Vertical Transfer Success: Hispanic Student Perceptions of Transfer and Transition Issues

Valerie O. Paton, Robert Elliott, Lucy Barnard-Brak, and Patricia M. Ryan

The authors conducted a qualitative investigation of Hispanic students' perceptions of the experience of vertical transfer from community college to a four-year institution. The study participants were students who had completed vertical transfer from two community colleges into a four-year degree program co-located in a region of the southwestern United States. Participants were predominantly Hispanic, male, and first generation. The findings of focus group sessions and survey data are analyzed and capture participants' perceptions of issues that are essential to transfer success at the pre-, mid-, and post-transfer phases of the transition process and post-graduation goals and expectations.

Increasingly, underrepresented minority (URM) students elect the community college as their first choice. According to the *Digest of Educational Statistics* (U.S. Department of Education, 2013), in 2012, more than 20 million students were enrolled in two-year and four-year public and private institutions of higher education in the United States; more than seven million of these students enrolled in two-year institutions. Of the 5.9 million Black and Hispanic students enrolled (nearly 29% of the total population), 43% were enrolled in a two-year institution, as compared to 32% of the White students. Given this context, vertical transfer from two-year to four-year institutions is an important educational pathway for baccalaureate degree attainment for all students, but particularly Black and Hispanic students. This study documents the vertical transfer experiences of Hispanic students who entered higher education in a two-year institution and transferred to a four-year institution.

The Condition of Education 2013 (U.S. Department of Education, 2013) provides student attainment data for degree-granting institutions and paints a picture

Valerie O. Paton (valerie.paton@ttu) is an Associate Professor of Educational Psychology and Leadership at Texas Tech University

Robert Elliott is an Assistant Prefessor and the Director of the Aviation Science Technology Program at Eastern New Mexico University

Lucy Barnard-Brak is an Associate Professor of Educational Psychology and Leadership at Texas Tech University

Patricia M. Ryan is a Research Assistant and Doctoral Student in Higher Education Research at Texas Tech University

of longer enrollments to complete a certificate or associate's degree at two-year institutions. For the fall 2008 cohort of undergraduate students, the students who entered two-year institutions to pursue an associate degree took 150 % longer to complete their goal. During the same period, for those students enrolled in a public two-year institution, 20% graduated within three years of their first enrollment. The graduation rate at public two-year institutions was 20% during the three-year. In terms of baccalaureate degree attainment of Black and Hispanic students, Carnivale and Strohl (2013) found that they are more likely to attend less selective institutions and have lower rates of baccalaureate degree completion as a result.

In the context of concentrated enrollments for first generation and URM students in two-year institutions, in 2011, the College Board convened university leaders to consider strategies to increase transfer rates from community colleges. The resulting report asserts that diversity is essential to baccalaureate education and transfer students are critical to accomplishing this goal (College Board, 2011). In the report, Alfred Herrera, assistant vice provost at the University of California at Los Angeles, discusses the value that transfer students bring to universities:

> The obvious advantage in admitting transfer students is that you obtain representation of students from different communities who have different life experiences. I think one of the goals of higher education is to prepare students to compete and perform well in the real world—to be able to change that world in ways that matter. Having students come from a variety of areas—whether it is geographic, cultural, ethnic, age—is a critical factor in that preparation. (p. 9)

The College Board (2011) report specifically addresses the importance of transfer students from community colleges, which enroll the "wide variety of students in American society…" including students who are described in the following quantitative terms: "42 percent are the first in their family to attend college, 46 percent are receiving financial aid and 45 percent are from an underrepresented ethnic minority group" (p. 9). Of the latter group, Hispanic students made up 16% of the population, 13 % were Black, 6% were Asian, and 1% were Native American (American Association of Community Colleges, 2011).

In a recent study of data extracted from the Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study, Crisp and Nunez (2014, pp. 300-301) suggest a conceptual model for "student level" and "institutional level" factors that predict vertical transfer from community college to university. Their work was informed by Nora's (2004) model, which addresses psychosocial dimensions of college choice, as well as student satisfaction as an important element of persistence. In Crisp and Nunez's (2014) model, elements of Nora's model are expressed in "student level" and "institutional level" variables that are considered as they relate to vertical transfer:

> Consistent with Nora's (2004) model and the findings specific to vertical transfer, our model hypothesizes that a combination of socio-demographic, precollege, environmental pull factors, educational expectations, and college

experiences predict White and URM students' transfer success. Extending Nora's model, our study also posits that a variety of institutional characteristics influence individual students' transfer outcomes. (p. 299)

At the student level, the variables predicting "individual probability of transfer to a four-year institution within six years" include Socio-Demographic Variables (gender and first-generation status), Precollege Factors (high school GPA, highest math course taken, earned college credit during high school, and delayed enrollment into college), Enrollment Pull Factors (hours worked, dependency status, financial aid received, and enrollment status), Degree Expectations (highest degree expected), Academic and Social Experiences (degree program, academic integration developmental education, first-year GPA, and distance education; Crisp and Nunez, 2014, p. 300).

At the institutional level, variables include Academic and Social Environment (enrollment size, percent of URM faculty, percent of full-time faculty, and academic support) and Precollege and Socio-Demographics (percent URM students, percent female students, and percent of students who received financial aid). These variables are employed to predict the probability of vertical transfer within six years to a four-year institution (Crisp & Nunez, 2014).

In their recommendations for further research, Crisp and Nunez (2014) cite the need for qualitative research to "better understand how both White and URM students access and convert various forms of capital (e.g., cultural and social) in the transfer process" (p. 309). Such research would explore the differences in students' transfer and persistence experiences that would suggest how different variables contribute to the probability of vertical transfer and success.

Purpose of the Study

In this study, the following research question is addressed: what transfer and transition issues are encountered by students in the midst of transition from a community college to four-year university academic program? Crisp and Nunez's (2014) identification of the need for further qualitative research and their recently published model are directly applicable to this study and, therefore, inform the analyses and interpretations of the findings. This study mirrors an earlier study that was conducted in 2007 to address this same question with a smaller number of vertical transfer students from the same community colleges who had matriculated to the same university program in the same geographical region. The demographics of the study participants were similar to those in the study presented here (see Gard, Paton & Gosslin, 2012).

At the pre-transfer stage of this study, the themes identified were academic advisement, psychosocial aspects of college attendance, developmental education, and financial issues. At the mid-transfer stage (transition to the university), the themes identified were finance (cost of attendance), communication with the university (particularly about financial aid), and conflicts in class scheduling with work. At post-transfer, study participants responses continued on the theme of finances and communication (sticker shock at transfer from a community

college to a university), graduate education, and work-study. The themes related to goals and expectations after graduation included employment and good salaries, aspirations related to self-employment and entrepreneurship, and new opportunities due to earning the baccalaureate degree, including graduate education (Gard, Paton & Gosslin, 2012).

Method

The methodology for the current study was designed to mirror the previous study with two exceptions: the timing of the study was in late October, rather than at the beginning of the term, and the survey was administered immediately following the focus group, rather than two months later, as was the case in the previous study (Gard, Paton & Gosslin, 2012). A qualitative design utilized focus groups with semi-structured interview questions with two cohorts of participants–one cohort of third year undergraduates and another cohort of fourth year undergraduates. The focus groups were conducted at the participants' current instructional facility. At the end of each focus group, a pencil-and-paper survey was administered to gather participant characteristics and opinions related to the research study questions. Institutional Review Board approval was secured prior to the start of this study.

Qualitative methodology offers researchers the opportunity to collect data directly from study participants who have immediate knowledge of and experience with the subject of the research. For instance, in this study, the researchers interviewed participants who had recently experienced transfer preparation at the community college level, transferred to a four-year institution, and were immersed in upper-division coursework and preparation for graduation. The researchers' perspectives were informed by their educational pathways, including community college to four-year transfer and successful degree completion.

Data collection in this study included a limited number of "purposefully selected" participants who are transfer students from two community colleges to a single four-year institution (Creswell, 2014). All data were gathered from the participants in a classroom setting at their four-year institutional site. The following semi-structured questions were utilized during the focus group sessions:

> Describe the challenges that you experienced in completing your first two years of college.
> Describe the challenges that you experienced in your transition to [the four-year university].
> Describe the challenges that you expect to encounter in completing your college degree.
> Describe your goals and expectations after completing your college degree.

Handwritten, text, and audio materials were generated from the focus groups. In addition, a 21-question survey entitled "Survey of Student Experiences in Transferring from the Community College to the University–Descriptive Information" was developed by the researchers and administered at the conclusion of each focus group session.

The data were analyzed by recording comments in the order that they were given in an Excel document and then coding each comment to identify emergent themes. The narratives were also analyzed using NVivo 10 to ensure that the researchers' coding of comments was supported by themes identified via frequency analysis. In addition, the survey data were analyzed using descriptive statistics. The combination of the qualitative and descriptive analyses were utilized to fully describe the participants' responses, utilizing a method documented in Elliott and Oliver (2015). These multiple sources of data were utilized to accomplish triangulation of data sources and establish the truthfulness of the researchers' findings.

Participants

Guided by qualitative research methodology, the participants in this study were selected because they could provide specific life experiences that inform the transfer process, particularly for Hispanic students with limited geographic opportunities to complete a professional undergraduate degree (Creswell, 2014, p. 189). Participants in this study were recent transfer students from two community colleges located in two states in the southwestern United States to a university degree program located within a 45-minute drive from each community college campus. Approximately 92% (n = 36) reported being Hispanic, while the remaining 8% (n = 3) reported as White, non-Hispanic. The total available population of students enrolled in the two-plus-two (2+2) program was third year (n=29) and fourth year (n=26). Of these students, focus group participants included 25 in third year (86%) and 15 in the fourth year (58%), and surveys were submitted by 24 third-year participants (83%) and 15 fourth-year participants (58%).

Using the "Student Level" characteristics from the Crisp and Nunez (2014) conceptual model, the participants are described in Table 1 and in the following narrative. In addition to these data gathered from the survey, the following details also add to a complete description of the "student level characteristics," as specified in the Crisp and Nunez (2014) model.

"Pre-college factors" in the Crisp and Nunez (2014) model include high school GPA, highest math course taken, earned college credits in high school, and delayed enrollment into college (p. 300). Since the study was conducted prior to the release of the Crisp and Nunez model and participants had successfully transferred to a four-year university, these variables were not collected in the survey instrument. However, the survey included a question related to participants' ages, which ranged from 19 to 43 years old (M = 25.10, SD = 5.69). In the focus groups, study participants reported frustration with not receiving college credit for courses taken in high school, particularly math credits.

"Environmental pull factors" (Crisp & Nunez, 2014) include hours worked, dependency status, financial aid received, and enrollment status. The survey did not include a question related to enrollment status because the program in which

TABLE 1

Student Level Characteristics

Variables	Percent	*n*
Socio-demographic variables		
Gender		
Male	71	28
Female	29	11
First generation status		
Neither parent attempted college	41	16
Parent attempted but did not complete	74	29
Environmental pull factors		
Employment		
Not-employed	38	15
Employed part-time	49	19
Employed full-time	13	5
Marital status		
Single and never married	69	27
Married or remarried	18	7
Spouse (if married) does not have high school diploma	72	5
Financial Aid		
Pell Grants	69	27
Stafford Loans	51	20

the participants were enrolled required full-time status during the term the study was conducted. "Degree expectations" (Crisp and Nunez, 2014) were explored in the focus groups and a resulting theme was the expectation for degree completion within the next two years. In addition, students discussed the need to pursue graduate work to qualify for licensure and how they planned to attain the needed graduate work and practical experience to complete their professional goals.

"Academic and social experiences" (Crisp and Nunez, 2014) include the degree program, academic integration developmental education, first year GPA, and distance education. The participants were third- and fourth-year students who had transferred from a specific academic program offered by regional community colleges to the same university-level degree program. Once the specific degree objective was established by study participants at the community college level, they

were enrolled in a fairly prescriptive curriculum with specific requirements that must be fulfilled prior to transfer to the university-level degree program. The first-year GPA of the study participants was not gathered in the survey instrument, nor was participation in distance education. Additional demographic characteristics of the study participants are included in the survey findings addressed later in this manuscript.

Institutional Characteristics

Study participants completed their lower-division coursework at two regional community colleges and then transferred to a four-year regional campus of a large public university located in the southwestern United States. For the purposes of this study, the community colleges have been labeled "A" and "B." When possible, institutional characteristics are reported from U.S. Department of Education sources in order to mask the identity of the institutions. In addition, the variables included in these descriptions are intended to align with Crisp and Nunez's (2014) "Institutional Level" model, including Academic and Social Environment (enrollment size, percent of URM faculty, percent of full-time faculty, and academic support) and Precollege and Socio-Demographics (percent URM students, percent female students, and percent of students who received financial aid).

The four-year university where the study participants were enrolled was a major research institution located in the southwestern United States. The student participants transferred from Community Colleges A and B into a two-year baccalaureate degree program that was offered by the four-year university at a regional site several hours away from the main university. The receiving transfer environment was co-located in the region with the sending community colleges and reflected more of their characteristics than that of the main campus. However, study participants reflected on the differences between these environments in the focus groups and survey responses, and these variables are noted here. Utilizing the variables from Crisp and Nunez's (2014) "Institutional Level" model, the four-year university characteristics and regional site characteristics are described in Table 2.

Findings

Focus Groups

Using the three sources—notes made by the researcher during the two sessions on flip chart pages, typed narratives completed during the focus group by a second researcher, and the audio recording of the sessions, the comments were uploaded into an Excel spreadsheet, where they were coded into themes or nodes by two researchers. The researchers then examined the data and coding together to ensure the thematic coding most closely represented the intended meaning of the participant. Comments of other participants immediately before and after each comment were examined to clarify the context of each comment. From these data,

TABLE 2

Institutional Level Characteristics for 2012 - 2013

Characteristic	Community College A	Community College B	4-Year Institution
Academic and social environment			
Institutional Size			
Branch	18,500		
Regional site			60
District	32,000	9,270	
Main campus			32,000
Faculty ethnic diversity			
Hispanic	58.4%	29.2%	5.7%
Graduation rate			
Male	10%	9%	
Female	11%	15%	
Hispanic	10%	12%	
Six-year graduation rate			59%
Academic support per full-time enrollment	$1,015	$705	$2,704
Tuition and fees for academic year	$1,966	$1,536	$7,500
Precollege and socio-demographics			
Student ethnicity			
Hispanic	85%	60%	19%
Student gender			
Male	33%	33%	55%
Female	57%	57%	45%
Enrollment level			
Full-time	32%	48%	89%
Part-time	68%	52%	11%
Pell Grant recipients	47%	54%	29%

Sources: Community college fact books and U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center on Education Statistics (n.d., a and b).

themes were developed for each question, and the participants' narratives about these themes are listed in order of frequency in the following analysis.

Challenges in the First Two Years

Academic advisement. Of the recorded participant comments, 57% (24/42) addressed the issue of academic advisement at the community college level prior to transferring. When the comments are sorted by the participants' year in the program, the third-year students focused on academic advisement (79% of their comments in response to Question 1); the fourth-year students' comments were split evenly between academic advisement (39%) and transfer articulation (35%).

Third-year participants came from two different community colleges and had very different experiences with academic advisement. For instance, one student said, "at [my community college], the professor was the advisor, and he knew what needed to be taken." However, a student from a different community college said, "I went to advising at [my community college] and they didn't know about [this major]." Third-year students complained about being sent from one office to another to secure academic advisement, being required to take courses that were not needed for transfer, and not being told that courses were offered in specific terms, resulting in prolonging their enrollment at the community college prior to transfer.

Fourth-year participants transferred from the same two community colleges and had similar contrasting experiences as those reported by the third-year students. A fourth-year student said, "[the] advisor at [my community college] was up to speed, focused on bringing students to [two different 4-year institutions]." However, another fourth year student shared dissatisfaction with the advisement process at a different community college: "Advisors were the major problem–they didn't know a whole lot of anything. You had to stay on top of them. [The student had to tell them], 'These classes aren't required.'"

There is an important distinction that informs the difference in the reported experiences by study participants. At one institution, students had access to an advisor who was a faculty member and practitioner in their field of interest; comments from these students indicated positive academic advisement experiences. At the second community college, academic advisors were generalists, with no specific knowledge of the intended transfer major and very heavy advisement loads; participants commented negatively about their academic advisement in this context.

Transfer articulation. Of the 10 comments coded as "transfer articulation," fourth-year participants had the most to say (eight comments or 80%). Fourth-year participants discussed a curricular change that led to a delay of one year prior to their transfer to the four-year institution. One student said, "None of us did it in two years; took us three to four years." Participants expressed frustration with course offerings and referenced a course that was required by the four-year institution but not offered by the community college, a four-year university that would not accept the community college's course for transfer credit, and limited

enrollment in required courses delaying completion of their lower-division coursework.

Curricular alignment at transfer. The fourth-year participants also discussed a closely related topic that was coded by the researchers as "curricular alignment at transfer" to distinguish it from "transfer articulation." This topic focused in on curricular alignment between lower-division coursework taken at the community college and upper-division coursework offered by the four-year institution. Participants from one community college voiced their concerns about not having the software skills and knowledge that were required immediately upon transfer in the fall coursework at the four-year institution: "I was not up to date on software so that kept me behind when I transferred," and "we had a crash course in software." However, a participant from a different community college stated, "[my community college] taught the technology classes–teachers were sent to Minnesota to get ready to teach us. They sat down with me and showed me [the program]."

In addition to these two dominant themes in the participant responses to Question 1, three other comments were recorded; two comments were about instructional facilities at the community colleges, and one comment addressed the fact that the academic offering was available at only one community college location and the student "would have spent less money on gas" if the program had been located on an additional campus closer to his home.

Challenges experienced in transfer to four-year institution

Inter-institutional communication. This theme was identified from participants' comments about how the four-year institution communicated with the student and the regional university site about admissions, financial aid, and orientation; the distance from the regional university site and the main campus six hours away exacerbated their frustration with these processes. On the theme of "inter-institutional communication," 62.5% (15/24) comments in response to Question 2 were from third-year students who have transferred from community colleges in the previous six months, but the fourth-year participants did not comment on this theme. Third-year participants remarked, "They are so far away. We have to e-mail or phone. Waiting and hoping that they got our papers." Another commented that he "needed just to hear that the application had been received." Participants commented that the inter-institutional communication difficulties resulted in stress for them: "Knowing what is going to happen, what will happen after the applications are done…stressful."

Financial aid. Third and fourth-year participants offered 10 total comments, five comments from each focus group, about financial aid. Overall, 17.5% of the responses to Question 2 were coded as "financial aid." However, many of the comments about "inter-institutional communication" referenced financial aid issues as well, but the gist of the participants' comments was about the nature of communication with them, rather than the specifics of their financial aid awards. In the "financial aid" theme, researchers recorded participants' concerns about how the financial aid award process was connected to their feelings of stress. Several

commented that they were just receiving their financial aid awards at the time of the focus group session, which was in the middle of their fall semester. A fourth-year student commented that he missed out on a significant financial aid award opportunity that would have covered all of his tuition and fees because he should have applied for it "two years ago." Another fourth-year student acknowledged the difference between the application process at transfer and the following year's process: "[the] first time applying for financial aid at [four-year institution] was the hardest. After all that hell they put you through, it was easier." In response to this comment, another fourth-year participant said, "I went through Veteran's Affairs and it went smoothly," in contrast to other participants who were not eligible for such support.

Curricular alignment at transfer. While responding to Question 2, in nine comments (9/57; 16%) fourth-year participants returned to the theme of "curricular alignment at transfer" identified in their responses to Question 1. The issue was the same: working knowledge of the software requirements that would be required at the 4-year institution. The lack of alignment in software between one community college and the 4-year institution was identified as having a negative impact on learning and academic performance throughout the two years of their upper-division coursework: "[the specific course at the community college] did not teach us the software that we needed at [the 4-year institution];" "…there should be a progression from where we started. But for us, due to the different software requirements, there is a stoppage in our progression."

Curricular alignment within the university. Fourth-year students returned to the theme of "curricular alignment within the university" (6/57 comments; 11%). Due to the two-plus-two curriculum between the community colleges and the four-year institution and specific accreditation requirements in the participants' degree program, students were required to finish all of their coursework at the regional site and then transfer to the main campus for graduate work. The participants' impression of this curricular differentiation was bitter: "no coordination between work in the different courses"; "can't transfer to [main campus] if we wanted to. We have been told that all of our courses have been molded to meet [main campus] standards"; "[regional four-year institutional site] is treated like a red-haired step child."

Academic advisement. Third- and fourth-year participants returned to the theme of academic advisement, offering five additional comments (2 and 3, respectively). One third-year participant mentioned that, prior to transfer, he/she had visited the four-year regional site and met with the degree program leadership. Another offered the suggestion that a "presentation would be helpful" in order to resolve some of the more difficult requirements at transfer, in this case, the state immunization requirement.

Fourth-year participants commented on academic advisement support at the regional site during the summer months of their transition from community college to the 4-year institution: "Didn't have an advisor, there was a lot of passing the buck. So one person wouldn't relay the message to another person. Had to 'carbon copy' others." And another fourth-year student stated, "During the

summer months it is very difficult to contact anyone. Then the response was 'we are on skeleton crew.' Had to call several times to get something straightened out. Had to sit on the phone and listen to the fight song."

Cost of attendance. In addition to "financial aid," a closely related theme emerged in response to Question 2. Fourth-year participants commented on the change of the cost of attendance from community college to the 4-year university (4/57 comments). One participant provided an assessment of this change that demonstrates the impact of cost on the transfer process: "[the] cost of tuition escalated triple from what we used to pay. We didn't know what we were getting into until we got the invoice. What was the tuition at the community college? $2000? What was [the four-year]? $8000?" Three participants followed with these exclamations: "Sticker shock," "Lack of communication," and "Cost versus value."

Instructional facilities. Fourth-year students began to comment on "instructional facilities" in response to Question 2 with four comments; this commentary emerged as a significant theme in response to Question 3. The context for these comments is important for the reader to understand the participants' concerns. During the summer prior to their fourth year, the four-year institution moved from temporary facilities in an administrative facility that was about one mile from a community college campus where many of the participants had completed their lower-division coursework. Although the new instructional facility was located in a historically significant building and part of a large downtown renovation effort, from the perspectives of the participants, the transition had an adverse impact on their academic experience. One participant led off the comments with this summation: "the facility that we transferred to did not have the resources that we had at [the former facility]." Others were more critical: "facility transfer has been disastrous," and "it is worse than being a disgruntled employee because you are paying for it."

Transfer articulation. In describing challenges experienced during transfer, three participants returned to the theme of transfer articulation, which also emerged in response to the first focus group question. A third-year student returned to a comment about the evaluation of Math and Pre-calculus credits that were earned in high school and how they were counted in college. A fourth-year participant suggested, "More collaboration of both schools [community college and 4-year institution] together would be better."

Challenges experienced after transfer in baccalaureate degree completion

Instructional facilities. Forty-one of 48 responses (85%) to Question 3 pertained to the theme of "instructional facilities." In qualitative research, capturing the "lived experiences" of participants is integral to the methodology, and the third- and fourth-year participants were candid about their perceptions of the challenges encountered in their instructional facility transition. The comments were almost equally split between the two focus groups: 20 from the third-year

participants and 21 from the fourth-year participants. Students commented on the technical problems that resulted in delayed installation of Internet, and due to this deficit, they could not print on site and incurred expenses at commercial printing facilities. They complained about the operational hours of the facility, lighting, security, and lack of a computers provided by the four-year institution. Participants also complained about the transition of a small library that had been previously housed in their classroom facility, but now was a part of a larger collection in a major museum located several blocks from their instructional facility. Summarized by a fourth-year participant, the impact of instructional facility change on students' learning experience cannot be underestimated:

> We don't have the resources to have classes here. We don't have the facilities.
> We have less than what we had at the other buildings. We can't print, we have
> no Internet, the library is down the road; we had 24 hour access….[this
> change] fragments our experience.

Full-time enrollment requirement. Three third-year participants commented on the hardship created by the full-time enrollment requirement of the upper-division degree program. One participant said,

> Another challenge that we all experienced is that we are mandated to enroll
> in the classes that they said. Have to take five classes. Cannot be a part-time
> student. Not given an option of when they could attend. A lot of us work part-
> time employees.

This concern was reflected by another comment that followed immediately: "I know some students who had to stop school. They were not able to do full-time, so they dropped out."

Instructor quality. The fourth-year participants included three comments in response to challenges that they had experienced after transfer. These comments were coded as "instructor quality" by the researchers. First, a fourth-year participant said,

> What makes this program is the instructors. The material that is being taught
> is great. If we could have a combination of both, it would be great. What is
> being taught makes this program unique.

Then, in response, another fourth-year participant stated, "The way that the classes are being taught. It seems like I am doing most of the work. The teachers just guide you…."

Access. A third-year participant commented about the availability of the degree program in the region, saying, "I guess, at the end of the day, we are thankful for what we have."

Goals and expectations after completing the baccalaureate degree

Graduate school plans. 30% (9/30) of the responses to Question 4 were coded as "graduate school plans." Third-year participants (six comments) understood that the final year of the required program would be a year of graduate

work and that it could not be completed in their region: "Must complete a master's degree at an accredited school. Have to go up. Go out of town…." Fourth-year participants (three comments) acknowledged the requirement for graduate work as a given.

Third-year participants also spoke about their location and the fact that it provided significant opportunities for internships. One participant commented, "Internships, but that's something that is more accessible here with professors who are working at firms or own firms. Internships are not that difficult to find by talking to your professors."

Generativity. Third-year participants articulated their commitment to their community in eight comments (8/30; 27%) related to how they planned to give back to it. Coded as "generativity," participant comments ranged from investments in their community to their community colleges and universities. From one participant, the researchers recorded the comment, "The program has really shown us the problems that we have here in town, from infrastructure to….That gives us hope that we can come back and change it." Another planned to "Give back to the community and help improve living conditions." Other participants specifically mentioned interest in faculty roles in their comments: "[the community college] program had professors who had gone through the [university] program and it was great to learn from them. They had a fresh perspective," and "Would like to come back and teach here and make this program better."

Employment. Fourth-year participants were focused on the next step in their journey and their concerns about the competitiveness of their degrees (6/30; 20%). Participants said they "[hoped to be] competitive in the job market"; "versatile [and] marketable"; and that their "Expectation is that the degree that we are about to get holds up against other degrees across the country." Another participant said, "[I am] split on whether they plan to practice in the region or go somewhere else."

Financial goals. The theme of financial issues resurfaced as goals for the future in three comments in response to Question 4. Third-year participants said, "We all want good paying jobs" in order to "pay back student loans." A fourth-year participant agreed that the goal was to "pay back loans."

Instructor quality. Third-year participants returned to the theme of "instructor quality" as they considered Question 4. A participant claimed that expectations after completing the college degree were positive "Because almost all of the professors here have a firm. We get a lot of real world here." Another commented, "We actually go on site, and they challenge us about what we would do." A third participant said that this was the "strength of this program."

Exploration. A third-year participant said that a goal and expectation after degree completion was to "Go out and travel and see all of the things we have learned about."

Focus Group Results Using NVivo Analysis

In addition to the process of coding the three focus group data sources described above, these data were also analyzed with NVivo10 to confirm the

findings of the coding process. This analysis yielded the following results. When comparing the third-year focus group comments with the fourth-year comments, the first 36 words in each record were compared in descending order of frequency count; all words and the order in which they surfaced in the focus groups were consistent across both groups. In specific, *class* had the highest frequency across both samples, but at a somewhat higher frequency in the fourth-year sample. A simple comparison of the total number of words analyzed revealed a difference of only one word (828 versus 829, respectively) and the number of words with a frequency of 10 and higher were relatively similar (128 versus 159, respectively).

The results of these analyses and comparisons may indicate (a) the community culture shared by members of the third-year and fourth-year participants make them a combined sample in the resulting data collected from their responses to the focus group questions and (b) despite the difference in years in the academic degree program, their responses to the focus group question remained fairly consistent. More specifically, all the participants transferred from the same two community colleges into the same four-year degree program, and these common vertical transfer contexts contribute to the consistent responses to the focus group questions.

Survey Results

Survey findings include the descriptions of the participants reported in the previous section as well as further descriptive data and responses to open-ended questions about the pre-, mid-, and post-transfer experience.

A variable of estimated parental income was collected as a categorical variable with varying increments ranging from values of "less than $10,000" to "$200,000 or more." The most frequently reported income was $30,000 to $39,000. For the variable of student income, the mode was $10,000 to $14,999.

In addition to the financial aid and Pell Grant participation reported earlier, there may have been additional students eligible for a Stafford loan based upon financial need that did not opt to take a Stafford loan that semester. An additional 28% ($n = 11$) reported receiving an alternative loan this semester. It appears that 25% ($n = 5$) of students who reported receiving a Stafford loan also received an alternative loan. Approximately one-third of the sample (33%, $n = 13$) did not report taking any loans (neither Stafford nor alternative). About half of these student (53%, $n = 7$) who reported not taking any loans reported receiving a Pell Grant for the current semester. The average number of years in community college ranged from two to five years with a mean of 3.05 years ($SD = .94$).

In response to open-ended questions, approximately 41% ($n = 16$) of students reported that the transfer process went very smoothly with ratings of "agree" to "strongly agree." A substantial portion, but less than a majority, of students appear to consider the transfer process satisfactory. The majority of students (66%, $n = 26$) reported feeling that community college prepared them well for university coursework, with ratings of "agree" to "strongly agree." Approximately 51% ($n = 20$) considered community college advisors as being very helpful in facilitating

their transfer to the university, with ratings of "agree" to "strongly agree." In contrast, approximately 23% (n = 9) considered university advisors as being very helpful in facilitating their transfer to the university, with ratings of "agree" to "strongly agree." There appears to be a discrepancy in community college versus university advising as reported by participants. In evaluating this discrepancy, we conducted a Wilcoxon signed rank test given the ordinal nature of the data among matched pairs (e.g., same participant responding to each variable), which revealed statistically significant differences between university and community college advising, Z = -2.22, p = .02, r = .36. This value of r indicates a medium effect size. Table 1 provides the results of the Wilcoxon signed rank test in detail.

TABLE 3

Rank results of University versus Community College Advising

	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
Negative Ranks	15	11.80	177.00
Positive Ranks	6	9.00	54
Ties	18		
Total	**39**		

Additionally, student expectations of academic rigor of the university environment versus the actual rigor were compared, which may indirectly contribute to the discrepancy in satisfaction found in advising between university and community colleges. Results of the Wilcoxon signed rank test revealed no significant differences between expected and actual rigor as reported by participants, Z = -0.38, p = .71.

Discussion

The findings of this study must be understood in light of the participants' particular frame of reference as students who had successfully transferred from a two-year institution to a four-year institution. Crisp and Nunez' (2014) describe under-represented students as "more likely to be male, older, first-generation immigrant, the first in their family to attend college, and low-income" (p. 297). This reference closely describes the students in this study.

The themes generated from the focus group narratives as well as the survey were analyzed in relationship to the stages of transfer and transition embedded in the focus group questions: pre-, mid-, and post-transfer and post-graduation. The

following overarching themes were generated from this analysis:

- Pre-transfer: Community college actions that support successful transfer.
- Mid-transfer: Clear, timely, and effective communication between the community college and the university support successful transfer.
- Post-transfer: Four-year institutions actions that support successful transfer.
- Post-graduation: Students focus on graduate school, generativity, and employment.

This method of meta-analysis provided triangulation of findings across the focus group and survey findings from the 2007 and 2013 studies. The major findings from triangulation are summarized within each transfer phase.

Pre-transfer

Academic advisement is the most consistently and highly identified theme that impacts the pre-transfer experience. In the focus groups, academic advisement was the most frequently cited theme by both third- and fourth-year students. In the survey, 51% of the respondents said that the community college academic advisors were helpful in the transfer process. In 2007, study participants also identified academic advisement as the most significant theme in the pre-transfer experience (Gard, Paton & Gosselin, 2012).

Mid-transfer

Inter-institutional communication was the most frequently identified theme by third-year study participants. This theme was also identified in the 2007 study (Gard, Paton, & Gosselin, 2012). The analysis of comments found that participants experienced challenges to transfer due to a lack of communication between the two sending community colleges and the receiving university. Specifically, participants stated that admissions, financial aid, and academic advisement communication posed challenges experienced during the mid-transfer phase.

Financial aid was cited as a frequent theme by third- and fourth-year participants, and it was also identified as a theme in the 2007 study (Gard, Paton & Gosselin, 2012). Participants cited the difficulty in providing the required information and delay in receiving financial aid as a factor that resulted in stress that adversely impacted their transfer experience.

Cost of attendance was identified by fourth-year participants and was also a theme identified in the 2007 study (Gard, Paton & Gosselin, 2012). The average of the 2012-13 tuition and fees of the two sending community colleges in this study was $1,750 per year–approximately 23% of the tuition and fees for the university during the same period. This differential puts the mid-transfer theme of financial aid into context as well as the resulting stress reported by participants during the transfer process.

Post-transfer

Full-time enrollment requirement. Third-year students identified the requirement of full-time enrollment as a challenge to degree completion; this theme was also registered in the 2007 study (Gard, Paton, & Gosselin, 2012).

Financial aid and cost of attendance. As mentioned earlier, in the mid-transfer phase, the themes of financial aid and cost of attendance were identified as challenges experienced during transition to the university. In the 2013 study population, 69% reported that they received Pell Grants; in the 2007 study population, 75% reported that they received Pell Grants. Thus, for these study participants, financial issues surfaced consistently as important themes in the transfer process. The 2007 study participants identified financial aid and cost of attendance as a challenge to completing their four-year degrees (Gard, Paton, & Gosselin, 2012, p. 840). However, when responding to this same question, the 2013 study participants were focused on the incomplete condition of their new instructional facilities. Their concern about finances was fully expressed in their comments related to the mid-transfer phase; however, these themes were evident in the concerns about the full-time enrollment requirement and in their survey responses of part-time (49%) and full-time (13%) employment while enrolled in a full-time degree program.

Post-graduation

Graduate school. Because of the nature of the university degree program in which the study participants were enrolled, the theme of graduate school was identified in both the 2007 and 2013 studies (Gard, Paton, & Gosselin, 2012). This theme was intertwined with the need for the participants to leave their geographical regions for further education and possible employment.
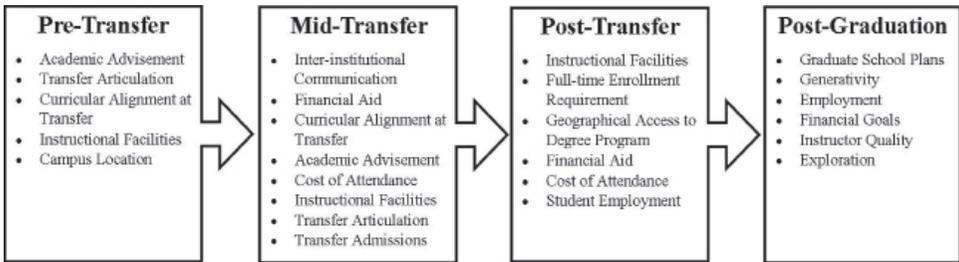
Generativity. Participants in both studies articulated the impact that the community college and university degree programs had had on their commitment to their communities and their desire to use their skills and knowledge to re-invest as professional leaders and, in some cases, faculty members.

Employment. The study participants consistently cited their expectations for employment and good salaries as an expectation for the future and a result of their degree completion. Participants cited the need to repay student loans as a requirement for future employment and resulting earnings.

These major themes, as well as the other themes identified in the 2013 study, were utilized to generate a model of the four phases of transfer and the thematic activities that contribute to the vertical transfer process and integrate the Crisp and Nunez (2014) model.

FIGURE 1

Transfer Phase Model

Pre-Transfer	Mid-Transfer	Post-Transfer	Post-Graduation
• Academic Advisement • Transfer Articulation • Curricular Alignment at Transfer • Instructional Facilities • Campus Location	• Inter-institutional Communication • Financial Aid • Curricular Alignment at Transfer • Academic Advisement • Cost of Attendance • Instructional Facilities • Transfer Articulation • Transfer Admissions	• Instructional Facilities • Full-time Enrollment Requirement • Geographical Access to Degree Program • Financial Aid • Cost of Attendance • Student Employment	• Graduate School Plans • Generativity • Employment • Financial Goals • Instructor Quality • Exploration

Conclusion

This study contributes to our understanding of how Hispanic students perceive their experiences in each stage of the vertical transfer process. Furthermore, the study participants offer rich data that identify the types of institutional level variables that support successful vertical transfer, as well as challenges that may impede successful transfer. The participants describe the impact of institutional practices and conditions on their academic success and psychosocial well-being. In particular, timely and accurate academic advisement, financial aid advisement and award processes, and enrollment status and work obligations interact to directly support or challenge vertical transfer and degree completion. At the mid-transfer phase from the community college to the four-year institution, the significant increase in price, a 300% increase in tuition and fees in this case, is a factor that must be addressed in a timely fashion by the receiving four-year institution to support the transfer student.

Remarkably, study participants demonstrated significant tenacity and resilience as they persisted under conditions that challenged their vertical transfer, instruction, and degree completion. From these participants, we glean the impact of institutional practices related to vertical transfer—what actions make a difference to them and when these actions need to occur to support their academic success.

Further research is recommended to confirm the findings of this study with students in different demographic populations. For instance, populations including only first-generation student perceptions might be sampled to identify the overlapping and disparate themes in each phase of the model (Figure 1). Additional research indicated for URM samples, as well as non-URM samples, on the themes generated in the Transfer Phase Model. Based upon the different experiences reported by participants, further research is needed to explore the relationship between discipline-based academic advisement on vertical transfer success of Hispanic students. In addition, the impact of collaborative or

concurrent financial aid advisement and awarding between the community college and four-year institution is recommended for investigation. Additional application of the variables in the Crisp and Nunez (2014) model, as well as the model proposed from this study, may yield more depth of insight into the specific student and institutional variables that are most significant in predicting vertical transfer success of Hispanic students and their baccalaureate degree completion.

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