

UNDERSTANDING THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF UNDERGRADUATE TRANSFER
STUDENTS AT FAITH-BASED AND RELIGIOUSLY AFFILIATED INSTITUTIONS: A
TRANSCENDENTAL PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

by

Amanda Nicole Davis

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

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Abstract

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to understand the lived experiences of undergraduate transfer students at faith-based and religiously affiliated institutions in the United States. Thus, in order to explore this phenomenon, the central research question directing the present study was: What are the lived experiences of undergraduate transfer students at faith-based and religiously affiliated institutions in the United States? The two theories guiding this study were Astin's theory of involvement and Tinto's theory of engagement, as they explain the relationship between institutional fit, involvement, and feelings of belonging. This study employed a transcendental phenomenological design and included 10 participants. Data was collected through semi-structured, individual interviews, journal prompts, and a focus group. Each form of data was transcribed, coded, and themed. Three methods of data collection were utilized to triangulate the data and provide the necessary rigor in the research process. Seven themes emerged: (a) a time of spiritual exploration, (b) birds of a feather vs. opposites attract, (c) initial uncertainty, (d) a period of personal growth, (e) community is key, (f) academics, and (g) perceptions of campus culture. In addition to the seven themes, two outlier findings were also present: (a) needing special accommodations and (b) distance learning. The findings of this study reflected the importance of holistic participation as well as the need for transfer-centric orientation activities and administrative supports. The implications of this study are far-reaching, as the findings suggest that transferring to a faith-based or religiously affiliated institution may serve to lessen the negative effects of transfer shock, while providing a smoother transition between sending and receiving institution, with virtually no stigmatization present.

Keywords: higher education, transfer students, stigma, transfer shock, transfer experience, faith-based, religiously affiliated, holistic participation, engagement, involvement

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to all of the wonderful people who made this dream a reality, and to all of the people who have believed in me, supported me, encouraged me, and inspired me throughout this educational journey. I truly would not have made it this far without them.

I would like to thank my family and friends for their limitless patience and understanding. To my family, thank you for providing me with all of the tools necessary to take on such a challenge and for so flexibly and selflessly working around my entirely unorthodox schedule. To my friends, thank you for always being available to talk; your encouragement has meant a great deal to me. I may have done the work, but I will always say that achieving this goal was a group effort. I am so incredibly thankful for each and every person that played a part in helping me reach this milestone, and so, it is to them that I dedicate this dissertation.

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List of Abbreviations

Adverse Academic Status Event (AASE)

American Sign Language (ASL)

Critical Literacies Achievement and Success Program (CLASP)

Directed Self-Placement (DSP)

Faith-Based Institution (FBI)

Grade Point Average (GPA)

Institutional Review Board (IRB)

Peer Advocate (PA)

Personal Background Preparation Survey (PBPS)

Prevalence of Academic Risk (PAR)

Religiously Affiliated Institution (RAI)

Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM)

Sigma Alpha Omega (SAO)

Student Government Association (SGA)

Transfer Learning Community (TLC)

University of California, Davis (UC Davis)

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

Transfer students enrolled in institutions of higher education are experiencing lower retention and graduation rates (Jacobson et al., 2017; Tobolowsky & Cox, 2012), leading to undesirable results among this underrepresented student population. The role that attending a faith-based or religiously affiliated institution played in affecting the experience of transfer students in higher education has yet to be explored, necessitating additional research. My study sought to gain an understanding of how attending a faith-based or religiously affiliated institution impacted the overall transfer student experience, as well as how it influenced transfer students' perceptions of institutional fit at their receiving institutions. Grounded in Tinto's (1975) theory of engagement and Astin's (1999) theory of involvement, my study investigated the psychological and behavioral aspects of academic and social integration and how each affected the transfer student experience within the context of faith-based and religiously affiliated institutions.

This chapter begins by providing a contextual background for my study and introduces the problem that was explored. The purpose of my transcendental phenomenological study was to illuminate the lived experiences of undergraduate transfer students at faith-based and religiously affiliated institutions and to inform best practices going forward that may serve to better accommodate the unique needs of transfer students in the future. The significance of my study was three-fold: having theoretical, empirical, and practical implications. Next, the research questions that guided my study are introduced, and a rationale for each question is given. Finally, the chapter concludes by presenting a list of key terms that will appear throughout the

manuscript. Each term is defined according to experts in the field, which offers the necessary information required to gain a comprehensive understanding of my study.

Background

As tuition costs and student loan debt continue to increase, student persistence has become a critical factor in higher education (Bastedo et al., 2016). Transfer students constitute a significant portion of undergraduate enrollments (Gere et al., 2017) yet reportedly achieve lower retention and graduation rates than students native to their institutions (Jacobson et al., 2017; Tobolowsky & Cox, 2012). Transfer student attrition has been attributed to numerous factors including, but not limited to transfer shock (Gere et al., 2017; Chamely-Wiik et al., 2021; Clausen & Wessel, 2015), lack of knowledge about the transfer process (Bass, 2017; United States Government Accountability Office, 2017), lack of support (Blekic et al., 2020), pejorative transfer student stigmas (Gere et al., 2017; Tobolowsky & Cox, 2012), issues regarding the transfer of previously earned credits (O'Connell & Resuli, 2020; Wetzel & Debure, 2018; Worsham et al., 2021; Yang et al., 2018), and feelings of isolation and self-doubt (Dika et al., 2015; Gere et al., 2017; Ishitani & Flood, 2018; Schmertz & Carney, 2013; Shaw et al., 2019). While Astin (1999) has noted that sharing the same religious affiliation as the institution can be a strong indicator of future success, this aspect has been heretofore overlooked as it pertains to transfer student populations. The following section serves to provide meaningful insights regarding the historical, social, and theoretical contexts within which my study is grounded.

Historical Context

Students have been transferring between institutions throughout the history of higher education, although current trends suggest that a greater number of students are transferring than ever before. For example, a study of the 2006 cohort of undergraduate college students showed

that over a five-year period, between 2006-2011, 33.1% of students transferred at least once (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2012). Two years later, a study of the 2008 cohort of undergraduate students revealed that 37.2% of students reportedly transferred at least once, while nearly half of those transfer students (45%) transferred at least twice (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2015). A decade ago, a study conducted by Tobolowsky and Cox (2012) reported that the transfer rate for undergraduate students was significantly higher at around 60%. Five years later, however, another study conducted by Gere et al. (2017) reported that nearly one-third of undergraduate students had transferred at least once, with up to 25% of students reportedly transferring two or more times. More recently, during the 2021-2022 academic school year, out of more than 13 million students enrolled at the undergraduate level, 2 million were identified as transfer students, a considerably lower percentage compared to past years (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2022). This 13.5% decline in transfer mobility may be attributed, in large part, to the COVID-19 pandemic, as transfer rates fell drastically across all institutional types during the two-year period following the initial outbreak of the virus (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2022).

Historically, ensuring a smooth and successful transition between institutions has been considered a responsibility of both the receiving institution as well as the transfer student (Robbins, 1942). Orientation programs and various other institutional initiatives have provided the foundation upon which transfer students have been able to build meaningful relationships in an effort to successfully integrate into the new campus culture (Mayhew et al., 2010; Robbins, 1942). Robbins (1942) noted that it takes transfer students about the same amount of time to become acclimated to the receiving institutional culture as it does freshmen upon entering the

institution for the first time; this transitional period is thought to last anywhere up to a year in length.

Articulation agreements between two-year and four-year institutions often make the transfer process easier for the student. The starting point for one of the first articulation agreements dates back to the 1960s when educators deemed it necessary to expand the biology curriculum in the first two years of higher education in the state of Iowa in order to make the transition between two-year and four-year institutions more seamless (Karre, 1972). The articulation program was a successful endeavor, and many articulation agreements exist today between two-year and four-year institutions around the United States (Karre, 1972; Worsham et al., 2021). These agreements are designed to help transfer students make the transition more easily, with fewer credit hours being lost in the process of moving between two institutions.

Academic performance has long been a topic of discussion surrounding transfer student populations. A number of studies conducted historically noted that transfer students did not perform at the same levels as their continuing counterparts that were considered to be native to the institution (Anstett, 1971; Hewitt, 1972; Knoell & Medsker, 1965; Melnick et al., 1970; Walker, 1969). While this drop in performance upon entering the receiving institution has been referred to as *transfer shock* (Gere et al., 2017; Chamely-Wiik et al., 2021; Clausen & Wessel, 2015; Hills, 1965; Lach, 1971), others have suggested that this drop in performance can be attributed to a lack of adequate academic preparation at the community college level (Weidman, 2014). A study by Sheehan and Reti (1974) examined and compared the academic performance of transfer students from several community colleges around the Alberta area relative to their native counterparts and the University of Calgary in Canada. The researchers found that, on average, transfer students performed considerably lower than their native peers based on four

methods of measuring academic performance, thus supporting the claims made previously by researchers in the field (Sheehan & Reti, 1974).

Throughout much of the latter half of the twentieth century, a number of studies focused on the reasons surrounding the myriad difficulties faced by transfer students. Sheehan and Reti (1974) note that at the time their study was conducted, several problem areas existed for transfer student populations. Some of these areas included a lack of articulation agreements and comparable curricula between institutions, an absence of guidance for transfer students from community colleges, the need for orientation programs at the receiving institutions, and providing transfer students with a better understanding of financial aid, admissions requirements and procedures, accessibility of resources, academic requirements and standards as well as how credits earned previously will transfer (Sheehan & Reti, 1974). Many of these problem areas still affect transfer students today and are still being investigated by researchers.

While many institutions have historically invested a significant amount of time and effort into helping transfer students transition from one institution to another, one study conducted in the last decade found that institutional attitudes toward transfer students may have changed during this period. Tobolowsky and Cox (2012) found that greater emphasis was being given to native students and that transfer students were often overlooked or an “afterthought” (p. 404). In the ten years since Tobolowsky and Cox’s (2012) study, research has suggested that several institutions have been concentrating their efforts on making their campuses and academic programs more inclusive and equitable for transfer students. For example, the effect of the stigmatization of transfer students has been examined (Tobolowsky & Cox, 2012), and efforts to mitigate these effects have been explored (Gere et al., 2017). Additionally, institutions have investigated the benefits of articulation agreements between two-year and four-year institutions

(Worsham et al., 2021), the role peer mentors and faculty advisors play in facilitating a smooth transition into receiving institutions (Hern et al., 2019; Wetzel & Debure, 2018), first-year seminars and academic support services for transfer students (Gere et al., 2017; Grigg & Dale, 2017; Robison, 2017), and how participating in service learning initiatives (York & Fernandez, 2018), learning communities (Chamely-Wiik et al., 2021; Coston, 2019; Scott et al., 2017), and honors programs (Bahls, 2018; Thomas et al., 2019) can assist transfer students as they adjust to their new campus environments.

Social Context

Transfer students struggle to transition between their sending and receiving institutions for myriad reasons (Gere et al., 2017; O’Connell & Resuli, 2020). A number of transfer students enter four-year institutions after previously attending two-year institutions (Aulck & West, 2017; Foster et al., 2020; Lee & Schneider, 2018; Mobley & Brawner, 2019; Worsham et al., 2021; Yang et al., 2018). While this educational pathway can be highly beneficial for students who would otherwise be unable to attend a four-year institution due to financial difficulties (Bastedo et al., 2016), it can also lead continuing students to view the transfer student negatively (Gere et al., 2017). The stigmatization of transfer students can lead others, both students and staff, to believe that transfer students lack the proper academic preparation or motivation to be successful (Mobley & Brawner, 2019; Tobolowsky & Cox, 2012). Furthermore, transfer students can experience *transfer shock* or a temporary drop in grade point average (GPA) as they adjust to the new institution (Chamely-Wiik et al., 2021; Clausen & Wessel, 2015; Gere et al., 2017). These negative phenomena can lead transfer students to feel isolated, lonely, and doubtful (Dika et al., 2015; Gere et al., 2017; Ishitani & Flood, 2018; Schmertz & Carney, 2013; Shaw et al., 2019). To make matters worse, issues regarding the transfer of previously earned credits can also pose a

problem for transfer students (O’Connell & Resuli, 2020; Wetzel & Debure, 2018; Worsham et al., 2021; Yang et al., 2018). Transfer students in all educational contexts serve to benefit from my study as these aspects of the transfer student experience appear to be both prevalent and wide-reaching. As the faith-based and religiously affiliated aspect had yet to be applied to the transfer student experience, my study examined how the faith-based and religiously affiliated aspect influenced the transfer student experience in light of the aforementioned phenomena that often plague the transfer student experience. My study, therefore, sought to understand the extent to which attending a faith-based or religiously affiliated institution affected the various facets of the transfer student experience within a higher educational context.

Theoretical Context

Tinto’s (1975) theory of student engagement and Astin’s (1999) theory of student involvement provided the theoretical foundation for my study. Each theory emphasizes the importance of student participation on campus, as participation is often associated with higher levels of persistence until degree completion. Tinto likens student attrition to suicide in that when students fall away from an institution or choose to leave without completing their degree programs, they withdraw their participation from the campus culture in the same way an individual who commits suicide withdraws themselves from society at large. Astin and Tinto claimed that if students are willing to invest time and effort into building meaningful relationships with peers and faculty members, they will reap the benefits of increased social and academic integration in the form of greater satisfaction and success.

Astin (1999) posited that the religious affiliation of an institution might play a role in supporting student success if the student shares the same religious beliefs as the institution. In order to explore this claim, my study sought to understand how the religious aspect affected the

transfer student experience. As transfer students often experience some form of the phenomenon commonly referred to as *transfer shock* (Chamely-Wiik et al., 2021; Clausen & Wessel, 2015; Gere et al., 2017; Tobolowsky & Cox, 2012), the negative effects of the transfer student stigma, and feelings of isolation (Ishitani & Flood, 2018), it is critically important that the religious aspect be examined regarding how it affects the transfer student experience. Due to the fact that this relationship had not been studied previously, my study filled the existing gap in the scholarship regarding the lived experiences of transfer students within the context of faith-based and religiously affiliated institutions.

While Astin (1999) and Tinto (1975) have provided two seminal works widely used by researchers when studying student retention and persistence, several other theories could be used to provide an additional lens through which the present phenomenon could be investigated. Two additional theories stand out among the rest as being particularly noteworthy. Bean's (1980) model of student attrition and Chickering and Gamson's (1999) seven principles for good practice provide two interesting viewpoints regarding the transfer student experience. While both additional theories contain several parallels to Astin's and Tinto's theories, both present distinct differences as well.

Bean's (1980) model of student attrition viewed student attrition as exhibiting many of the same patterns as one would find when examining a cause-and-effect relationship. Bean posited that if certain things happen, students will leave their institutions. In this model, student attrition is compared to employee turnover in the workplace, where market demands and varying organizational factors can put pressure on industries; likewise, student characteristics, predispositions, and institutional factors can put pressure on students (Bean, 1980; Brinkley-Etzkorn & Cherry, 2022). This can impact a student's institutional satisfaction, leading to

decisions to persist or to depart (Bean, 1980). Ten factors were identified that could influence student attrition, including “intent to leave; grades; opportunity to transfer; practical value; certainty of choice; loyalty; family approval; courses; student goals; and major and job certainty” (Bean, 1982, p. 291). Researchers Cabrera et al. (1993) claimed that Bean’s model was best applied in conjunction with Tinto’s (1975) work on student retention to provide a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon.

Chickering and Gamson (1999) provide another approach to ensuring student success. Lauded for providing a more holistic lens that blends both the psychological and behavioral aspects of engagement (Lee & Schneider, 2018), Chickering and Gamson (1999) emphasize the need for good practices to be employed, which can be especially helpful for transfer student populations. The key factors listed as important determinants of success include communicating superior standards and the benefits associated with more time spent on task, “contact between students and faculty, cooperation among students, active learning, prompt feedback, and diverse talents and ways of learning” (Chickering & Gamson, 1999; Lee & Schneider, 2018, p. 79). Numerous studies have examined the impact of the seven principles of good practice and have found that the best practices for predicting student success were increased contact between students and faculty members, engaging in active learning, and higher levels of cooperation among students (Chickering & Gamson, 1999; Kuh et al., 1997).

Problem Statement

The problem is that transfer students enrolled in institutions of higher education experience lower retention and graduation rates (Jacobson et al., 2017; Tobolowsky & Cox, 2012), leading to undesirable results among this understudied student population. When students transfer to other institutions, they lack both the academic and social integration their peers have

already achieved through prior involvement in campus life (Blekic et al., 2020), leading to heightened feelings of isolation (Ishitani & Flood, 2018) which may increase the likelihood that the student will either leave the institution by transferring again or by leaving higher education altogether (Tinto, 1975), culminating in a negative outcome for the unretained transfer student, the institution, and society at large (Sternberg, 2016). Although there are a significant number of faith-based and religiously affiliated institutions throughout the United States, little is understood regarding how attending a faith-based or religiously affiliated institution can impact the transfer student experience.

Therefore, it is critically important that educators understand the experiences and needs of this population to ensure that a greater number of transfer students succeed at their receiving institutions. While a significant number of studies have examined the experiences of transfer students at large research universities and small liberal arts colleges, few, if any, studies have explored the lived experiences of transfer students at faith-based and religiously affiliated institutions. As Astin (1999) emphasized that students who attend faith-based or religiously affiliated institutions are more likely to persist if they share the same religious beliefs as their institutions owing to increased feelings of institutional fit, it is important to understand the impact attending a faith-based or religiously affiliated institution might have on the transfer student experience. In order to fill the apparent gap in the literature, my study aimed to understand the lived experiences of undergraduate transfer students at faith-based and religiously affiliated institutions in the United States.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of my transcendental phenomenological study was to understand the lived experiences of undergraduate transfer students at faith-based and religiously affiliated

institutions in the United States. The lived experiences of undergraduate transfer students can be generally defined as the personal anecdotes, thoughts, and recollections recounted of occurrences experienced by the participants in this study during their transition from one institution to another. Current research shows that transfer students constitute a significant portion of the undergraduate population (Gere et al., 2017; Tobolowsky & Cox, 2012). In addition, studies have revealed that graduation and retention rates are significantly lower among transfer student populations (Jacobson et al., 2017; Tobolowsky & Cox, 2012), necessitating that research be conducted that explores the reasons behind this phenomenon.

Significance of the Study

My study holds important theoretical, empirical, and practical significance for the field of higher education. Through the thorough examination of the lived experiences of undergraduate transfer students at faith-based and religiously affiliated institutions in the United States, my study not only fills a gap in the current scholarship surrounding the experiences of transfer students but offers critical insights that may serve to inform college and university administrators of ways to improve current practice regarding this student population. The theoretical significance of my study is considered first, followed by a discussion of my study's empirical contribution. Finally, the practical implications of my study are considered.

Theoretical Significance

The theoretical significance of my study was two-fold. My study sought to bridge the gap between Tinto's (1975) theory of engagement and Astin's (1999) theory of involvement by examining both the psychological and behavioral aspects and implications surrounding the social and academic integration of undergraduate transfer students from a holistic perspective within the context of faith-based and religiously affiliated institutions. As one theory simply cannot be

used exclusively without the context of the other, using both theories together to provide a framework through which the transfer student experience can be explored in its multifaceted entirety adds to the present literature surrounding the phenomenon. A significant amount of research presently examines the psychological aspects of the transfer student experience by addressing the thoughts, feelings, and needs of this unique and underrepresented population. Likewise, numerous studies have surveyed the behavioral aspects of the transfer student experience by presenting a discussion of how active participation in various programs and initiatives can lead to better outcomes. However, as thoughts and feelings often underlie behaviors and vice-versa, examining the ways in which students respond to various phenomena, as well as how they perceive the phenomena, provides a complete, all-encompassing, and holistic understanding of the transfer student experience in light of the two guiding theories.

Empirical Significance

The empirical significance of my study was that it provided a unique, pioneering perspective within the field of higher education by examining how the religious aspect of institutional fit, as outlined by Astin (1999), impacted the transfer student experience. Further, the impact of the transfer student stigma (Gere et al., 2017; Tobolowsky & Cox, 2012) and various negative connotations often associated with transferring, such as a lack of motivation (Mobley & Brawner, 2019), lack of prior academic preparation (Casey et al., 2019; Coats & Pemberton, 2017), and lack of financial ability or familial support (Blekic et al., 2020) were also explored within the context of faith-based and religiously affiliated institutions. Additionally, the impact of various institutional initiatives such as new student on-boarding programs (Mayhew et al., 2010; Scott et al., 2017), service learning programs (York & Fernandez, 2018), learning communities (Chamely-Wiik et al., 2021; Coston, 2019; Scott et al., 2017), peer and faculty

mentoring and advising opportunities (Hern et al., 2019; Lee & Schneider, 2018; Wetzel & Debure, 2018), first-year seminars (Gere et al., 2017), honors programs (Bahls, 2018; Thomas et al., 2019), and more, were explored regarding how each impacted the transfer student experience within the present context. Approaching this topic from a faith-based or religiously affiliated perspective filled a gap in the current scholarly literature, as few studies, if any, had considered the impact that attending a faith-based or religiously affiliated institution could have on the transfer student experience.

Practical Significance

The practical significance of my study was to provide administrators and student support staff within higher educational contexts with valuable data regarding the transfer student experience that may serve to inform practice regarding how transfer student initiatives are implemented in the future. Current research has reported concerning trends regarding the retention and persistence rates of transfer student populations. Transfer students are often an overlooked population at many colleges and universities, with precedence given to continuing students considered to be native to the institution (Shaw et al., 2019; Tobolowsky & Cox, 2012). For a variety of reasons, transfer students often struggle at their receiving institutions leading to lower retention and graduation rates (Jacobson et al., 2017; Tobolowsky & Cox, 2012), necessitating that additional research be conducted that will provide the critical insights needed in order to understand why this phenomenon may be present in today's educational climate. My study sought to answer those questions while also seeking to uncover the impact that attending a faith-based or religiously affiliated institution had on student perceptions of institutional fit (Astin, 1999) and the overall transfer student experience within this context. My study sought to inform best practice at not only faith-based and religiously affiliated institutions, but all

institutions of higher learning. Additionally, my study sought to uncover ways in which both sending and receiving institutions can assist transfer students, allowing for a smoother transition from one institution to another. Finally, my study aimed to understand which institutional factors and programs were beneficial to transfer students and which were not, thus providing valuable information regarding the needs of this previously underrepresented population in light of their unique experiences within the present context.

Research Questions

The research questions that guided my study were carefully constructed from the present theoretical and empirical literature surrounding the issues regarding transfer students in higher education. As a significant number of studies had previously examined the experiences of transfer students at large research universities and small liberal arts colleges, a gap existed in the scholarly literature exploring the lived experiences of undergraduate transfer students at faith-based and religiously affiliated institutions. The central research question was designed to address this gap in the literature. My three sub-questions examined the extra-personal (spiritual or divine), intrapersonal (psychological or internal), and interpersonal (behavioral or external) aspects of the phenomenon, as I sought to provide a comprehensive and holistic depiction of the undergraduate transfer student experience within the context of faith-based and religiously affiliated institutions in the United States. A graphic representation of the research questions can be found in Appendix H.

Astin's (1999) assertion that institutional fit is often a strong predictor of student persistence also claims that students who attend faith-based or religiously affiliated institutions are more likely to persist if they share the same religious beliefs as their institution. By their very nature, faith-based and religiously affiliated institutions serve to offer students an additional

layer of integration, supplementing the traditional measures of academic and social integration by incorporating spiritual integration into the college experience (Ekwonye & DeLauer, 2019). The first sub-question serves to address Astin's statements regarding institutional fit by examining how the religious aspect of faith-based and religiously affiliated institutions affects the transfer student experience. Furthermore, sub-question one seeks to understand the ways in which spiritual integration impacts the transfer student experience within the context of faith-based and religiously affiliated institutions.

The phenomenon of transfer shock and the pejorative stigmas surrounding transfer students often lead to decreased performance and participation among this population (Chamely-Wiik et al., 2021; Clausen & Wessel, 2015; Gere et al., 2017; Tobolowsky & Cox, 2012). Further, successful or unsuccessful integration, both academically as well as socially, can lead to varying levels of self-efficacy, which in turn can influence motivation, goal and institutional commitment, and sense of belonging, each of which have been linked to student success (Tinto, 1975; 2015). The second sub-question guiding my study sought to examine the intrapersonal, psychological aspects of the transfer student experience by exploring how attending a faith-based or religiously affiliated institution affected the self-efficacy of transfer students.

Tinto's (1975) theory of engagement and Astin's (1999) theory of involvement provided the theoretical framework for my study. The aforementioned theories emphasize the dire need for students to be successfully integrated both academically and socially at their institutions. Greater levels of academic and social integration are often linked to increased student persistence, satisfaction, and success (Astin, 1999; Tinto, 1975). The final research question sought to understand how the transfer student experience at faith-based and religiously affiliated

institutions impacted a student's perceived level of academic and social integration at their receiving institutions from both a psychological as well as a behavioral standpoint.

Central Research Question

What are the lived experiences of undergraduate transfer students at faith-based and religiously affiliated institutions in the United States?

Sub-Question One

How does the religious aspect of attending a faith-based or religiously affiliated institution affect the transfer student experience?

Sub-Question Two

How does attending a faith-based or religiously affiliated institution affect the self-efficacy of transfer students?

Sub-Question Three

How does attending a faith-based or religiously affiliated institution affect the perceived levels of integration (Tinto, 1975; 1993) of transfer students?

Definitions

Each of the terms listed below are used throughout this manuscript. A brief definition is provided for each of the following terms, as mastery of each will afford a better understanding of my study.

1. *Transfer Stigma* – The notion that transfer students are not as able or as prepared as native students (Gere et al., 2017).
2. *Transfer Shock* – The phenomenon in which transfer students often experience a decline in academic performance while navigating the transition from sending to receiving institution (Chamely-Wiik et al., 2021; Clausen & Wessel, 2015; Gere et al., 2017).

3. *Persistence* – The phenomenon of continuing or staying at an institution with the intention to complete one's intended degree program (Tinto, 1975).
4. *Attrition* – The phenomenon that occurs when a student drops out from an institution or is otherwise not retained by the institution (Tinto, 1975).
5. *Vertical Transfer* – Students who attend a two-year institution before transferring to a four-year institution (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2022).
6. *Upward Transfer* – An upward transfer is another name for a vertical transfer (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2022).
7. *Reverse Transfer* – Students who attend a four-year institution before attending a two-year institution (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2022).
8. *Lateral Transfer* – Students who transfer from one four-year institution to another four-year institution; the term also applies to students who attend one two-year institution before attending another two-year institution (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2022; Postsecondary National Policy Institute, 2022).
9. *Undermatching* – This phenomenon occurs when students deliberately choose programs or institutions far below their academic abilities due to feelings of self-doubt (Bahls, 2018).

Summary

This chapter provided an overview of my study that sought to understand the lived experiences of undergraduate transfer students at faith-based and religiously affiliated institutions in the United States. First, a discussion of the historical, social, and theoretical contexts was provided that laid the foundation for my research study. As transfer students have become a prominent population within the context of higher education (Gere et al., 2017;

Tobolowsky & Cox, 2012), additional research efforts surrounding this group of students was warranted. The research problem that was explored in my study was introduced next, outlining the need for the present research to be conducted. The problem is that when students transfer to other institutions, they lack both the academic and social integration their peers have already achieved through prior involvement in campus life (Blekic et al., 2020), leading to heightened feelings of isolation (Ishitani & Flood, 2018) which may increase the likelihood that the student will either leave the institution by transferring again or by leaving higher education altogether (Tinto, 1975), culminating in a negative outcome for the unretained transfer student, the institution, and society at large (Sternberg, 2016), yet little is understood regarding how attending a faith-based or religiously affiliated institution can impact the transfer student experience. The purpose of my transcendental phenomenological study was to elucidate the lived experiences of undergraduate transfer students within these contexts and to inform best practices pertaining to transfer students in the future. The theoretical, empirical, and practical significance of my study was discussed next. Subsequently, the central research question and the three sub-questions guiding my study were introduced, along with an explanation of the rationale underlying each question. Finally, key terms and definitions were provided for increased clarity.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

A systematic review of the current literature was conducted to explore the issues and trends surrounding transfer student integration and to gain an understanding of the experiences of transfer students at four-year, faith-based and religiously affiliated institutions. This review begins with a discussion of Tinto's (1975) theory of engagement and Astin's (1999) theory of involvement. It is followed subsequently by a synthesis of the literature regarding the transition and integration of transfer students. Next, this review discusses the impacts of academic and social integration on the student experience. Lastly, this review considers the connection between academic and social integration and the lived experiences of transfer students. This literature review reveals a gap, necessitating that further research focus specifically on understanding this underrepresented student population by examining the lived experiences of undergraduate transfer students at faith-based and religiously affiliated institutions located in the United States.

Theoretical Framework

This section of the literature review provides a brief overview of the two theories comprising the theoretical framework for this study. Tinto's (1975) theory of engagement will be discussed first, followed by a discussion of Astin's (1999) theory of involvement, and the main themes revealed in these theories will be extrapolated. Finally, the rationale for the selection of each theory will be provided regarding its relevance to the research topic as well as the overarching purpose for conducting this research study. Figure 1 provides a detailed graphic representation of this study's theoretical framework.

Theory of Student Engagement

The first theory comprising my study's theoretical framework is Tinto's (1975) theory of student engagement. This theory discusses the importance of academic and social integration on college campuses. Applying Emile Durkheim's (1961) theory of suicide to higher education, Tinto posited that many similarities exist between those who fall away from society and those who fall away from their educational institutions. As a lack of integration is often cited as a factor that may contribute to an individual's decision to commit suicide, Tinto claimed that students who are not integrated socially and academically within their universities are at a higher risk of falling away from their institutions. Tinto argued that each college or university could be viewed as a unique environment consisting of its own culture, social norms, and social structures. Failing to adhere to these structures can result in a lack of integration and an increased likelihood of institutional departure. Falling away can take many different forms, including dropping out, stopping out, or transferring. While each of these behaviors can look different depending on the individual and the situation, dropping out is usually used to refer to individuals who withdraw from an institution with no inclination to return, whether for academic or disciplinary dismissal or another reason (Tinto, 1975). Tinto used the term *stopping out* to refer to students who withdraw from an institution but intend to continue their studies at some point in the future. Finally, Tinto refers to students who transfer as individuals who leave one institution to enroll in another.

Academic and social integration are the two themes repeatedly stressed in this seminal work. Tinto (1975) posited that students who are better integrated socially have a higher likelihood of persisting because they are more committed to the institution and its culture. Furthermore, the importance of academic integration and academic success are emphasized in

that a student's performance, good or bad, is one of the most significant predictors of whether or not the student will persist at the institution until graduation (Stewart et al., 2015; Tinto, 1975). For students to have the greatest chances of success, they must be integrated both academically and socially. Tinto stated that it is possible that students may achieve only one type of integration while failing to attain the other. Tinto argued that students who are socially integrated but not academically integrated run the risk of academic dismissal due to insufficient performance in the classroom. Conversely, Tinto claimed that students who are academically integrated might feel isolated if they fail to reach a sufficient level of social integration. In either case, students who lack both forms of integration are deemed to be at risk.

Tinto's (1975) theory of engagement also discussed the critical roles that goal commitment, institutional commitment, and family background play in a student's likelihood to persist. Tinto posited that a student's goal commitment might be a significant indicator of whether or not they will be successful. Students with high goal commitment are likely to persist, while students who lack goal commitment are more likely to fall away (Tinto, 1975). Likewise, students who have higher levels of institutional commitment are more likely to continue at their college or university, ultimately resulting in degree completion (Ballo et al., 2019; Tinto, 1975). Family and financial backgrounds can also influence a student's decision to persist at or withdraw from an institution. Students from more affluent urban areas with educated parents are more likely to persist (Tinto, 1975). Parents with higher levels of education are likely to be more involved in their student's educational journey and are more likely to have higher educational expectations for their children (Tinto, 1975).

This theory also examined the institutional characteristics associated with dropping out of higher education. Because dropping out is a multidimensional process, Tinto (1975) claimed it

was only fair to examine how institutions influence dropout behavior. Some institutional types are more predisposed to higher levels of student attrition. Tinto posited that students at two-year community colleges have the lowest persistence rates, followed by students at public universities. Private institutions tend to have the highest retention rates out of all institutional types (Tinto, 1975). It was also stated that higher-quality schools have a greater number of persisting students than do lower-quality schools (Tinto, 1975).

This landmark study was chosen for the theoretical basis of this review due to its relevance to the research topic. Because transferring is one form of institutional withdrawal, exploring the lived experiences of transfer students is necessary and will serve to elucidate both the hardships and triumphs of this important student demographic. Ishitani and Flood (2018) claimed that students who are more engaged socially might be less likely to transfer. Because the participants of my study will already be transfer students, it will be interesting to see what the data reveals regarding their academic and social integration, as transfer students often lack integration on their receiving campuses, at least at the initial stages of their transition. My study aimed to understand why students chose to leave their sending institutions, as well as what their experiences were as transfer students at their receiving institutions. Additionally, this research study examined the integration process of transfer students at faith-based and religiously affiliated institutions in order to determine the impact of social and academic integration on the overall undergraduate experience within this context.

Theory of Student Involvement

Astin's (1999) theory of involvement is the second theory comprising this theoretical framework. Astin (1999) defined *student involvement* as "the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience" (p. 518). Students

who are involved in campus clubs and activities, invest a significant amount of time in their schoolwork, and foster meaningful friendships with peers and relationships with faculty members are more likely to be successful than students who are uninvolved or lack active participation on campus (Astin, 1999). Like Tinto (1975), Astin argued that increased levels of involvement lead to more positive results.

Drawing from Freud's concept of *cathexis*, the theory of involvement posited that individuals have a finite amount of psychological energy to devote to various situations, people, and objects (Astin, 1999). These objects can be social, academic, or entirely unrelated to the college experience in their nature. Freud's *cathexis* is evident in Astin's theory of involvement in that students can be expected to reap both academic and social rewards commensurate with the amount of effort they exert. When students invest significant time and effort into the college experience, they are likely to feel a greater sense of attachment to the university. Conversely, when students spend considerable time on endeavors outside of the university, they have less energy to devote to being actively involved on campus (Astin, 1999). This led Astin to posit that working full-time outside of the university campus can detract from the overall college experience because that psychological energy is being spent elsewhere. Dika et al. (2015) supported this claim, maintaining that employment was linked with lower levels of persistence among student populations.

While concepts such as motivation, or lack thereof, may be difficult to gauge due to the abstract nature of the constructs, involvement is easier to measure because it focuses on student behaviors (Astin, 1999). Student involvement is not static or standardized; it can vary by student as well as activity, and these levels of involvement can fluctuate over time (Astin, 1999). Therefore, student involvement can be viewed as taking place along a "continuum" (Astin, 1999,

p. 519). The theory of involvement brought forth the argument that effective student learning requires active participation in the academic environment (Astin, 1999). When students are actively engaged in their own learning, the learning becomes more meaningful. Clark (2018) echoed this sentiment, citing that when students are given the opportunity to become “co-producers of knowledge,” they gain a greater appreciation for the research and learning process than they would by simply being consumers of knowledge (p.90).

According to Astin (1999), time is the greatest asset a student has, and their time must be respected. To emphasize the critical role of involvement, Astin describes the impacts various facets of the student experience have on student success. Academic involvement was shown to be a critical factor in student engagement as well as participation in student government associations, athletic teams, and Greek life (Astin, 1999). Astin also emphasized institutional fit as being a strong predictor of student persistence in that students who attend faith-based or religiously affiliated institutions are more likely to persist if they share the same religious beliefs as the institution. One aspect, a student’s living arrangement, stood out among the rest as being particularly indicative of a student’s level of involvement. When students live on campus, their levels of involvement are generally higher due to their increased interactions with peers, faculty, and staff at the university (Astin, 1999). Astin also highlighted the importance of peer-faculty relationships.

Due to the positive impact mentoring relationships can have, both peer and faculty mentoring programs have been implemented at several four-year institutions, as these programs often serve to increase student involvement. Mentoring programs can lead to higher levels of retention by bolstering a student’s academic and social involvement through increasing the number of interactions a student has with their university, their peers (Day et al., 2017), and

faculty members (Buyserie et al., 2017). Increasing the number of positive interactions a student has on campus increases the amount of psychological energy they invest in the college experience. It is important to note, however, that Astin (1999) found that excessive amounts of academic and athletic involvement led to lower levels of personal development than moderate amounts of involvement. This finding revealed that it is possible to become involved to a point in which it is no longer beneficial but detracts from the overall college experience.

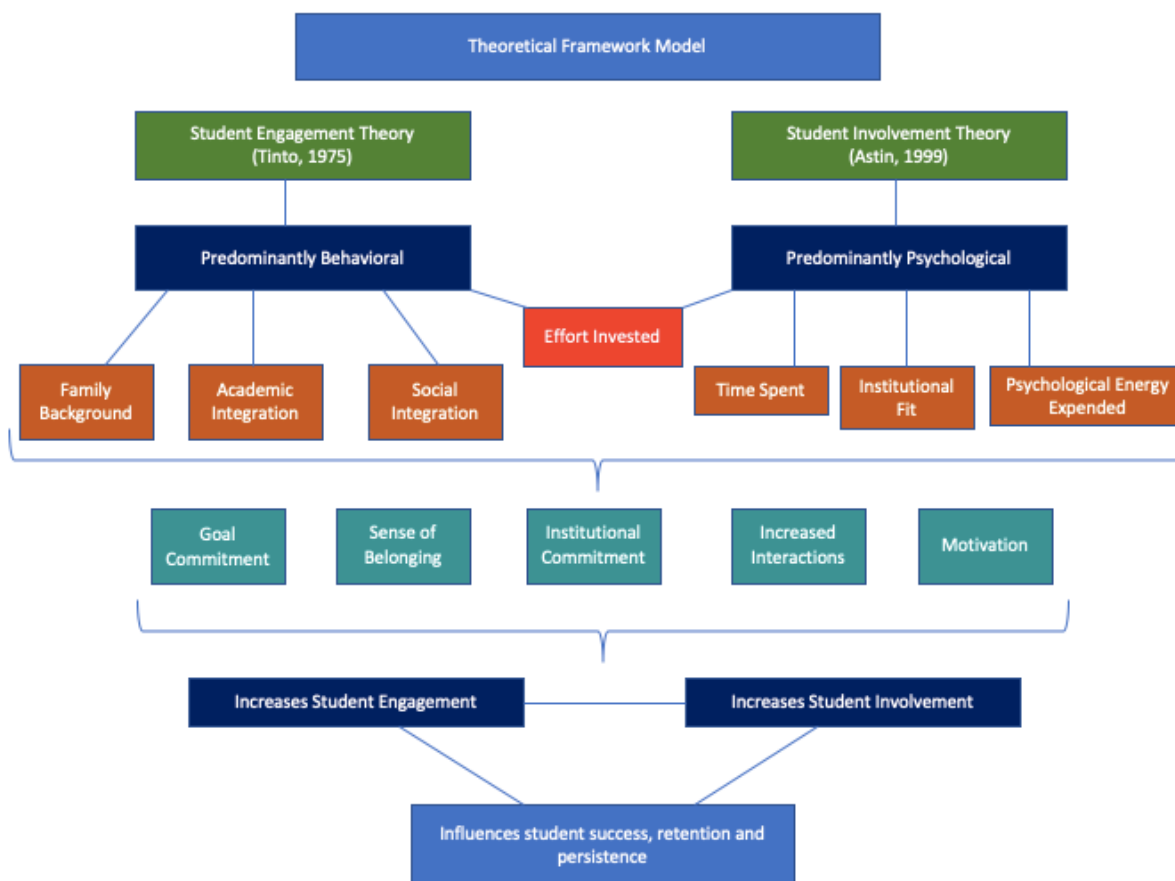
This theory was chosen due to the relationship between student involvement and student success. The more time students invest in their college experience, the more they can expect to get out of it. Astin's (1999) theory of involvement complements Tinto's (1975) theory of engagement in that students must invest time and energy into their social and academic lives to ensure they have a full and rewarding college experience. Increasing involvement, especially through opportunities such as an on-campus part-time job, may also serve to increase institutional attachment, ultimately leading to higher levels of persistence (Astin, 1999; Tinto, 1975). As transfer students often enter their receiving institutions without the same levels of inclusion and involvement as their continuing peers, this group is worthy of study.

Furthermore, many transfer students struggle to overcome the negative implications of the transfer student stigma, which may hinder students from becoming more involved on campus, thus diminishing their chances of success at the receiving institution. My study examines the claims set forth by Tinto (1975) and Astin (1999), which stated that greater levels of involvement and engagement lead to more positive experiences and more desirable outcomes in the lived experiences of transfer students. Transfer students may need to exert greater amounts of effort than their continuing peers to successfully integrate into the new campus environment. This theoretical framework provided the grounding for my research study as I sought to gain an

understanding of the lived experiences and transition strategies employed by undergraduate transfer students at faith-based and religiously affiliated institutions in the United States.

Figure 1

Theoretical Framework Model



Related Literature

The following section provides a breakdown of the literature surrounding the topic of transfer students. The review begins with a discussion of transfer students and the themes that have emerged as pertaining specifically to this group of undergraduate students, followed by a discussion of the various transfer pathways students must consider as well as how each type of institution might affect the transfer student experience. Next, the transitional period experienced

by transfer students upon entering their receiving institutions is examined, followed by a discussion of the themes of academic and social integration, outlining how each contributes to student success. Furthermore, this section provides insight into how each form of integration can be applied specifically to transfer students in order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of their lived experiences.

Transfer Students

There is possibly no student demographic more diverse than transfer students (Tobolowsky & Cox, 2012). Transfer students come from various educational, cultural, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds, making them exceptionally unique but also exceedingly difficult for institutions to accommodate (Tobolowsky & Cox, 2012). It is often impossible for receiving institutions to give each transfer student the personalized care needed (Tobolowsky & Cox, 2012). When compared to their continuing peers, transfer students may not perform as well academically (Gere et al., 2017; Tobolowsky & Cox, 2012), and studies have shown that retention and graduation rates for this population are significantly lower (Bastedo et al., 2016; Jacobson et al., 2017), ranging from percentages in the mid-sixties compared to around 80 percent for their continuing colleagues (Tobolowsky & Cox, 2012). This evidence suggests that institutional shortcomings may have an impact on the experiences of transfer students as well as their institutional success relative to their continuing peers. Lower graduation rates among this population are concerning as this may have negative implications, not only for the students but also for the institutions and for society as well (Sternberg, 2016).

Furthermore, statistical data has shown that the COVID-19 pandemic has created additional difficulties for transfer student populations (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2022; Postsecondary National Policy Institute, 2022). Transfer student enrollment was

reported to have decreased substantially in the Fall 2020 semester, with a 9.2% decline (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2022; Postsecondary National Policy Institute, 2022). Transfer student enrollments have seemingly begun to stabilize over the course of the 2021 academic year (Postsecondary National Policy Institute, 2022); however, it has been noted by researchers that the innumerable pre-existing disparities that are ever-present among the varying student populations were exacerbated by the wide-reaching implications of the COVID-19 pandemic (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2022). With transfer student enrollments experiencing significant fluctuations in recent years, it is more important, now than ever, that institutions of higher education make an effort to understand the multifaceted and complex experiences of this student population to better meet the needs of transfer students in the future.

Background

Transfer students constitute a significant portion of the undergraduate population (Gere et al., 2017; Tobolowsky & Cox, 2012), suggesting that they are no longer a fringe group on college and university campuses. Recent trends have revealed declining enrollments among institutions of higher education, emphasizing the need for institutions to focus more on enhancing the experiences of transfer students in order to bolster enrollment (Lockhart, 2019). Historically, ensuring a successful adjustment to the receiving institution has been viewed as a responsibility shared by both transfer students as well as the receiving institutions (Gere et al., 2017; Robbins, 1942). In many cases, this has been accomplished through on-campus initiatives and orientation programs for transfer students (Mayhew et al., 2010; Robbins, 1942). Robbins (1942) posited that the adjustment period most transfer students experience lasts about as long as that of the incoming freshman each year.

The literature suggests an increase in transfer behavior among college students, citing that up to a third of students at the undergraduate level have been reported to transfer, with around 25% of undergraduate students reporting having transferred more than once (Gere et al., 2017). With increasing concerns of economic instability and soaring tuition costs, greater numbers of students are forced to explore non-traditional paths to obtaining a college degree, such as beginning their educational journeys at a community college (Gere et al., 2017), as these two-year institutions serve to provide students with the necessary academic foundation that will enable them to transfer to a four-year institution later (Cohen & Kisker, 2010). However, recent reports have shown that attending a two-year institution before transferring to a four-year institution is not always the most economically prudent alternative (Belfield et al., 2017; Nguyen, 2017). As student loan debt continues to be an increasing issue within higher education (Bastedo et al., 2016), it is critically important that institutions do everything they can to ensure that every transfer student has a smooth transition from their sending institution to their receiving institution to lessen the likelihood that these students will have to direct additional funding toward repeating credits that are deemed non-transferable upon their enrollment at the receiving institution.

Types of Transfer Students

Students transfer for a number of different reasons and consequently arrive at their receiving institutions from a variety of sending institutional types. Three types of transfer students exist in higher education today. Vertical transfer students, also referred to as upward transfer students, are those who attend a two-year institution before transferring to a four-year institution (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2022). Reverse transfer students are those who first attend a four-year institution and later transfer to a two-year institution

(National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2022). Lateral transfer students are those who begin their educational journey at one four-year institution and later transfer to another four-year institution (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2022; Postsecondary National Policy Institute, 2022). Students can also transfer laterally between two-year institutions (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2022; Postsecondary National Policy Institute, 2022).

Many transfer students begin their higher educational journeys at two-year institutions (Aulck & West, 2017; Foster et al., 2020; Mobley & Brawner, 2019; Worsham et al., 2021; Yang et al., 2018). Community colleges provide a significant number of students with a low-cost alternative to attending a four-year university for the entirety of their college career (Aulck & West, 2017). However, while a large number of transfer students come from community colleges, that is not the case for all transfer students. In a study conducted by Tobolowsky and Cox (2012), 44% of transfer students transferred from an in-state two-year institution, while 56% of transfer students had previously attended a four-year institution. For some students, the intent to transfer was always present (Mobley & Brawner, 2019; Worsham et al., 2021). For other students, lack of institutional fit, social integration, or desired academic program at their sending institution led to the decision to transfer (Ishitani & Flood, 2018); and yet, for some students, indecision can provide the grounds for transferring from one institution to another (Dika et al., 2015). Though the reasons students transfer are as varied and diverse as the students themselves, the reception transfer students receive upon entering their receiving institutions is more standardized.

Transfer Pathways

Undergraduate transfer students are incredibly diverse, as are the motivations behind their decisions to transfer from one institution to another (Tobolowsky & Cox, 2012). As a result, there are numerous transfer pathways a student can choose depending on their needs. For example, students may transfer laterally between institutions of the same level, such as from one community college to another or from one four-year institution to another, they may transfer vertically from a two-year to a four-year institution, or they may reverse transfer from a four-year to a two-year institution (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2022). Likewise, there are several institutional types that a transfer student must consider when making the difficult decision to embark on the transfer student journey. Institutional types comprise two-year and four-year institutions, which include public, private, for-profit, and faith-based institutions. Additionally, each institutional type can vary by size and focus. For example, some institutions identify as large public research universities, while others may identify as small, private liberal arts colleges. Each of these factors can impact the campus culture of an institution and, along with it, the transfer student experience.

Two-Year Institutions

Two-year institutions such as community colleges have been a critically important transfer pathway for students. Tuition costs at two-year institutions are considerably lower than at four-year institutions, providing socioeconomically disadvantaged students with a more cost-effective path toward earning a bachelor's degree (Aulck & West, 2017). The first junior college was established in 1901 to separate the lower and upper-level courses (Drury, 2003). As the number of two-year institutions multiplied during the twentieth century, the modern community college structure began to take shape. In 1944, with the passing of the GI Bill of Rights, World

War II veterans were entering the higher education landscape at unprecedented rates, with nearly 2.2 million veterans enrolling in institutions of higher learning (Drury, 2003). The 1946-1947 academic year brought 455,000 new enrollments to community colleges across the country, marking a significant increase of 54% from the previous academic year (Gumm, 2006). Some community college programs became more vocationally focused around the 1970s and 1980s, seeking to provide students with valuable skills rather than preparing them to transfer elsewhere (Drury, 2003).

In recent years, community college students continue to constitute a significant portion of undergraduate enrollments, with a significant number of transfer students choosing to attend two-year institutions before vertically transferring to a four-year institution to complete their bachelor's degrees (Aulck & West, 2017; Foster et al., 2020; Mobley & Brawner, 2019; Worsham et al., 2021; Yang et al., 2018). Numerous students have also been reported to reverse transfer, attending a four-year institution before enrolling at a two-year institution (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2018). Data reported for the 2011 Fall cohort showed that out of all initial enrollments across all institutional types, 42.1% of students attended two-year institutions (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2018). Of those students, 40.8% attended public two-year institutions, 1.0% attended private non-profit two-year institutions, and 0.3% attended private for-profit two-year institutions (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2018). The 2011 cohort also reported a 36.7% transfer rate among students initially enrolled at two-year institutions, suggesting that many students choose the community college transfer pathway (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2018). However, this report additionally revealed that 38.5% of students who initially attended a four-year institution transferred at some point in their college careers, necessitating that special

attention be given to this population as well (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2018).

Four-Year Institutions

Although a significant number of students transfer vertically from two-year institutions to four-year institutions, a sizable amount transfer laterally between four-year institutions. Four-year institutions fall into three categories: public, private non-profit, and private for-profit institutions. Institutions within each of the three aforementioned categories can vary by size, scope, and mission. A report following the 2011 Fall cohort exposed transfer student origins and destinations by institutional type shedding light on how transfer students move between institutions (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2018). Public non-profit institutions reported the highest percentage of initial enrollments at four-year institutions, with 37.6% of students attending these institutions; private non-profit four-year institutions and private for-profit four-year institutions enrolled 16.8% and 3.6%, respectively (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2018). Statistics have shown that the most significant percentage of lateral transfer students at both public and private non-profit four-year institutions transferred from four-year public institutions (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2018). Transfer students from private non-profit four-year institutions were the next most prevalent group (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2018). Transfer students from private for-profit four-year institutions represent the smallest group of transfer students entering public and private non-profit four-year institutions; however, they constitute the largest group of students transferring into other private for-profit four-year institutions (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2018).

Of all students who transferred into four-year public institutions, 33.5% transferred laterally from other public four-year institutions, 9.2% transferred from private non-profit four-year institutions, and 2.6% transferred from private for-profit four-year institutions (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2018). Similarly, of all students who transferred into private non-profit four-year institutions, 33.4% transferred from four-year public institutions, 20.8% transferred from other private non-profit four-year institutions, and 2.4% transferred from private for-profit four-year institutions (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2018). While it appears that students who initially attended private non-profit four-year institutions were more likely to transfer to another institution of the same type, it is worth noting that students who initially attended a private for-profit four-year institution were most likely to transfer to another private for-profit four-year institution. Of all students who transferred into private for-profit four-year institutions, only 8.8% transferred from a public four-year institution, 10.7% transferred from a private non-profit four-year institution, and a staggering 48.3% transferred from another private for-profit four-year institution (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2018). It should also be noted that regarding the 2011 Fall cohort of students, a substantial number initially enrolled in four-year institutions reverse transferred to two-year institutions at a rate of 59.2% (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2018). This data has shown that not all transfer students are vertical transfers, having attended two-year institutions before enrolling in a four-year institution. This necessitates that research investigates not only the lived experiences of vertical transfer students but reverse transfer and lateral transfer students as well, as both factions comprise possibly the largest transfer student population in today's modern higher education landscape.

Faith-Based and Religiously Affiliated Institutions

The United States has a rich and diverse history and a population comprised of innumerable individuals from all over the world. People are welcome to bring their cultural traditions and religious beliefs with them when they emigrate to America; this inclusivity and acceptance has brought forth a plethora of faith-based and religiously affiliated institutions for students to choose from across the country. While the greatest number of faith-based institutions in the United States are rooted in Christian doctrine, Catholic, Jewish, Islamic, Buddhist, and Hindu institutions are also present in today's higher educational landscape (Council for Christian Colleges and Universities, n.d.; Hindu University of America, n.d.; International Student, 2022; UniRank, 2022). The Council for Christian Colleges and Universities (n.d.) stated that upwards of 185 Christian colleges and universities are located across the globe, more than 150 of which are concentrated in North America alone. Faith-based and religiously affiliated institutions are generally private and designed to incorporate aspects of spirituality or faith into their student bodies by merging facets of their guiding religious dogma with their academic curriculum (Ekwonye & DeLauer, 2019).

As Christian colleges and universities are the most prevalent in the United States, it is no surprise that the majority of scholarly research surrounding student success and persistence at faith-based institutions has been conducted at Christian or Catholic institutions. Although most faith-based and religiously affiliated colleges are four-year institutions, they stand to offer an additional layer of integration beyond the traditional measures of academic and social engagement. Faith-based and religiously affiliated institutions offer students the aspect of spirituality and spiritual integration (Ekwonye & DeLauer, 2019). *Spirituality* is defined as the feeling of well-being and sense of purpose that one derives from engaging in a relationship with

nature, higher power, or divine figure (Ekwonye & DeLauer, 2019; Weathers et al., 2016). Astin (1999) claimed that religious affiliation could be considered a determinant of institutional fit; consequently, students who attend institutions that align with their belief systems have a greater likelihood of persisting at that institution. A study by Ekwonye and DeLauer (2019) sought to understand the individual and interpersonal factors that led to higher levels of academic success among female students enrolled at a Catholic university. It was discovered that, when taken together, higher levels of academic integration, social integration, and spiritual integration were positively linked to academic resiliency, a noted factor contributing to student success (Ekwonye & DeLauer, 2019). As transfer students often struggle upon entering their receiving institutions for various reasons, evaluating the effect of spiritual integration on transfer student populations may provide critically important insights regarding how attending a faith-based or religiously affiliated institution impacts the transfer student experience.

Transition

Many transfer students express having difficulty adjusting to their receiving institutions (Gere et al., 2017; O'Connell & Resuli, 2020). A study by Gere et al. (2017) revealed five key areas in which transfer students struggle when acclimating to a new institutional environment. These areas include having trouble adapting to differences in the workload at the receiving institution, understanding what is expected of them academically as well as socially, building meaningful relationships with peers and faculty members, learning to adjust to differences in instructional approaches, and understanding the various resources available to them (Gere et al., 2017). This transitional period can be extremely stressful and frustrating for students as they learn to navigate their new environments. For students transferring from other countries, the adjustment period can be even more challenging (O'Connell & Resuli, 2020). Furthermore,

many transfer students experience issues regarding the transfer of credits between their sending and receiving institutions (O'Connell & Resuli, 2020).

In addition to these concerns, many students report experiencing the phenomenon known as *transfer shock* (Clausen & Wessel, 2015; Gere et al., 2017; Wetzel & Debure, 2018), as well as feelings of loneliness or doubt (Blekic et al., 2020; Ishitani & Flood, 2018). The pejorative stigmatization of transfer students can also affect their experience at their receiving institutions (Gere et al., 2017; Tobolowsky & Cox, 2012). Students can feel overwhelmed when acclimating to the new campus culture and have often reported experiencing feelings of confusion regarding the lack of information received pertaining to campus traditions (Tobolowsky & Cox, 2012), course expectations, and campus resources (Foster et al., 2020; Gere et al., 2017). Understanding the countless challenges transfer students face while attempting to traverse this difficult transitional period is critically important and should serve to inform future practice regarding how the transfer process is approached by institutional administrative staff personnel.

Credit Transfer

Transfer students enter their receiving institutions with credit hours earned for courses at their sending institutions (O'Connell & Resuli, 2020; Wetzel & Debure, 2018; Worsham et al., 2021; Yang et al., 2018). Sometimes it may not be clear if or how these credits will transfer over to fulfill degree requirements at the receiving institution, and this confusion can lead to severe consequences for the student both financially as well as academically if they are required to spend more time enrolled due to issues regarding transfer credits (Yang et al., 2018). In addition, transfer students often lack the necessary information regarding the transfer process (Bass, 2017; United States Government Accountability Office, 2017). On average, studies show that transfer students lose around 43% of the credits they previously earned at their sending institution (Bass,

2017; United States Government Accountability Office, 2017). Furthermore, it is noted that the number of credits lost varies substantially depending on institutional type, with the most credits reportedly being lost between for-profit and public not-for-profit institutions, with a loss of 94% of previously earned credits (United States Government Accountability Office, 2017).

Students who begin their educational journeys at community colleges before vertically transferring to four-year institutions may also experience difficulties transferring their credits from one institution to the other. The community college pathway to a bachelor's degree is not always the most efficient, often resulting in a number of non-transferrable credits or an abundance of credits unrelated to the transfer student's intended field of study (Belfield et al., 2017; Nguyen, 2017). Transfer students have expressed frustration when course credits from their sending institutions do not have equivalents at their receiving institutions, leading to extra time and money being spent retaking courses they have already completed (O'Connell & Resuli, 2020). To mitigate this issue, many community colleges have developed articulation agreements with four-year universities (Worsham et al., 2021). Helping students navigate the academic transitional period more efficiently can aid students in reaching their academic goals in a shorter time while also saving them money (Wetzel & Debure, 2018; Yang et al., 2018). Additionally, some researchers have found that advisors designed specifically to help transfer students can ease the transition from one institution to another (Wetzel & Debure, 2018; Yang et al., 2018). For example, Eckerd College, located in Florida, found that having designated faculty members that handled matching transfer credits with institutional equivalents helped students immensely (Wetzel & Debure, 2018). Students who are enrolled in STEM majors have less flexibility than their peers regarding how transfer credits are applied due to the academically progressive nature of the course subject matter (Wetzel & Debure, 2018).

Transfer Shock

The phenomenon known as *transfer shock* can manifest in myriad ways. Upon entering their receiving institutions, transfer students experience an adjustment period that can result in a decline in academic performance (Chamely-Wiik et al., 2021; Clausen & Wessel, 2015; Gere et al., 2017). This drop in grade point average (GPA) is often temporary and can be more or less severe depending on the student's field of study (Gere et al., 2017). Transfer shock can happen for a variety of reasons but is generally attributed to institutional differences regarding instruction and expectations (Clausen & Wessel, 2015; Gere et al., 2017). The difficulties experienced during this transitional period can be exacerbated by a student's lack of academic preparation. Information literacy competence has been cited as a reason for poor transfer student performance at receiving institutions (Casey et al., 2019; Coats & Pemberton, 2017). Students who transfer to four-year institutions from community colleges have been identified as particularly deficient in the information literacy competencies necessary to be successful at the college level (Coats & Pemberton, 2017). Additionally, transfer students have claimed that the academic standards at their receiving institutions were significantly higher than at their community colleges (Gere et al., 2017; Mobley & Brawner, 2019). While the transition may be difficult, successfully adjusting to the receiving institutional standards should result in better academic results for transfer students.

Stigma

Much research has centered around the stigmatization of the transfer student experience. Gere et al. (2017) noted that transfer students are often marginalized at their receiving institutions due to preconceived notions that transfer students are not as capable or prepared as continuing students. Supporting this belief, data reported by the NELS suggest that, on average,

lateral transfer students are more likely to be better prepared academically than vertical transfer students (Weidman, 2014). Further, it has been documented that transfer students are often viewed as lacking both motivation and social integration (Mobley & Brawner, 2019), two aspects often cited as being critically linked to persistence and student success (Tinto, 2015). These uncomplimentary sentiments are not only found among students but university administrators as well (Tobolowsky & Cox, 2012). The transfer stigma is pervasive and can influence how these students are treated at their receiving institutions. Due to this stigma, transfer students are often overlooked, and precedence is given to other student populations within the receiving institution (Tobolowsky & Cox, 2012). In many cases, native students happen to be the sole focus of college and university administrators, and excessive energy is directed toward ensuring that this group of students is successfully integrated into the institution, while little or no energy is devoted to incorporating incoming transfer students (Shaw et al., 2019). Some institutions have even referred to transfer students as being an “afterthought” rather than a priority (Tobolowsky & Cox, 2012, p. 404).

Research shows that students who transfer from two-year institutions such as community colleges are more likely to experience the pejorative effects and feelings of the transfer student stigma (Shaw et al., 2019) than students who transfer laterally between four-year institutions. This phenomenon has been referred to by scholars as the “community college effect” and has notably been linked to lower levels of degree attainment among this population (Bastedo et al., 2016, p. 366). This phenomenon has led to experts questioning if community colleges truly lead to higher levels of bachelor’s degree attainment (Bok, 2013). However, it should be noted that not all students who attend a community college prior to attending a four-year institution experience this negative phenomenon (Bastedo et al., 2016). Rather, transfer students who would

have otherwise been denied the opportunity to attend a four-year institution without the community college pathway are less likely to experience this effect leading to more desirable outcomes (Bastedo et al., 2016). Therefore, it appears that regardless of the debate surrounding the effectiveness of the community college pathway, attending a two-year institution prior to attending a four-year institution does prove to be tremendously beneficial to certain sub-populations of transfer students.

Feelings of Loneliness and Doubt

Transferring from one institution to another is difficult and can lead to feelings of loneliness, isolation, and self-doubt (Dika et al., 2015; Gere et al., 2017; Ishitani & Flood, 2018; Schmertz & Carney, 2013; Shaw et al., 2019). Tinto (1975, 2015) stated that a lack of social and academic integration, along with low levels of motivation and self-efficacy, can cause students to feel this way. In addition, many factors can influence transfer students' perceptions of the transitional period, including socioeconomic status, the perceived academic ability of their peers, and transfer stigma (Gere et al., 2017).

A significant number of transfer students attend two-year community colleges before transferring to four-year institutions (Aulck & West, 2017; Foster et al., 2020; Mobley & Brawner, 2019; Shaw et al., 2019; Worsham et al., 2021; Yang et al., 2018). This decision is often made for financial reasons. Students who transfer may be perceived by their continuing peers as unable to afford college or that they were not granted admission to the university the first time they applied (Gere et al., 2017). For this reason, transfer students often view their continuing peers as more academically capable than they are (Gere et al., 2017). This phenomenon can lead transfer students to feel different than their continuing peers, with many transfer students doubting their capability of achieving a successful result at the receiving

institution (Schmertz & Carney, 2013; Shaw et al., 2019). This can also lead transfer students to be undermatched at their receiving institutions (Bahls, 2018). Undermatching occurs when students do not feel they are as intellectually gifted as their peers and therefore choose programs far below their ability due to heightened feelings of self-doubt (Bahls, 2018). Research conducted by Kang and Torres (2018) showed that out of a sample of almost 5,000 transfer students, nearly 40% were undermatched at their institutions. Undermatching has also been cited as one of the phenomena responsible for lower levels of persistence and degree attainment among transfer student populations (Bahls, 2018).

The feelings of self-doubt experienced by transfer students have been likened to what is known as the “imposter phenomenon” or imposter syndrome (Clance & O’Toole, 1987, p. 51). This negative self-perception can impact a student’s self-efficacy. Bandura (1977,1994) defined *self-efficacy* as one’s confidence in their own abilities and their deeply held belief that they can be successful in a given scenario. Self-efficacy can directly influence a student’s sense of belonging and, consequently, their level of motivation as well (Tinto, 2015). Students who lack self-efficacy, a strong sense of belonging, and motivation are often those who are less likely to succeed and are thus less likely to persist until the completion of their degree program (Tinto, 2015).

Furthermore, this disparity can be highlighted even more for first-generation transfer students, who may feel particularly isolated when their continuing peers have family members to help guide them through the college experience (Gere et al., 2017). Not only do transfer students often lack external academic support, but they lack support within their institutions as well (Blekic et al., 2020). When continuing students have established networks of friends and understand the institutional support structures, it can be intimidating for transfer students to

approach their peers to ask for help (Gere et al., 2017). This can hinder transfer students from making meaningful connections with their peers as they may feel they do not belong (Gere et al., 2017). Failing to build relationships with other students can prevent transfer students from becoming socially integrated at their receiving institutions (Tinto, 1975).

Social Integration

According to researchers, social integration is critically important for all students (Astin, 1975, 1985, 1993, 1999; Day et al., 2017; Dennehy & Dasgupta, 2017; Foster et al., 2020; Hern et al., 2019; Patterson Silver Wolf et al., 2017; Tinto, 1975, 1993, 2015). The social integration of transfer students is vital to successfully navigating the transition from one institution to another. Tinto (1975) posited that when students are not socially integrated on college campuses, they are more likely to fall away from their institutions. When transfer students arrive at their receiving institutions, they lack the social integration their continuing peers have already achieved (Blekic et al., 2020). Patterson Silverwolf et al. (2017) and Tinto (2015) discussed the importance of belonging in regard to student success, suggesting that when students feel accepted, they are more likely to perform better and, thus, are more likely to persist at their institutions. Further, a student's perceived sense of belonging has been linked to levels of motivation (Tinto, 2015). Conversely, when students lack a strong sense of belonging and feel that they are outsiders at their respective institutions, they tend to lose their motivation which often leads to unsuccessful outcomes (Walton & Cohen, 2007). Several institutional initiatives such as transfer student orientation programs (Mayhew et al., 2010), service-learning opportunities (Clever & Miller, 2019; Rahn et al., 2018; York & Fernandez, 2018), and learning communities (Chamely-Wiik et al., 2021; Murphy & Hartlaub, 2017; Scott et al., 2017) have been developed to increase social integration and promote success among transfer students.

Transfer Student On-Boarding

When transfer students arrive at their receiving institutions, many are either asked or required to attend some form of orientation initiative. Transfer student orientations have been noted as important programs that serve to increase satisfaction and success among transfer student populations (Scott et al., 2017). New student on-boarding is an essential introductory step into the institution (Mayhew et al., 2010; Robbins, 1942), and in many cases, students are presented with information regarding the plethora of student services available to make their college experience more manageable (Gere et al., 2017). Students are also given important information regarding institutional rules, regulations, and requirements to help students transition more smoothly into the receiving institutional culture (Mayhew et al., 2010).

While orientation initiatives are well-intentioned, research has shown that these programs may not be as effective or efficient as university administrators hoped (Gere et al., 2017; Mayhew et al., 2010). A study conducted by Gere et al. (2017) reported that students were presented with a significant amount of useful information during their orientation program; however, many students claimed that there was too much information being shared too quickly for them to be able to grasp everything at once. Mayhew et al. (2010) found that smaller institutions are often better able to make the orientation experience more personalized for incoming students resulting in higher levels of social integration among students who participated in the programs. However, many transfer students reported that orientation programs aided them in achieving academic integration as opposed to social integration, suggesting that transfer students may be less interested in the social aspect of the college experience (Mayhew et al., 2010).

Learning Communities

To ease the transition from one school to another, institutions have developed learning communities designed to help transfer students acclimate to their new institutions (Chamely-Wiik et al., 2021; Coston, 2019). While learning communities have been shown to improve student success across all institutional types (Murphy & Hartlaub, 2017), these communities are particularly advantageous for students who transfer into four-year institutions from two-year institutions (Chamely-Wiik et al., 2021). In addition, learning communities have been linked to increased levels of student success, including higher grade point averages (GPA) and retention rates (Scott et al., 2017).

Recognizing the need to better incorporate transfer students into their institution, and in particular, their STEM programs, Texas A&M University implemented an innovative program called the Transfer Learning Community (TLC) (Scott et al., 2017). Under this new initiative, Texas A&M partnered with a two-year community college and required that transfer students participate in an academic boot camp and attend monthly meetings that included faculty advising and peer mentoring opportunities upon entering the institution (Scott et al., 2017). This program proved to be a success, with higher retention rates and GPAs resulting from its implementation. As a result of the TLC initiative, the overall retention of participating transfer students increased from 87% to 89% (Scott et al., 2017). Additionally, GPAs increased from 2.869 to 3.217 among students who opted to leave the College of Science but remain at the university (Scott et al., 2017). Interestingly, there was a slight decline in GPA among students retained by the College of Science, with GPAs dropping minutely from 2.920 to 2.918 (Scott et al., 2017).

By cultivating a sense of community among students, the TLC program served to bolster academic success. The community aspect of learning communities assists transfer students in

achieving successful social integration at their receiving institutions (Chamely-Wiik et al., 2021), which is a critical aspect of fostering strong feelings of belonging (Tinto, 1975). High-impact practices such as learning communities have also been reported to increase graduation rates among Latino and other traditionally underrepresented student populations (Murphy & Hartlaub, 2017). Additionally, researchers have reported that participation in undergraduate research opportunities can increase academic integration (Chamely-Wiik, 2021), suggesting that positive interactions with faculty members can also contribute to academic success (Buyserie et al., 2017).

Service-Learning

Among the many ways to increase involvement among transfer student populations are service-learning initiatives. Supporting prior claims made by Tinto (1975) and Astin (1999), York and Fernandez (2018) posited that social integration and academic integration are strongly related to a student's perception of whether or not they belong at a given institution. Dewey's (1938) theory of experiential learning serves as the foundation from which service-learning initiatives have emerged (Clever & Miller, 2019). Service-learning has been positively linked to student success both academically as well as socially due to the "active learning pedagogy" employed by such initiatives (York & Fernandez, 2018, p. 579). It has also been noted that engaging in service-learning programs can lead to higher levels of student retention and persistence (Main et al., 2022).

Service-learning also links curricular learning to real-world experiences by allowing students to serve their communities (Rahn et al., 2018) while also aiding students in the development of critical skill sets (York & Fernandez, 2018). Due to the collaborative nature of service-learning initiatives, especially initiatives in which students work together to provide a

service to the community as a team, it serves to strengthen students' sense of belonging as well as supports the development of teambuilding skills (Main et al., 2022; Rahn et al., 2018). Further research has shown that service-learning programs may increase students' social awareness and civic engagement while lessening prejudicial thought patterns through interacting with individuals from varying socioeconomic backgrounds (Clever & Miller, 2019). Furthermore, it has been noted that transfer students who engage in service-learning programs have reported increased feelings of belonging at their receiving institutions, suggesting that service-learning initiatives might ease the transition from one institution to another (York & Fernandez, 2018).

Academic Integration

Academic integration is equally as important as social integration (Astin, 1975, 1985, 1993, 1999; Tinto, 1975, 1993, 2015). When students are socially integrated but not academically integrated, they risk academic dismissal due to insufficient performance in the classroom (Tinto, 1975). Students are more likely to succeed academically if they believe the curriculum to be relevant and worthwhile (Tessema et al., 2012; Tinto, 2015; Zepke, 2015). Additionally, researchers have found that “academic resiliency, academic self-efficacy, academic integration, and institutional commitment” are among the factors that contribute to higher levels of student success (Ekwonye & DeLauer, 2019, p. 86; Fife et al., 2011; Kahn et al., 2014; Tinto, 1998; Woosley & Jones, 2011). Studies have reported that academic success measured by grade point average (GPA) was the most reliable means of predicting student persistence (Borgen & Borgen, 2016; Stewart et al., 2015).

Given the vital importance of academic integration, institutions have approached this aspect of the college experience in myriad ways. Peer and faculty mentoring opportunities have been employed at several institutions in an effort to bolster academic success while providing

students with meaningful interactions with other students and university affiliates (Buyserie et al., Day et al., 2017; Dennehy & Dasgupta, 2017). First-year seminars (Garrett et al., 2017; Gere et al., 2017; Holmes & Busser, 2017; Permzadian & Credé, 2016) and honors program participation (Bahls, 2018; Thomas et al., 2019) have also proven effective in helping students acclimate to the receiving institution's culture and expectations. These programs also serve to integrate students academically. Additionally, academic support services (Grigg & Dale, 2017; Robison, 2017) and early alert systems (Harrison et al., 2021; Villano et al., 2018; Wetzel & Debure, 2018) have been developed as a way to increase student success by tailoring programs specifically to the needs of transfer students.

Peer Mentoring

While mentoring has positive social implications for transfer students, the predominant benefit of mentoring is increased academic integration and success. Peer mentors increase student interactions with their coursework and peers, serving the dual purpose of integrating the student both academically and socially (Day et al., 2017). The Stereotype Inoculation Model developed by Dasgupta (2011) provides an interesting analogy for why mentorship programs serve an important purpose. This model compares mentorship to a “social vaccine” in which “exposure to ingroup experts and peers...inoculates one's mind against noxious stereotypes,” allowing students to effectively navigate difficult transitional periods when students typically encounter the highest levels of self-doubt (Dennehy & Dasgupta, 2017, p. 5965). Mentorship programs have been implemented at a number of institutions and have reported positive findings (Day et al., 2017; Dennehy & Dasgupta, 2017).

The University of Texas at El Paso is one institution that has had tremendous success with peer mentoring initiatives (Day et al., 2017). The Peer Advocate (PA) program is one

example in which upper-level undergraduate students mentor first-year students to aid the first-year student in acclimating to the new environment (Day et al., 2017). In this program, PAs are chosen based on a list of pre-determined qualities outlined by Chaskes and Anttonen (2005), deemed necessary for making new students feel comfortable such as “having passion, caring, being an active listener, being creative and flexible, having a good sense of humor, and being patient but persistent” (Day et al., 2017, p. 241). Each PA was also an academically gifted student who was well-integrated on campus and could serve as both a role model and mentor for incoming students (Day et al., 2017). The findings reported by Day et al. (2017) showed that students who cultivated positive relationships with their PAs were more likely to benefit from the program than those who did not. These students were able to improve and develop their writing skills, gain a deeper sense of connection to the campus community, and they also reportedly utilized academic support services more frequently than students who did not develop meaningful relationships with their PAs (Day et al., 2017).

A similar program was implemented at another university that focused its efforts on providing peer mentoring opportunities for women in engineering programs (Dennehy & Dasgupta, 2017). This study took a slightly different approach than the previous study conducted by Day et al. (2017) by exploring how gender affected the student-mentor relationship. Because female students are often underrepresented in STEM majors, the effect of female mentors on female STEM students was investigated (Dennehy & Dasgupta, 2017). Taking gender into account, Dennehy and Dasgupta (2017) found that “shared identity” was a significant factor in student retention (p. 5968). Further, it was discovered that “female (but not male) mentors protected women’s belonging in engineering, self-efficacy, motivation, retention in engineering majors, and postcollege engineering aspirations” (Dennehy & Dasgupta, 2017, p. 5964).

While gender played an important role in Dennehy and Dasgupta's (2017) study, the positive findings surrounding the STEM peer mentoring program are consistent with Day et al.'s (2017) findings reported in the study of Peer Advocates. It is also important to note that the benefits of the peer mentoring relationships lasted beyond the end of the mentoring programs (Day et al., 2017; Dennehy & Dasgupta, 2017). Transfer students can benefit from peer mentoring programs due to the fact that they lack both academic and social integration upon entering their receiving institutions. Peer mentoring relationships can allow transfer students to acclimate to the new campus culture in a safe environment while receiving valuable institutional support in the form of academic encouragement and social reassurance from a peer they can trust and respect.

Faculty Mentoring and Advising

Faculty mentoring and advising initiatives have been reported to be equally as beneficial as peer mentoring. Students want to build meaningful relationships with their professors, and these relationships can greatly influence student persistence at an institution (Day et al., 2017). A study conducted at Washington State University explored the benefit of a faculty mentoring program that employed a two-pronged approach that focused on both the development of faculty members as well as the bolstering of student learning and success (Buyserie et al., 2017). The program known as the Critical Literacies Achievement and Success Program (CLASP) was designed to aid students who generally fall into the at-risk category to build confidence and improve their self-efficacy by focusing on their academic abilities and achievements rather than emphasizing their deficiencies (Buyserie et al., 2017). CLASP required students to connect with faculty members on a regular basis in order to cultivate meaningful relationships with their professors (Buyserie et al., 2017). This lessened the distance between students and faculty

members and allowed students to develop critically beneficial academic skills as well as the confidence needed to approach professors to ask questions comfortably in the future (Buyserie et al., 2017). When students were asked whether they continued to meet with their professors due to what they learned in CLASP, 52% responded with a definitive 'yes,' 43% responded that they somewhat continued the patterns learned in CLASP, and 5% of students answered that they did not meet with their professors (Buyserie et al., 2017). Introducing transfer students to academically beneficial habits such as meeting with professors serves to not only aid them as they transition into the new academic setting but also to assist transfer students in building a sense of community within the new campus environment.

Faculty advising has also been noted as a factor that contributes to transfer student success (Hern et al., 2019; Wetzel & Debure, 2018). In a study regarding STEM transfer students at Eckerd College, Wetzel and Debure (2018) found that transfer students would benefit greatly from specialized advising from faculty members, especially during the first semester at the receiving institution, as this is the most critical time period for transfer students. A second study by Hern et al. (2019) revealed that institutions do not always ensure that transfer students have the resources they need. The study revealed that 29% of study participants reported not knowing who their faculty advisor was (Hern et al., 2019). While this statistic might be concerning, Hern et al. (2019) also found that when faculty advising is carried out in an efficient manner, it yields positive results for transfer students. For example, Thomas et al. (2019) found that when transfer students were paired with faculty mentors, these students were significantly more successful. Students who worked closely with faculty and administrative mentors also reported higher levels of emotional well-being and an increased sense of belonging, in addition to experiencing greater levels of academic success (Thomas et al., 2019). Faculty mentorship opportunities have been

vitally important in creating a safe, welcoming, and productive environment where transfer students can grow while building confidence and meaningful relationships during the adjustment period at their receiving institutions.

First-Year Seminars

When transfer students arrive at their receiving institutions, they might have difficulties adjusting to the academic expectations of their receiving institutions. A study by Gere et al. (2017) revealed that transfer students often struggle to understand what is expected of them on various assignments, particularly those that are writing intensive. Foster et al. (2020) echoed this finding, stating that transfer students often received grades that were lower than expected due to this academic adjustment period. First-year seminars can help students navigate this critical adjustment period while providing them with the tools and skills they will need to be successful at their receiving institutions going forward.

A study conducted at the University of Michigan by Gere et al. (2017) found that first-year seminars for transfer students, such as Writing 350 and Transfer DSP, aided students in adjusting to the academic standards of the receiving institution. Both programs were designed to help students make the necessary changes in order to be more successful at the receiving institution. Writing 350 was designed to be taken in conjunction with the upper-level writing requirement at the university to assist students who may be struggling with balancing their workload (Gere et al., 2017). This program also included “low-stakes writing practice, one-on-one feedback, genre explication,” as well as other vital skills that may not have been taught at the community college level (Gere et al., 2017, p. 344). The overwhelming success of the Writing 350 program led to the development of another program explicitly designed with transfer students in mind. The transfer-directed self-placement or Transfer DSP program allowed

incoming transfer students to view an example of the level of work required at the University of Michigan so that they could compare it with their previous academic requirements (Gere et al., 2017). If they did not feel they were adequately prepared, it was recommended that they enroll in Writing 350 as a way to improve their chances of success in upper-level writing courses (Gere et al., 2017). While the Transfer DSP program could have had higher levels of participation, the responses to Writing 350 were very positive (Gere et al., 2017).

A study conducted by Garrett et al. (2017) also examined the extent to which first-year seminars positively impact first-year students. This study revealed that students who perform well in first-year writing seminars are likely to perform well in their major courses in the future (Garrett et al., 2017). Furthermore, it was discovered that success in first-year writing seminars could predict persistence and graduation, while failure in the seminar can predict dropout behavior (Garrett et al., 2017). It is important to note that a student's chances of success drop significantly each time he or she fails to complete the course with a passing grade (Garrett et al., 2017). Additionally, Garrett et al. (2017) found that writing courses were better predictors of future success than courses in any other discipline, including first-year mathematics courses. Therefore, it is critically important that institutions place an emphasis on writing courses, in particular, to ensure that students have the greatest chances of being successful at their institutions. While some researchers have found first-year seminars to be particularly useful tools for predicting future success and persistence, Permzadian and Credé (2016) claimed that first-year seminars are often ineffective. Although there is some debate among researchers regarding first-year seminars, a number of studies have offered support for transfer student participation in honors programs (Bahls, 2018; Thomas et al., 2019).

Honors Program Participation

While few transfer students participate in honors programs currently, many institutions are seeking innovative ways to incorporate transfer student populations going forward (Bahls, 2018; Thomas et al., 2019). In many cases, transfer students may not know that honors programs are available at their receiving institutions (Bahls, 2018). Further, they may not believe they are intellectually gifted enough to be considered honors students if they come from more modest or non-traditional backgrounds (Bahls, 2018).

Several community colleges have honors programs and have, thus, created articulation agreements with various four-year institutions in which the honors credit hours earned at the two-year institution would be honored and accepted at the four-year institution (Bahls, 2018). However, transfer students may not know these articulation agreements exist (Bahls, 2018). Understanding these articulation agreements can be critically important as many transfer students may be less inclined to inquire about honors coursework if they believe participating in an honors program may prolong the time it would take them to earn a degree. Transfer students are typically at their receiving institutions for shorter periods of time and may consequently have less ability to be flexible in terms of adding additional coursework to their already full schedules (Bahls, 2018). Adequately advertising honors program offerings and requirements may be one way to create increased interest in honors courses among transfer students. This can be accomplished through the use of websites that are informative and easy to use (Bahls, 2018).

Although some institutions have focused predominantly on making the existence of honors programs known to transfer students (Bahls, 2018), others, such as the University of California, Davis (UC Davis), have implemented a number of successful initiatives aimed at incorporating transfer students into the honors program at the university (Thomas et al., 2019).

Bahls (2018) and Thomas et al. (2019) share the belief that entry points into honors programs need to be made visible to transfer students on college and university campuses. Furthermore, these avenues need to be made known to community college students in particular, as this population constitutes a significant portion of all transfer students and because these individuals may not realize the options available to them. Understanding the need to facilitate the entrance of community college transfer students into honors programs in order to diversify the existing programs so that they accurately reflect the demographics of the student body, faculty and administrators at UC Davis have made a concerted effort to come alongside transfer students in order to support their transition into not only the honors program but the institution as well (Thomas et al., 2019).

A study by Thomas et al. (2019) examined faculty mentoring, research opportunities, and community development by means of a mandatory seminar and how each can bear influence on honors program success among transfer students. The researchers discovered that students benefitted from the interventions, particularly the mentorship program and mandatory seminar course (Thomas et al., 2019). The findings revealed that transfer students enrolled in the University Honors Program (UHP) experienced only a marginal decline in GPA after one quarter, suggesting that the *transfer shock* phenomenon may have been lessened for these students due to participation in the program (Thomas et al., 2019). Additionally, students participating in the UHP were reported to be more engaged in research opportunities, with the cohorts from years 2014 and 2015 reporting that 55% of students were engaged in mentor-guided research, while the 2016 cohort was expected to reach 85% engagement (Thomas et al., 2019). This study demonstrates that when honors programs are made visible and when students are

adequately accommodated by their institutions, they are able to make the transition between sending and receiving institutions more easily.

Academic Support Services

When transfer students arrive at their receiving institutions, they may not be aware of the services and support systems available to them (Gere et al., 2017). Academic support services are designed to help students succeed. Institutional academic support services include, but are not limited to, writing centers, peer tutoring, library services, and more (Casey et al., 2019; Coats & Pemberton, 2017; Gere et al., 2017; Wetzel & Debure, 2018). Many researchers have cited information literacy as an area that transfer students struggle with (Casey et al., 2019; Coats & Pemberton, 2017; Grigg & Dale, 2017; McBride et al., 2017; Robison, 2017). Transfer students often hear about the academic support services at orientation but may not know how to utilize these resources (Gere et al., 2017). A study conducted by Gere et al. (2017) found that the library was among the most important resources for transfer students. McBride et al. (2017) found there to be a positive relationship between library use and student success. This may be due to the social encounters students have at the library as well as the academic help they receive from librarians and other library personnel (McBride et al., 2017).

Although many transfer students experience difficulties developing their information literacy skills, not all transfer students have the same troubles. Researchers have noted that community college transfer students may be particularly disadvantaged from an information literacy standpoint due to the lack of instruction regarding how to engage in the research process at their sending institutions (Coats & Pemberton, 2017; McBride et al., 2017). Researchers also found that non-traditional-aged transfer students also experienced difficulties with information literacy skills compared to their traditional-aged peers (Grigg & Dale, 2017). Due to the

information literacy deficiencies of transfer students, institutions have developed courses designed to aid in developing these critical competencies (Grigg & Dale, 2017; Robison, 2017). Participation in these courses yielded positive results, with students reporting higher comfort levels regarding their research abilities (Grigg & Dale, 2017; Robison, 2017).

At-Risk Identification

Declining enrollments in recent years have driven institutions to focus more heavily on student success and retention (Lehan & Babcock, 2020). Early alert systems have been developed and implemented at several colleges and universities to alert faculty and staff members regarding students who may be struggling academically in order to refer these students to support services that may be able to help rectify the issue before it is too late (Harrison et al., 2021; Marcal, n.d.; Villano et al., 2018). By administering a Personal Background Preparation Survey (PBPS), Johnson et al. (2016) were able to identify students who may be at an increased risk of falling away by examining different factors that could lead to adverse academic status events (AASE). This survey focused on numerous elements such as individual and familial influences, a student's prior academic achievement, an individual's self-concept and self-esteem, the various support systems an individual has access to, an individual's personal or familial financial situation, their leadership abilities, experiences dealing with discrimination, their aptitude and participation in community service initiatives, and an individual's long-ranging and long-term goals (Johnson et al., 2016). Based on the results of the surveys, each student was given a Prevalence of Academic Risk (PAR) profile constructed in response to their individual needs, allowing for targeted interventions to be directed toward specific groups of students (Johnson et al., 2016).

Applying a different approach, studies by Harrison et al. (2021) and Villano et al. (2018) found a significant relationship between early alert systems and student retention rates. It was discovered that when a variety of confounding variables such as demographic information, institutional type, a student's workload, and academic performance were controlled for, early-alert systems were able to adequately identify students at an increased risk of falling away from their institution (Harrison et al., 2021; Villano et al., 2018). Both studies employed a survival model, which the researchers deemed to be the best model for predicting and understanding retention behavior (Harrison et al., 2021; Villano et al., 2018). As transfer students are reportedly experiencing lower retention and graduation rates (Jacobson et al., 2017; Tobolowsky & Cox, 2012), it is critical that institutions provide adequate early detection resources that may be able to prevent such high levels of attrition among this population. When applied to transfer student populations at Eckerd College, early alert systems proved to be an integral part of their STEM transfer student success program (Wetzel & Debure, 2018).

In addition to alerting faculty and administrators when students are experiencing academic difficulties, some early alert systems have been designed with geolocation services built in to track levels of involvement among students on campus (Schuh et al., 2017). Through the use of predictive analytic measures, institutions can determine which students are disengaged and the extent to which they are disengaged, allowing institutional representatives to contact students before their lack of involvement, both social and academic, becomes deleterious for the student (Schuh et al., 2017). Further, these features can aid institutional personnel in tracking how often students access certain academic materials online or whether they attend various events on campus (Schuh et al., 2017). These types of behavioral patterns can be strong indicators of whether or not a student will succeed at an institution, and it is critically important

that students are adequately integrated in order to increase their chances of success. As transfer students often lack social and academic integration upon entering the receiving institution, early alert systems may be beneficial for this population, as institutional personnel may be able to help them become engaged if they need assistance.

While early alert systems may sound promising, many researchers hold differing opinions regarding the effectiveness of such programs. For example, Marcal (n.d.) notes that early alert systems are excellent tools for aiding faculty in identifying struggling students; however, these programs lack follow-up measures to determine whether or not the intervention recommended to the student was pursued. Olney et al. (2021) echo Marcal's (n.d.) observations that while these programs have great potential, the extent to which that potential is realized is yet to be determined. Furthermore, ethical issues have been raised regarding the use of early alert systems and student surveillance techniques, stating that labeling students as at-risk may prove to do more harm than good (Lawson et al., 2016).

Summary

Transfer students are becoming an increasingly prominent demographic among undergraduates (Blekic et al., 2020; Gere et al., 2017; Tobolowsky & Cox, 2012). This literature review discussed the concepts of social and academic integration as outlined by Tinto (1975) and Astin (1999) and applied these theoretical constructs to better understand the multidimensional experiences of transfer students. First, the many types of transfer students were discussed (Foster et al., 2020; Gere et al., 2017; Tobolowsky & Cox, 2012), followed by the ways in which transfer students approach the transitional experience of leaving their sending institution and entering their receiving institution (Foster et al., 2020; Mobley & Brawner, 2019). Next, the implications of the pejorative transfer student stigma were raised as well as transfer student

responses to the stigma (Gere et al., 2017; Tobolowsky & Cox, 2012). Exploring the many ways institutions have endeavored to mitigate a lack of involvement on campus led to the primary constructs of academic and social integration (Tinto, 1975). In order to monitor the success of incoming students, first-year seminars (Garrett et al., 2017; Holmes & Busser, 2017), academic support services (Gere et al., 2017), and at-risk identification initiatives (Harrison et al., 2021; Johnson et al., 2016; Lawson et al., 2016; Villano et al., 2018; Wetzel & Debure, 2018) have proven useful. Further, mentoring programs increase the number of interactions between students and university affiliates, leading to increased rates of social integration (Day et al., 2017; Dennehy & Dasgupta, 2017). Finally, service-learning and on-campus learning communities serve to broaden a student's perspective by introducing them not only to their campus but also to the surrounding communities around their college or university (York & Fernandez, 2018).

Transfer students were identified as an underrepresented population, necessitating greater research efforts. Existing studies have examined the experiences of transfer students at large public research universities (Gere et al., 2017; Tobolowsky & Cox, 2012); however, little research is available illuminating the experiences of transfer students enrolled at faith-based and religiously affiliated institutions. As many transfer students lack social and academic integration at their receiving institutions, it is critical that research be conducted that explores the transitional experiences of this population in this setting. Grounded in Tinto's theory of engagement (1975) and Astin's (1999) theory of involvement, my study sought to narrow the gap in the current scholarship while also offering practical solutions for improving existing practices regarding the academic and social integration of transfer students at faith-based and religiously affiliated institutions in the United States.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to understand the lived experiences of undergraduate transfer students at faith-based and religiously affiliated institutions in the United States. Research regarding the transfer student experience at faith-based and religiously affiliated institutions has heretofore been scant, if not entirely nonexistent. My study aimed to fill the gap in the current literature. The purpose of this chapter is to introduce the research design, the research setting and participants, the research questions, and the methods utilized to collect and analyze the research data. A discussion of my positionality as the researcher is provided next, followed by the interpretive framework and philosophical assumptions that guided the present study. Finally, the chapter closes with a discussion of the various facets of trustworthiness as well as the ethical considerations that were addressed in order to ensure that the study was conducted in compliance with the highest standards of integrity.

Research Design

The qualitative research method was deemed appropriate for the present study due to the emphasis qualitative research places on connecting with participants (Corbin & Strauss, 2015) and striving to understand their perspectives through the elicitation of rich and thick descriptions of thoughts, feelings, and opinions regarding their lived experiences. In order to understand the lived experiences of undergraduate transfer students at faith-based institutions in the United States, a transcendental phenomenological study design was chosen.

Two schools of phenomenological inquiry exist, transcendental and hermeneutic phenomenology. The transcendental design was developed by Edmund Husserl (1970), and the

design itself draws heavily from its deeply philosophical foundation (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Moustakas (1994) expanded upon Husserl's phenomenology, leading to the development of Moustakas' (1994) modern transcendental phenomenological design while van Manen's (1997) hermeneutic phenomenological design expanded predominantly upon the work of Heidegger (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Transcendental phenomenology shares many parallels with hermeneutic phenomenology but differs in a critical way. The fundamental difference between hermeneutic and transcendental phenomenological work lies in the role of the researcher. In a hermeneutic phenomenology, the researcher positions themselves within the research study, including a description of their personal experiences with the phenomenon under investigation (Creswell & Poth, 2018; van Manen, 1997). In a transcendental phenomenological study, the researcher brackets their personal experiences with the phenomenon out of the study in order to report the data with as much of an unbiased perspective as possible (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). This removal of self, or objectivity, is often referred to as *epoché* (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). The word *epoché*, taken from the Greek language, refers to the abstinence of judgment (Moustakas, 1994). In order to create an objective and unbiased report of the essence of the phenomenon, the researcher must approach the topic with naivety (Moustakas, 1994).

Conducting a phenomenology is an intentional process (Moustakas, 1994). The goal of a transcendental phenomenological study is to uncover the true essence of a phenomenon, and data is analyzed for textural and structural meaning through the use of codes and themes in order to make the essence of the phenomenon evident (Moustakas, 1994). In order to do this, the researcher must gain an understanding of the experiences of the participants, making an effort to fully understand their perspective (Patton, 2015). Transcendental phenomenological studies

place a greater emphasis on the words and experiences recounted by the research participants than the personal experiences and interpretations of the researcher (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

In a phenomenological study, the central source of data is the lived experiences of the participants acting as co-researchers alongside the primary researcher (Moustakas, 1994; van Manen, 1997). Though I have experienced the phenomenon first-hand, I decided that, for the sake of uncovering the true essence of the transfer student phenomenon as it pertains to students today within the context of faith-based and religiously affiliated institutions, it would be best to follow the practice of *epoché* as outlined by Moustakas (1994). Furthermore, in conducting my study, I wish to focus solely on the experiences of the participants rather than my own experiences with the phenomenon. For these reasons, a transcendental phenomenological study design was deemed appropriate for the present study.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the present study regarding the lived experiences of transfer students.

Central Research Question

What are the lived experiences of undergraduate transfer students at faith-based and religiously affiliated institutions in the United States?

Sub-Question One

How does the religious aspect of attending a faith-based or religiously affiliated institution affect the transfer student experience?

Sub-Question Two

How does attending a faith-based or religiously affiliated institution affect the self-efficacy of transfer students?

Sub-Question Three

How does attending a faith-based or religiously affiliated institution affect the perceived levels of integration (Tinto, 1975; 1993) of transfer students?

Setting and Participants

I explored the lived experiences of undergraduate transfer students at faith-based and religiously affiliated institutions in the United States. A description of the research setting is provided first, followed by the rationale for the selection of the setting. Next, the research participants and the criteria developed for participant selection are introduced. Participants were purposely selected based on pre-determined criteria in order to develop a sample that would be able to provide rich and meaningful descriptions of their lived experiences regarding the phenomenon.

Setting

The research setting for my study was faith-based and religiously affiliated institutions in the United States. The rationale for selecting these institutional types as the research setting was founded in Astin's (1999) assertion that students who attend faith-based or religiously affiliated institutions are more likely to persist if they share the same religious beliefs as the institution they attend. As graduation and retention rates are significantly lower among transfer student populations when compared with their continuing peers (Jacobson et al., 2017; Tobolowsky & Cox, 2012), these research settings were deemed worthy of study in order to examine the religious aspect as it pertains to the perceptions and experiences of transfer student populations within this context.

Participants

The participants in my study were current and former transfer students either currently

enrolled or previously enrolled in a degree-granting program offered at either a faith-based or religiously affiliated institution located in the United States. For the purposes of my study, a *transfer student* was generally defined as an individual of traditional college age who began their educational journey upon their successful completion of high school and earned course credit toward a degree at another postsecondary institution before transferring to a faith-based or religiously affiliated institution to complete their degree requirements. Traditional-aged college students are individuals between 17 and 24 years of age (Postsecondary National Policy Institute, 2021). For my study, students must have been between the ages of 18 and 24 when they transferred to the faith-based or religiously affiliated institution. My study included 10 participants, and I sought both male and female transfer students of various races and ethnicities in order to provide a comprehensive understanding of the transfer student experience within the present context.

Researcher Positionality

Qualitative research requires that researchers position their studies within an interpretative framework while making an effort to acknowledge their own philosophical assumptions in order to mitigate preexisting biases that may influence the findings uncovered by the data. An interpretative framework is grounded in an individual's worldview and is representative of how an individual seeks to understand or make meaning of something (Patton, 2015). Identifying one's positionality is a highly reflexive process but is necessary to ensure a sound study. An explanation of the social constructivist paradigm that guided the present study is provided, followed by a discussion of the ontological, epistemological, and axiological philosophical assumptions. Finally, the role of the researcher as mediator, interpreter, and reporter is explored.

Interpretive Framework

The present study approached the investigated phenomenon using a social constructivist lens. The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to gain an understanding of the lived experiences of undergraduate transfer students at faith-based and religiously affiliated institutions in the United States. This paradigm was chosen due to the nature of phenomenological inquiry. Constructivists place a significant emphasis on procuring an understanding of the world in which they live, and this understanding is gained predominantly through the examination of the meanings individuals assign to personal experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The present study sought to employ open-ended questions in order to stimulate meaningful conversations between myself as the researcher and the participants in an effort to extract rich and thick descriptions of the participants' personal experiences with the phenomenon. Open-ended questions are often associated with a constructivist approach, as is the significant emphasis placed on interpersonal interactions and personal anecdotes (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Employing this interpretive framework allowed me to focus on the participants' lived experiences as they shared their constructed understandings of the phenomenon being investigated.

Philosophical Assumptions

In qualitative research, it is critical that the researcher philosophically position the study by providing an in-depth discussion of their own ontological, epistemological, and axiological assumptions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Each of these assumptions addresses various beliefs held by the researcher that can bear influence on the present study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018). By addressing the potential that preexisting biases exist and through the process of bracketing out one's personal experiences with the phenomenon through the practice

of *epoché* (Moustakas, 1994), the researcher is able to mitigate the influence these biases may have on the research, thus allowing the researcher to provide an objective representation of the phenomenon by focusing solely on the experiences of the participants and the data collected throughout the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). As I have personally experienced the phenomenon under investigation first-hand, the following sections allow me to bracket out my own experiences while also providing an explanation of my philosophical positionality.

Ontological Assumption

Ontology focuses on the fundamental elements of reality (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This assumption explores how the researcher views reality and recognizes that each individual has their own singular perception of reality as they experience it (Creswell & Poth, 2018). As the researcher, I acknowledge that the present study uncovered multiple, varying viewpoints regarding the phenomenon as each participant expressed a unique depiction of their lived experiences. Further, each of the participants' experiences differed not only from one another but from my own experiences as well. While some may choose to believe that there are multiple realities or that reality is strictly subjective in that each individual creates their own reality, I believe that individuals construct their own reality within the overarching framework of an ultimate and singular reality. Like the pragmatists, I believe in an "external world independent of the mind" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 27). However, I also hold the constructivist perspective that individuals view reality through a lens that is unique and special to them, a lens that has been forged by an amalgamation of both lived experiences as well as learned thought patterns. Understanding my own ontological assumptions allowed me to set aside any preexisting biases and focus solely on the participant's views regarding their perception and construction of reality. Furthermore, my study emphasized the ways in which participants assign meaning to their lived

experiences as undergraduate transfer students at faith-based and religiously affiliated institutions in the United States.

Epistemological Assumption

The epistemological assumption explores what is known and how such knowledge can be justified (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This assumption holds that knowledge is understood subjectively through the collection of experiences recounted by individuals (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Epistemologically, I believe that knowledge and understanding are born from experience. Creswell and Poth (2018) posited that in order to conduct a qualitative study well, the researcher must become close with participants in an effort to gain a better understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. In order to become as close to the research participants as possible, I worked to build trust and rapport with each participant. As I have personally experienced the phenomenon under examination, I am close to the myriad challenges experienced by transfer students. This closeness allowed me, as the researcher, to be understanding while remaining objectively open to the experiences shared by the participants. Understanding my own epistemological views allowed me to set aside my personal beliefs regarding the phenomenon under study and to solely seek an understanding of the participants' lived experiences. Successfully setting aside my personal beliefs allowed me to grow closer to the participants and lessen the distance between myself as the researcher and the participant (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Guba & Lincoln, 1988). This was achieved by studying participants in the most comfortable and organic environment possible.

Axiological Assumption

The axiological assumption addresses the values held by the researcher (Creswell & Poth, 2018). As qualitative research is a value-laden process, it is best practice for researchers to

express their values (Creswell & Poth, 2018) in an effort to set aside any preconceived notions they may hold and to abstain from passing judgments regarding the research (Moustakas, 1994). The practice of *epoché*, or bracketing one's experiences out of the study in order to minimize researcher bias, is a characteristic of transcendental phenomenology and is employed in an effort to maintain researcher neutrality and objectivity (Moustakas, 1994). I have experienced the transfer student phenomenon first-hand, having been a transfer student at the undergraduate level. This experience with the phenomenon gives rise to the potential that subjective biases exist. In order to minimize these biases, I have explicated my viewpoints regarding the phenomenon under investigation. I believe that while transfer students may face myriad challenges during the transitional period following their enrollment at the receiving institution, they are a resilient group that is capable of adapting to new environments and that, with the proper guidance, they will be able to achieve the same levels of social and academic integration and success as their continuing peers. Additionally, I believe, as Astin (1999) does, that institutional fit is an important indicator of transfer student success.

Researcher's Role

My role as the researcher in the present study was to collect the data from the participants through individual interviews, journal prompts, and a focus group session. Further, I analyzed the data through the development of codes and themes to arrive at textural and structural descriptions of the phenomenon under investigation, with the analysis process ultimately culminating in the revelation of the true essence of the transfer student experience within this context (Moustakas, 1994). While various forms of instrumentation may be used throughout the quantitative research process, the researcher acts as the sole instrument in qualitative research studies. I sought to understand the lived experiences of undergraduate transfer students at faith-

based and religiously affiliated institutions in the United States. My goal in conducting the present study was not only to illuminate the lived experiences of transfer students within this context but to inform administrative practices by uncovering how current practices benefit students and how these practices could be improved upon going forward. As I have personal experience with the phenomenon under investigation, the potential for bias exists; however, that bias was minimized to the greatest extent possible through the process of *epoché* as outlined by Moustakas (1994) and Creswell and Poth (2018).

As the researcher, I in no way held a position of power over any of the participants engaged in the present study (Krueger & Casey, 2015), but served as a co-researcher alongside each of the participants (Moustakas, 1994). I advertised my study on various social media platforms by posting the recruitment flyer located in Appendix C. Interested participants that met the criteria contacted me via email or direct message. Each participant was sent a copy of the screening survey located in Appendix D. Prospective participants were asked to fill out the screening survey in order to determine their eligibility to participate. After each screening survey was completed, if the participant met the required criteria to participate, they were notified and sent an informed consent letter. Participants were asked to virtually sign and return the consent form if they were interested in participating in the research project. Participants were informed that participation in the present study was strictly voluntary and that they would be able to withdraw from the study for any reason at any point in time without penalty. Participant and institutional confidentiality were maintained through the use of secure file storage and the use of pseudonyms when reporting the data in the final report.

Procedures

The following sections discuss how the present study was conducted. Before data was collected, permissions were obtained from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) and each of the 10 participants. The recruitment plan is discussed as well as the necessity of obtaining informed consent from each of the 10 participants involved in the study. Next, the three data collection methods, individual interviews, journal prompts, and focus groups, are described in detail. A discussion of the data analysis techniques that were utilized are provided next, along with an account of how triangulation was accomplished. This section concludes with an in-depth discussion of the trustworthiness of the study as well as the various ethical considerations that were addressed.

Permissions

In order to conduct the present study, several permissions were sought prior to data collection. In order to collect data from participants, Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was obtained from the Liberty University IRB. The IRB approval letter for my study can be found in Appendix A at the end of this manuscript. Furthermore, I obtained consent from each individual who met the study criteria and was interested in participating in the research study. As all participants were over the age of 18, parental consent was not needed. A copy of the informed consent letter can be found in Appendix B. No data was collected from participants until each of the aforementioned permissions had been fully granted.

Recruitment Plan

The sample pool for my study encompassed all current and former undergraduate transfer students who attended faith-based or religiously affiliated institution in the United States. My study included a purposive criterion sample of 10 participants. A purposive sample is often used

in qualitative research as it allows the researcher to choose which individuals participate in their study based on the participant's ability to express an informed understanding of the topic or phenomenon under investigation (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Criterion sampling is a type of purposive sample in that individuals are selected to participate in the study under the condition that they meet the criteria set forth by the researcher. This sampling method allows the researcher to select only those individuals within a given population who have been deemed eligible to participate in the research study and is used as a measure of quality assurance (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Patton, 2015).

In order to determine the eligibility of potential research participants, each prospective participant was asked to fill out and return a screening survey to the researcher. The screening survey contained questions pertaining to the predetermined criteria outlined by the researcher for participation in the study. If, after completing the screening survey, interested individuals wished to participate in the study, a consent form was emailed to them and their signatures were requested electronically. As previously stated, participants must have been current or former undergraduate transfer students that transferred into either a faith-based or religiously affiliated institution at the undergraduate level and they must have been between the ages of 18-24 at the time of their transfer. A copy of the screening survey used can be found in Appendix D at the end of this manuscript. Maximum variation within the sample was sought, seeking to including a diverse sample of both male and female students, as well as a variety of racial backgrounds in order to provide a broad and comprehensive understanding of the undergraduate transfer student experience within this context. Before data was collected from participants, approval was granted by the Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB), and each participant gave their informed consent.

Data Collection Plan

The qualitative research process differs considerably from the quantitative research process. As the qualitative method relies more heavily on the spoken word and the experiences of participants as opposed to statistical analyses (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), qualitative researchers depend heavily on data collection methods such as semi-structured, open-ended interviews, observations, artifacts, documents, photographs, and more (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Miles et al., 2020; Patton, 2015). The goal of qualitative research is to provide a rich, meaningful, and descriptive account of the phenomenon being investigated (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Therefore, it is often recommended that qualitative researchers collect more than one type of data for their research (Patton, 2015). The present study employed three different types of data collection in order to capture the true essence of the phenomenon under investigation. Utilizing three methods of data collection allowed for triangulation of the data, thereby increasing both the rigor and credibility of the study (Patton, 2015).

The three methods of data collection utilized in this transcendental phenomenological study were individual interviews, journal prompt writing protocols, and a focus group session. Individual one-on-one interviews with participants were conducted first in order to establish a baseline understanding of participant experiences regarding the transfer student experience and to build rapport with each individual. Next, participants were asked to respond to a series of journal prompts, allowing for deeper reflection regarding their personal experiences as transfer students at faith-based and religiously affiliated institutions. Finally, four participants were selected to participate in a focus group session in order to encourage dialogue, allowing me to probe into any areas that had yet to be discussed and to seek additional data that had not been uncovered in the individual interviews or journal prompts. A detailed description of the three

aforementioned data collection methods and the respective methods of data analysis are described in depth in the following sections.

Individual Interviews Data Collection Approach

The first method of data collection that was employed in my study was the semi-structured, open-ended interview. Independent interviews are often conducted in qualitative research (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Creswell & Guetterman, 2019; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Patton, 2015) and are utilized by researchers conducting both hermeneutic and transcendental phenomenological studies (Moustakas, 1994; van Manen, 1997). *Qualitative interviews* are defined as conversations between researchers and participants that can vary in structural degree with the intention of collecting data regarding the lived experiences, thoughts, feelings, and opinions surrounding a given phenomenon (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018; deMarrais, 2004; Patton, 2015).

As the method suggests, individual interviews record data collected from a single participant at a given time (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). As interviews are often conversational in nature, they also allow the researcher to build rapport with the participants. This rapport builds trust between the participant and the researcher, allowing participants to feel more relaxed and open when speaking with the researcher, which will hopefully allow the researcher to collect more meaningful data by lessening a participant's reluctance to be transparent and honest during the interview (Bickman & Rog, 2009). Researchers ask participants a series of open-ended questions to which participants may respond regarding their personal experiences. The researcher's objective is to understand the phenomenon from the perspective of the participant (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Patton, 2015).

The researcher can conduct interviews in various ways; for example, over the phone, in person, and over video chat software (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). In my study, I conducted the individual interviews and focus group session with participants via Microsoft Teams video conferencing software. Interviews were scheduled with participants at a time that was mutually agreeable to both the participant as well as myself. Each individual interview was recorded, both aurally as well as visually, in order for me to review and reflect on the data after the interview had been conducted. Additionally, each interview conducted was transcribed and checked for accuracy.

Phenomenological research relies heavily on the independent interview method as a source of data collection (Moustakas, 1994; van Manen, 1997). As researchers cannot easily observe things that have occurred prior to the study, nor can a researcher observe or measure thoughts, feelings, and opinions, the interview method allows researchers to gain an understanding of a participant's past experiences as well as emotive sensations surrounding the phenomenon (Patton, 2015). Furthermore, as qualitative research, and phenomenological studies in particular, are designed to analyze the structural and textural meanings underlying a phenomenon in order to uncover its true essence (Moustakas, 1994), the individual interview method allows a researcher to focus special attention on the words and experiences recounted by participants resulting in rich and thick descriptions of the phenomenon (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Patton, 2015).

The following individual interview questions were developed with the intention of seeking information from participants that may serve to answer the central research question and three sub-research questions guiding the present study. All interview questions were developed in keeping with the research questions aforementioned in this study. The interview began with

what has been defined as a *grand tour question* by Marshall and Rossman (2015). The grand tour questions were broad and sought to answer the central research question while also building rapport with the participant. The following questions focused on answering the three sub-questions; there were multiple interview questions designed for each sub-question, and a denotation after each question indicates which sub-question the interview question addressed. The interview closed with a final question asking participants to offer any additional information they felt may serve to enhance the present study. The following interview protocol can also be found in Appendix E at the end of this manuscript.

Individual Interview Questions

1. Please describe your educational background. CRQ
2. Please describe your experiences at your prior institution. CRQ
3. Please explain the reasons behind your decision to transfer. CRQ
4. How would you describe your experience as a transfer student at your new institution?
CRQ
5. Was attending a faith-based institution important to you? SQ1
6. Please describe your spiritual involvement at your new school. SQ1
7. How has transferring from one institution to another affected you spiritually? SQ1
8. How has the religious aspect of your new school affected your experience as a transfer student? SQ1
9. Please describe the positive effects of transferring. SQ2
10. Please describe the negative effects of transferring. SQ2
11. How has transferring affected your confidence? SQ2
12. How has transferring affected your motivation? SQ2

13. How has transferring affected your work-ethic? SQ2
14. Please describe your social life at your new school. SQ3
15. How has transferring from one institution to another affected you socially? SQ3
16. Please describe your academic involvement at your new school. SQ3
17. How has transferring from one institution to another affected you academically? SQ3
18. Please describe what it was like to meet new people and make friends as a transfer student. SQ3
19. Please describe your relationship with faculty members and advisors. SQ3
20. Please describe a moment when you experienced a “high” in reference to transferring.
CRQ
21. Please describe a moment when you experienced a “low” in reference to transferring.
CRQ
22. Is there any additional information you would like to share that may enhance this study by helping myself and others to better understand the transfer student experience? If so, what? CRQ

The first four interview questions served to ease the participant into the study. Asking broad and general questions pertaining to the central research question served to acclimate the participants to the interview environment and help them gain a sense of confidence and comfort while speaking with me as the researcher. The central research question sought to broadly understand the lived experiences of undergraduate transfer students at faith-based and religiously affiliated institutions in the United States. As the present study was a phenomenology, the first four interview questions focused on the prior lived experiences of the participant, as suggested by Moustakas (1994) and van Manen (1997).

Questions five through eight sought to address the first sub-question, which seeks to understand how the religious aspect of attending a faith-based or religiously affiliated institution affects the transfer student experience. Astin (1999) discussed institutional fit as a determining factor of success in higher education, positing that students who share the belief system present at their institution tend to experience more positive perceptions of belonging, leading to increased levels of persistence. As retention and graduation rates are often lower among transfer student populations (Jacobson et al., 2017; Tobolowsky & Cox, 2012), examining the influence of the religious aspect at faith-based and religiously affiliated institutions is critically important to understanding how this phenomenon impacts the transfer student experience.

Sub-question number two was addressed by interview questions nine through thirteen. This sub-question pursued an understanding of how attending a faith-based or religiously affiliated institution affects the self-efficacy of transfer students. Gere et al. (2017) and Tobolowsky and Cox (2012) discuss the negative effects of the transfer student stigma and the uncomplimentary views some students, faculty, and staff have held regarding this student population at other institutions. Due to the feelings of loneliness and doubt often reported by transfer students upon entering their receiving institutions, these interview questions were developed with the intention of understanding to what extent the transfer student stigma is present at the participants' institutions and the degree to which the stigma affects the motivation and self-perception of transfer students within this context. Additionally, these interview questions sought to understand the experience of transfer shock at faith-based and religiously affiliated institutions.

The third sub-question was addressed by interview questions fourteen through nineteen. Sub-question number three sought to understand how attending a faith-based institution affects

the perceived levels of integration (Tinto, 1975;1993) of transfer students. These interview questions were grounded in the present study's theoretical framework, as both Tinto's (1975) theory of engagement and Astin's (1999) theory of involvement discuss the necessity of academic and social participation in order for a student to be successful. Lack of integration and engagement can have deleterious outcomes for students and can increase the risk of a student failing to complete their degree program (Tinto, 1975).

The final three interview questions were designed to bring the interview to a close while also addressing the central research question once more. Aimed at understanding the lived experiences of undergraduate transfer students at faith-based and religiously affiliated institutions in the United States, interview questions twenty through twenty-two sought clarification regarding general experiences. Questions twenty and twenty-one allowed participants to recount positive and negative aspects of their transfer student experience as I sought to understand the participant's perspective (Patton, 2015). Finally, interview question twenty-two gave the participant the freedom to supplement their data with any information they felt was meaningful regarding the transfer student experience that they may not have mentioned previously or that may not have surfaced organically over the course of the discussion. Any areas that required further probing were addressed again in the focus group setting.

Before I began collecting data from participants, each interview question was carefully reviewed by experts in the field to ensure the validity and acceptability of each question. In addition to subjecting the abovementioned interview protocol to a review, Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was also granted before the commencement of the data collection phase of the research process. Once IRB approval was granted and the interview protocol had been

permitted, the research process began. Interview questions were reviewed and amended as needed reflecting the conduct of the first individual interview in the series.

Individual Interview Data Analysis Plan

Each individual interview conducted with participants was transcribed word-for-word in a Microsoft Word document. As the interview was recorded visually and aurally, the transcription was checked for accuracy before the data analysis process began. Once the interview transcript had been checked for accuracy and participants had approved the transcript as correctly reflecting their experiences, I began to analyze the data.

The first step in analyzing the individual interview data was to code the data. The coding process allows the researcher to make sense of the data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). *Coding* is generally defined as the process of assigning a single word or phrase to data in order to create labels denoting the essence of each piece of data presented (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Creswell & Guetterman, 2019; Saldaña, 2021). Codes often have symbolic meaning or serve to describe the data and are used to help the researcher cluster the data into meaningful units and to look for any patterns or themes that may develop (Miles et al., 2020). In order to accomplish this task, the data was broken up into more manageable sections. All transcript text was double-spaced, and wide margins were utilized to allow for the data to be coded by hand (Saldaña, 2021). Each transcript was read through several times before codes were added, allowing me to become familiar with the content and essence of each participant's perspective regarding the phenomenon. The transcript text was broken down into shorter units of data; transcripts were coded line by line, with some lines clustered together if several consecutive sentences could be coded as a single unit (Saldaña, 2021).

The inductive coding method was used to determine the codes employed in this analysis. Inductive coding allows the researcher to develop the necessary codes as called for by the data, whereas deductive coding typically follows a set of predetermined codes developed prior to data analysis (Saldaña, 2021). No predetermined list of codes was utilized during the data analysis process. After the data had been coded line-by-line, the codes were analyzed for repetition and patterns. Codes were clustered together as appropriate to develop themes that reflect the essence of the phenomenon (Miles et al., 2020). As phenomenological studies seek to uncover the essence of a phenomenon, inductive coding and theming analysis techniques support the aim of phenomenological research and were deemed appropriate for the present study. All data was winnowed down to twenty-five codes, resulting in seven themes.

Journal Prompts Data Collection Approach

The second data collection method that was utilized in the present study was narrative journal prompts. Journal prompts have gained a considerable amount of traction as a data collection technique in the field of sociology (Rudrum et al., 2022). The journaling or writing protocol can be generally defined as “the generating of original texts” by participants, which the researcher will then review and analyze as valuable research data (van Manen, 1997, p. 63). This generation of data through writing allows the participant to reflect and respond to specific questions developed by the researcher in order to answer the research questions guiding the qualitative study. The nature of journal prompts allows the participant to remove themselves from the research environment and focus solely on their perceptions and experiences. The act of writing itself encourages participants to be more reflective (van Manen, 1997). The data collected through the use of journal prompts are written in the participant’s own words. The nature of a phenomenological study requires that researchers rely heavily on data collected

recounting the lived experiences of participants (Moustakas, 1994; van Manen, 1997), making journal prompts an important source of data collection. Further, the act of journaling allows the participant to take the time to think through their writing and review their responses for clarity before submitting their answers to the researcher for evaluation.

Each participant in the present study was asked to complete the following journal prompt protocol. A copy of the protocol can be found in Appendix F at the end of this manuscript. Journal prompts were sent to participants via email, and each participant was asked to respond to each of the nine prompts. Participants completed the protocol in a Microsoft Word document and returned the fully satisfied protocol by email. All participants were asked to complete the journal prompt protocol in two to three weeks. Each prompt was developed from the present study's guiding research questions, and each question was purposefully crafted in keeping with the current scholarly literature pertaining to the transfer student experience.

Journal Prompts Protocol

Please provide a thoughtful and complete response to the following journal prompts. Please make sure to include not only a description of your experience, but your thoughts, feelings, and opinions related to each experience. Take as long as you need to complete each prompt.

1. What made you choose a faith-based/religiously affiliated institution over a secular institution? CRQ
2. What was it that drew you to this specific faith-based/religiously affiliated institution? CRQ
3. Please describe how the faith-based/religiously affiliated institution facilitated your transition as a transfer student from your previous school in detail. Was there an

orientation program that you participated in, special welcoming activities, or community-building exercises for transfer students? How did your new school help you get connected with the campus culture, your peers, and faculty/staff members? Feel free to elaborate on your experiences in addition to these topics. CRQ

4. Please describe in detail any school sponsored or faith-based programs/activities you found to be particularly beneficial to aiding in the transfer experience. SQ1
5. Please describe what it was like to adapt to the requirements and expectations of your new school. SQ2
6. How well do you fit in at your new school? SQ3
7. Please explain some of the obstacles you have overcome as a transfer student. CRQ
8. Please list any concerns you still have/had regarding transferring. CRQ
9. What advice would you give to incoming transfer students just starting at your school?
CRQ

The first three prompts sought to answer the central research question regarding understanding the lived experiences of undergraduate transfer students at faith-based and religiously affiliated institutions in the United States. Each prompt aimed to gain a comprehensive understanding of the transfer student experience from the perspective of the participant, as suggested by Moustakas (1994) and van Manen (1997). The first and second journal prompts were designed to collect information regarding the student's reasons for choosing a faith-based or religiously affiliated institution versus another institutional type. As Astin (1999) posited that students who attend faith-based or religiously affiliated institutions are more likely to persist if they share the same religious beliefs as their institutions owing to increased feelings of institutional fit, it is critical to understand how the religious aspect

influenced the student's decision to transfer to their faith-based or religiously affiliated institution. Further, it is important to understand the degree to which the student identifies with the religious grounding of the institution, as this, too, can influence feelings of belonging and institutional fit.

The third journal prompt requested information regarding the transfer student on-boarding process and provided insight regarding which on-boarding methods transfer students found useful and which they did not, as on-boarding can play a critically important role in acclimating a student to a new campus culture (Mayhew et al., 2010). The fourth prompt addressed the first sub-question regarding how the religious aspect of attending a faith-based or religiously affiliated institution affects the transfer student experience. The prompt asked for the participant's opinion regarding the potential benefits of faith-based programs in aiding the transfer student transition from one institution to another. This prompt was grounded in Astin's (1999) assertion regarding the connection between shared religious belief and institutional fit.

The fifth prompt sought to answer the second sub-question regarding how attending a faith-based or religiously affiliated institution affects the self-efficacy of transfer students by inquiring about how the student adapted to their new environment. As self-doubt and lower levels of self-efficacy can negatively impact a student's motivation (Tinto, 2015), this prompt aimed to understand how transfer shock, stigmatization, and the transitional period impact the transfer student experience (Chamely-Wiik et al., 2021; Clausen & Wessel, 2015; Gere et al., 2017; Mobley & Brawner, 2019; Tobolowsky & Cox, 2012). The sixth prompt sought to answer the third sub-question regarding how attending a faith-based or religiously affiliated institution affects the perceived levels of integration (Tinto, 1975;1993) of transfer students in keeping with the theoretical underpinnings of Astin (1999) and Tinto (1975). The final three prompts sought to

answer the central research question by asking participants to discuss their perceived successes and shortcomings as a transfer student at their faith-based or religiously affiliated institution and requested that they share any pieces of advice they might give to incoming transfer students just starting at their institution based on their personal experiences. Each journal prompt protocol was reviewed by experts in the field before data collection began, and data collection only took place after IRB approval had been granted.

Journal Prompts Data Analysis Plan

The journal prompt or protocol writing responses were analyzed in line with the individual interviews. While the data collected during the individual interviews was orally recounted by the participants, the journal prompts elicited textual representations of the participants' experiences as opposed to spoken dialogue. Due to the nature of the data collection method, I was able to begin the analysis process without having to transcribe the data or ask participants to approve the transcription. Each response provided was read carefully and thoroughly several times in order for me to familiarize myself with the content provided. I then coded each of the responses. As with the individual interviews, data collected through the journal prompts was coded inductively, allowing me to develop codes freely as opposed to using a set of codes predetermined before the outset of data analysis (Saldaña, 2021). After coding was completed, I reviewed the codes and clustered each of the codes into themes reflecting the essence of the phenomenon. Again, twenty-five codes were developed, resulting in the construction of seven themes.

Focus Group Data Collection Approach

The third and final method of data collection that was utilized in the present study was a focus group. Similar to the one-on-one interview, focus groups also serve to collect data from

participants as information is recounted orally. As phenomenological research emphasizes the necessity of rich descriptions of a phenomenon given in the participant's own words (Moustakas, 1994), focus groups are an excellent method of data collection for qualitative studies (Bickman & Rog, 2009). Patton (2015) defines a *focus group* as a type of group interview that administers a series of open-ended questions to a purposive sample of homogenous individuals, all of whom share a common knowledge of a given topic of interest or share a common experience. Focus groups allow the researcher to collect data from a relatively small number of participants at a single time, which saves the researcher time but also allows for richer discussions to take place between the researcher and the participants involved (Bickman & Rog, 2009; Creswell & Guetterman, 2019; Krueger & Casey, 2015). Focus groups also allow for greater dialogue to take place between participants, which may also provide richer data than if the participants participated solely in one-on-one interviews with the researcher (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019; Creswell & Poth, 2018). This synergistic process may lead to novel insights being exposed that individuals may have been too apprehensive or fearful of sharing individually (Bickman & Rog, 2009).

The researcher acts as both interviewer as well as mediator (Bickman & Rog, 2009; Kreuger & Casey, 2015). It is critically important that the researcher facilitates a productive conversation, ensuring that judgments are not passed, discussions remain civil, and that every individual has an opportunity to share their thoughts, opinions, and experiences (Bickman & Rog, 2009; Kreuger & Casey, 2015). When focus groups are conducted well, the researcher should be able to identify patterns of similarities or differences among participants (Bickman & Rog, 2009; Kreuger & Casey, 2015). Additionally, granting participants the freedom to express themselves in a judgment-free environment gives rise to the ability to observe how participants

interact with and discuss the phenomenon under investigation allowing further insight into how the participants engage with the phenomenon (Bickman & Rog, 2009).

I conducted one focus group session in the present study with four selected participants. An interview protocol was developed that aided me in directing the focus group, with specific interview questions aimed at answering each of the research questions that guided the present study. Participants were selected due to the nature of their responses in the individual interview and the journal prompts. The focus group session was designed to probe deeper into the data gleaned from the previous two methods of data collection. Participants were grouped together to promote discussion and minimize anxiety. The focus group session was scheduled to take place virtually through Microsoft Teams video conferencing. The focus group was video and audio recorded, and a transcription of the session was produced.

The following focus group protocol was designed to guide the discussion while seeking to answer each of the present study's research questions. This protocol can also be found in Appendix G at the end of this manuscript. Discussion questions were developed that addressed the central research question as well as each of the three sub-questions. The focus group questions started broad but became increasingly narrower and more specific as the discussion progressed. Each discussion question was designed to complement the information provided by participants during the individual interviews and journal prompts, and follow-up probes were employed to seek correction of any discrepancies as well as to clarify any information that was unclear. Discussion questions were modified as needed.

Focus Group Questions

1. How did your expectations differ from the reality of attending your new school? CRQ

2. Please describe in detail any programs or activities you found to be particularly beneficial to aiding in the transfer experience. CRQ
3. What do you enjoy about the religious aspect of your new school? SQ1
4. What do you not enjoy about the religious aspect of your new school? SQ1
5. Please describe a time you experienced doubt regarding transferring. SQ2
6. Please describe a time when you experienced frustration as a transfer student. SQ2
7. Have you ever felt that you were treated differently, either positively or negatively, due to your status as a transfer student? Please describe your experiences in detail. SQ2
8. How did these experiences affect your confidence? SQ2
9. How did these experiences affect your commitment to achieving your goals at your new school? SQ2
10. Please describe any interactions with peers, faculty, or staff that stood out as being particularly positive. SQ3
11. Please describe any interactions with peers, faculty, or staff that stood out as being particularly negative. SQ3
12. What would you change about the transfer experience to make the transition easier for transfer students in the future? CRQ
13. Is there anything we have not touched on that you would like to share that you think may enhance this study by helping myself and others to better understand the transfer student experience? If so, what? CRQ

The first two questions focused on the central research questions regarding understanding the lived experiences of undergraduate transfer students at faith-based and religiously affiliated institutions in the United States. Each question also served as a way to stimulate discussion

amongst focus group participants. The questions were designed to be broad and to draw on personal experiences, allowing each participant to become acclimated with the rest of the group and begin discussing the phenomenon under consideration.

Questions three and four focused on answering the first sub-question regarding how the religious aspect of attending a faith-based or religiously affiliated institution affects the transfer student experience. Astin (1999) posited that sharing one's religious affiliation with the institution can positively impact the student experience. These questions were designed to examine how the religious culture and ideals present on campus impacted the transfer student experience. Further, these questions sought to understand the degree to which the faith-based aspect either benefitted or hindered the participant from successfully integrating into the campus community while asking participants to share their thoughts regarding the faith-based practices of the institution.

Questions five through nine sought to answer sub-question number two, which addressed how attending a faith-based or religiously affiliated institution affects the self-efficacy of transfer students. As transfer shock (Chamely-Wiik et al., 2021; Clausen & Wessel, 2015; Gere et al., 2017) and transfer student stigmas (Gere et al., 2017; Tobolowsky & Cox, 2012) often plague the transfer student experience, it is import to understand how students experience these phenomena and how they respond to and overcome the negative impacts associated with each. As motivation is often cited as a character trait that transfer students are thought to lack (Mobley & Brawner, 2019), gaining an understanding of this issue from the perspective of transfer students is of vital importance.

Focus group questions ten and eleven sought to answer sub-question number three regarding how attending a faith-based or religiously affiliated institution affects the perceived

levels of integration (Tinto, 1975;1993) of transfer students. As social and academic integration are critically important to student success in higher education (Astin, 1975, 1985, 1993, 1999; Day et al., 2017; Dennehy & Dasgupta, 2017; Foster et al., 2020; Hern et al., 2019; Patterson Silver Wolf et al., 2017; Tinto, 1975, 1982, 1988, 1993), understanding how students have navigated the transition into their faith-based or religiously affiliated institution is of key significance. Additionally, understanding the role faculty play in aiding transfer students in transitioning into an institution can provide meaningful insights for improving future practice.

The final two questions addressed the central research question once more, bringing the focus group to a close. The last two questions were designed to allow participants to address any topic of their choice that did not come up in the discussion, as well as to brainstorm how current practices regarding transfer students could be improved going forward. Each question was broad, allowing participants to respond however they felt led.

As with the individual interview and journal prompt writing protocols, each of the focus group questions were submitted for review by experts in the field, and IRB approval was granted before the focus group session was held. Questions were reviewed and amended as needed in order to glean the necessary information to provide rich and thick descriptions of the lived experiences of undergraduate transfer students at faith-based and religiously affiliated institutions in the United States.

Focus Group Data Analysis Plan

The data collected during the focus group session was analyzed in much the same way as the data collected during the individual interviews. The data was transcribed and checked for accuracy. All participants were given the opportunity to review the transcript of the focus group session to ensure that all data was accurate and correctly reflected the experiences and

perceptions of the participants. Each participant was given the opportunity to redact any information they wished to be stricken from the record before the data analysis commenced. As with the individual interviews, the data collected during the focus group sessions was coded, and then the codes were analyzed for theme development. The process of coding allowed me as the researcher to assign a single word or a phrase to the data that aided me in categorizing or theming the data later in the data analysis process (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Creswell & Guetterman, 2019; Saldaña, 2021). Inductive coding took place, thus, allowing me to develop codes in response to the data (Saldaña, 2021). There was no set list of codes used during the data analysis process. After the coding phase of the data analysis process had been completed, I reviewed the codes and grouped the codes into categorical themes. These themes sought to uncover the essence of the phenomenon under investigation, which was the lived experiences of undergraduate transfer students at faith-based and religiously affiliated institutions in the United States.

Data Synthesis

In order to create a rich and thick description of the phenomenon under investigation, the data must not only be analyzed separately but synthesized into a cogent body of meaningful information. Triangulation of data was achieved by employing three individual data collection methods. These methods included individual interviews, journal prompt writing protocols, and a focus group session. Using a combination of data collection methods gives strength to a qualitative study (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Patton, 2015).

Each data set produced by the three data collection methods listed previously was analyzed individually. Data was omitted that failed to answer the question or was irrelevant to the present study. This procedure, known as phenomenological reduction (Moustakas, 1994),

pertains to the process in which the researcher begins to whittle down the data collected to reveal only the necessary components regarding the phenomenon. The data collected during the individual interviews, journal prompt writing protocols, and focus group session was horizontalized through coding procedures. Each set of codes was analyzed further to give rise to the development of themes. Once each data set had been analyzed individually to produce textural descriptions of the participants' experiences (Moustakas, 1994), I returned to the codes listed for each data set to see how they compared across the other two sets of data. Codes were merged for clarity, and themes were revised so that the three data sets came together to allow for imaginative variation to take place, permitting myself as the researcher to create a thick and rich structural description of a singular phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). The amalgamation of the textural and structural descriptions of the phenomenon allowed me, as the researcher, to expose the phenomenon in its totality and, in so doing, uncover its true essence (Moustakas, 1994).

Trustworthiness

Qualitative inquiry has been criticized by those who subscribe to the positivist paradigm for providing a research design that lacks rigorous methods of investigation and having questionable measures of reliability and validity (Shenton, 2004). In order to provide a measure of assurance that qualitative studies can be as worthwhile as quantitative studies, Lincoln and Guba (1985) identified four components that speak to the trustworthiness of a study.

Trustworthiness is a term used to describe the merit, value, rigor, and authenticity of a study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 2015). The four components that comprise trustworthiness are credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 2015; Shenton, 2004). A discussion of each component is provided as well as an explanation regarding how each element was successfully achieved.

Credibility

Credibility addresses the truth of a research project (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). A study is considered to be credible when the findings of the research accurately portray the phenomenon under investigation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). There are a number of ways a researcher can address the credibility criterion, such as triangulating the data, prolonging engagement with participants, engaging in peer debriefing, conducting negative case analyses, member checking, and more (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006). The present study achieved credibility through triangulation of the data, peer debriefing, and member checking. The following sections provide a discussion regarding how each of the aforementioned techniques was used to add credibility to the present study.

Triangulation

The present study employed triangulation in an effort to add credibility to the research findings. Triangulation was achieved through the employment of multiple data collection methods. I collected data through individual interviews, journal prompt writing protocols, and a focus group session. Webb et al. (1966) posited that utilizing numerous data collection methods serves to increase confidence in research findings, thus adding to the credibility of the study.

Peer Debriefing

I engaged in peer debriefing in an effort to increase the present study's credibility. *Peer debriefing* is generally defined as the process in which the researcher subjects their research to an unbiased, disinterested party for review (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). It is the duty of the disinterested party to critically evaluate and critique the study in an effort to maintain the researcher's integrity and honesty throughout the research process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This process seeks to uncover any discrepancies and elucidate any biases that may be present in the

interpretation of the data and reporting of the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I engaged in peer debriefing by submitting the present study to experts in the field for evaluation and review.

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) assert that peer debriefing is often accomplished in doctoral research through the thoughtful review provided by the candidate's dissertation committee members. The present study achieved peer debriefing in this manner.

Member Checking

Member checking is a process in which the researcher returns to the participants in order for them to review the data collected and the researcher's interpretation of the findings for accuracy before submitting the research formally (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This process allows the researcher to seek clarification from participants in an effort to minimize or mitigate any misinterpretations of the data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Member checking serves to increase the credibility of the findings in that the participants are given the opportunity to review the data to ensure that their experiences have been interpreted correctly by the researcher. This process also serves to eliminate researcher biases from the research process. In the present study, I engaged in member checks with participants after the transcription of each individual interview as well as after the transcription of the focus group session to ensure that no misinterpretations or misunderstandings were present before entering the data analysis process.

Transferability

Transferability addresses the applicability of the research findings across contexts and across time (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The researcher can increase the study's transferability by providing rich and thick descriptions of the data (Geertz, 2008; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). These descriptions allow others to determine for themselves whether the findings presented in the

research have the potential to apply across situations and across periods of time (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I provided rich and thick descriptions of the participants' experiences in order to increase the likelihood that the findings of the study will transfer to other contexts. Purposive sampling aided in the collection of deep and meaningful data from participants (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Dependability

Dependability pertains to a study's replicability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The present study displays dependability by approaching the matter in the three ways described by Lincoln and Guba (1985). I employed an overlap of methods, provided a thorough description of the steps taken to conduct the research study, and subjected the present study to an inquiry audit to ensure accuracy (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The overlapping methods used were individual interviews, journal prompt writing protocols, and a focus group session. Lincoln and Guba (1985) claim that showing a study is credible is the first step in exhibiting that the study is dependable. I have outlined in great detail the steps that were taken to purposively select participants based on predetermined criteria, the steps that were taken to collect data from participants through the three methods mentioned heretofore, and the processes engaged in to analyze the data. Finally, I subjected the present study to an inquiry audit by submitting the study for review by experts in the field in order to determine the acceptability and accuracy of not only my application of the study design and methodology but the data collection and analysis procedures undertaken to arrive at the study's findings.

Confirmability

Confirmability pertains to the establishment of objectivity and the mitigation of biases by the researcher (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The research process should not be subjective; rather, the

research findings should provide an accurate portrayal of the participants' experiences (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The present study sought to establish confirmability by subjecting the research to a confirmability audit. Confirmability audits, along with audit trails, reflexivity, and triangulation, provide a process by which the researcher can increase the assurance of neutrality and objectivity in a research study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Halpern (1983) outlines the ways in which a researcher can maintain an audit trail to ensure objectivity. Halpern (1983) asserts that all raw data should be kept by the researcher, and all steps taken during the research process should be documented and recorded. Additionally, researcher memos should be recorded that document the thought processes of the researcher as they engage with the data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Keeping a reflexive journal is also important (Guba, 1981). This journal allows the researcher to reflect on the process in terms of how it impacts the self (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Finally, triangulation increases a study's confirmability by drawing on data from multiple sources. The present study achieved confirmability through the triangulation of data collection methods, member checking, peer debriefing, *epoché* and reflexive journaling, and the maintenance of an audit trail throughout the entirety of the research process.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations are of paramount concern throughout the entire process of conducting qualitative research. It is important to note that issues can arise at any point in the qualitative research process that may call ethical considerations into question, making it best practice for researchers to plan ahead in an effort to mitigate any possible ethical problems before they develop (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Researchers must be respectful of the participants who choose to participate in their studies, concerned with their participants' well-being, protection, and privacy, and their studies must be conducted in a manner that is both equitable

and socially just (Creswell & Poth, 2018; National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979).

Researchers must adhere to certain guidelines when planning a research study. In order to conduct my study, approval from the Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB) was granted to ensure that ethical considerations were appropriately addressed. Before collecting any data, informed consent from each of the 10 participants was obtained. In order to obtain informed consent, the nature of the study, as well as its purpose, was disclosed to participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The research participants were informed that their participation in the study was strictly voluntary, and that they could choose to withdraw from the study for any reason and at any time without penalty. As participant privacy and confidentiality are of utmost concern, pseudonyms were used for participants and institutional names were not disclosed (Creswell & Poth, 2018). To further stress the importance of maintaining participant and institutional privacy, participants were informed as to how the data would be stored as well as how long the data would be stored. All research data collected from participants has been stored in a secure location, guarded with either physical locks if in hardcopy form, or protected with secure passwords if stored electronically (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Finally, any risks the participant may encounter due to their participation were shared before the individual granted their consent. There were no foreseeable risks associated with participation in my study. Possible power dynamics between the researcher and the participants were considered in order to ensure that no participants were exploited or harmed in the conduction of this study. A researcher should never be in a position of power over the participants in a study (Krueger & Casey, 2015). In my study, I, as the researcher, did not hold a position of power over any of the participants; therefore, any possible power dynamics were not

present. Participants stand to reap the benefit of knowing that they have contributed to aiding college and university administrators to better understand and serve future transfer students going forward. When conducting research, it is critically important that researchers show integrity in their work. Therefore, all research findings uncovered by the data were honestly and accurately reported, and credit has been given to other researchers for their prior contributions to the field of higher education.

Summary

This chapter provided a detailed explanation of the research methodology that was employed in this transcendental phenomenological study. My study was conducted to gain insight into a previously underrepresented area of inquiry within the current body of scholarly literature. The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to understand the lived experiences of undergraduate transfer students at faith-based and religiously affiliated institutions in the United States. The research design, research questions, as well as the setting and participants were introduced. Next, the positionality of the study was explained, as was my role in conducting the present study as the researcher. This chapter provided a detailed description of the procedures that were utilized to collect and analyze the data, and a discussion of ethical considerations and trustworthiness brought the present chapter to a close.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of my transcendental phenomenology was to gain an understanding of the lived experiences of undergraduate transfer students at faith-based and religiously affiliated institutions in the United States by examining how attending these institutions affects the transfer student experience from a holistic perspective. This chapter begins by introducing each of the ten participants who took part in the study. A discussion of the thematic deductions that arose succeeding a rigorous application of phenomenological reduction and inductive coding procedures follows. Finally, this chapter closes by readdressing the central research question and three sub-questions that guided my study by offering responses to each, respectively.

Participants

This study examined the experiences of 10 participants. Two of the ten participants were current transfer students, while the remaining eight participants were former transfer students who have since graduated from their respective institutions. All participants attended either a faith-based or religiously affiliated college or university in the United States and each was enrolled in a degree-granting program at their institution. Each participant in this study was between the ages of 18 and 24 when they transferred to their faith-based or religiously affiliated institution, making them traditional-aged college students.

Six of the participants attended faith-based institutions, and four attended religiously affiliated institutions. The institutions that the participants attended were far-reaching, including institutions on the East and West Coasts as well as institutions more centrally located within the United States. Of the six participants who attended faith-based institutions, three identified as male and three identified as female; two students were currently enrolled. Of the four

participants who attended religiously affiliated institutions, one identified as male and three identified as female; all were former transfer students. Nine of the ten participants identified as White, and one identified as African American. All ten participants took part in the individual, one-on-one semi-structured interviews and completed the nine journal prompts. Four participants were selected to participate in the focus group session. The focus group consisted of one male and one female from each institutional type.

Table 1

Transfer Student Participants

Participant Name	Current Age	Age at Time of Transfer	Student Classification	Institutional Type: FBI/RAI
Hannah	21	20	Current	FBI
Jacob	25	19	Graduated	FBI
Michael	22	21	Current	FBI
John	41	20	Graduated	FBI
Madison	30	20	Graduated	FBI
Natalie	27	20	Graduated	FBI
Rachel	32	23	Graduated	RAI
Ashley	29	21	Graduated	RAI
Scott	28	22	Graduated	RAI
Lauren	27	19	Graduated	RAI

Hannah

Hannah is a 21-year-old college student enrolled at a faith-based institution on the East Coast. She grew up in a Christian family, attended church regularly, and was enrolled in private Christian schools before being homeschooled in her later years of high school. She started her higher educational journey in 2020, just as the COVID-19 pandemic began. Her courses began in an online format due to lockdown protocols throughout the country. She first enrolled in a public state university that was located close to home before transferring to another state university. After completing an associate's degree in Community and Human Services with a concentration in Criminal Justice, she decided she wanted a change of pace and transferred to a faith-based institution that she believed would be a better institutional fit. While this faith-based institution was liberating for Hannah, she was still attending classes online and desired the traditional, on-campus college experience; however, financial barriers stood in the way. Hannah decided to transfer to another faith-based institution that was more financially feasible for her budget and would allow her to have the traditional in-person experience that she so desired. Though she has yet to attend classes in-person at her new school, she will be attending her first in-person classes this fall. She is currently pursuing a degree in Government and aspires to attend law school after completing her undergraduate education.

Jacob

Jacob is a 25-year-old former transfer student. He transferred from a large public research institution to a medium-sized faith-based institution when he was 19 years old. He does not share the same religious affiliation as his institution and did not choose the institution for religious reasons. Jacob was very active on campus and spent time tutoring other students, serving as a mentor in his scientific disciplines of Chemistry and Physics, and working alongside professors

in various science labs over the course of his undergraduate education at his faith-based institution. He also took part in a research fellowship for two summers.

Michael

Michael is a 22-year-old African-American college student enrolled at a faith-based institution in the eastern United States. Due to financial constraints and the COVID-19 pandemic, Michael began his post-secondary schooling through his local community college in the Midwest. He then transferred to a faith-based institution on the West Coast that aligned with his personal denominational affiliation. Michael did not feel that his needs as a transfer student were adequately met at his first faith-based institution, so he transferred again to another faith-based institution grounded in the same religious denomination located in the Eastern half of the United States. Over the course of his undergraduate education, Michael changed his major several times, pursuing three different majors in total. Since attending this second faith-based institution, Michael has become involved in campus life, including taking part in his institution's sports broadcasting program.

John

John is a 41-year-old former transfer student. Before transferring to a faith-based institution, he attended two separate community colleges. Always knowing he wanted to go into ministry, John sought out a faith-based institution to give him the firm spiritual foundation he would need going forward in his career. John found the spiritual counsel of the institution to be exceedingly beneficial and credits the institution with helping him develop into the man of faith he is today. John has worked in ministry and has served as a pastor since graduating from his faith-based institution.

Madison

Madison is a 30-year-old former transfer student who transferred to a faith-based institution after attending a local community college in her home state. She was 20 years old when she transferred to her new school to pursue a degree in Government. Drawn to the faith-based institution for its respected reputation, spiritual community, and institutional protections, Madison enjoyed the faith-based aspects of her institution. However, she found the institution's stance against dancing restrictive, having previously attended a high school for the performing arts.

Natalie

Natalie is a 27-year-old former transfer student who transferred to a faith-based institution after attending a community college. First interested in the culinary arts, Natalie realized she wanted to become an American Sign Language (ASL) interpreter. She knew she had to transfer in order to accommodate this new career decision. The religious grounding of the institution played a critical role in Natalie's decision to attend, as faith is an important part of her life. Natalie was part of two honors societies, Phi Theta Kappa and Tau Sigma, and found her community through her academic program on campus and local church services off campus.

Rachel

Rachel is a 32-year-old former transfer student with a visual impairment. She was 23 when she transferred to a religiously affiliated institution after attending a local community college. Although she identifies as Agnostic and does not share the same religious beliefs as the institution she attended, she found the religious component of the institution to be positive and was even involved with InterVarsity, a faith-based organization on campus. Given Rachel's visual impairment, she required extra accommodations during her time at the institution.

Uncertainty and doubt surrounding her initial choice of major led her to change majors and follow a different, albeit rewarding path.

Ashley

Ashley is a 29-year-old former transfer student. Over the course of her college career, she transferred several times. She began her educational journey at a community college in her home state before transferring to a private four-year college in Florida. She later decided that the school she was attending did not suit her career decision, so she transferred back to her local community college. Eventually, Ashley found a small, private, religiously affiliated institution in the mountains to call home. She transferred to this religiously affiliated institution when she was 21 years old and remained at the institution until graduation. Although Ashley enjoyed the social environment and the friendships made at the religiously affiliated institution, she struggled academically due to an auditory processing disorder.

Scott

Scott is a 28-year-old former transfer student. He was 22 years of age when he transferred from a community college on the West Coast to a small, religiously affiliated institution on the East Coast. Scott was raised in the Catholic Church but does not consider himself to be religious. He does not share the same religious affiliation as the institution he attended, and he did not choose this institution because of its religious affiliation; rather, he desired to attend a smaller school that would provide a more personalized experience with a stronger sense of community.

Lauren

Lauren is a 27-year-old former transfer student. Before transferring to the religiously affiliated institution, she attended a small, private liberal arts college. Lauren transferred because she desired to attend a larger institution that provided more opportunities and greater diversity.

The religious affiliation of her receiving institution was not a factor she considered in her decision to transfer. During her time at the religiously affiliated institution, Lauren enjoyed working with the professors in her academic department, participating in the institution's equestrian club, and being a member of Sigma Alpha Omega (SAO), a Christian sorority.

Results

This section presents the findings of the study by discussing the major themes and sub-themes that arose after carefully analyzing the data collected through the individual interviews, journal prompts, and focus group session. This section also serves, not only to describe and explicate the thematic findings, but to allow the voices of each of the participants to be heard by sharing excerpts regarding their experiences in their own words as they pertain to the various themes and sub-themes uncovered.

Table 2

Themes and Sub-Themes

Themes	Sub-Themes
A Time of Spiritual Exploration	Cemented Spiritual Beliefs, Spiritual Introspection, Positive Spiritual Atmosphere Regardless of Personal Beliefs
Birds of a Feather vs. Opposites Attract	Comfort in Like-Mindedness, Celebrating Diversity
Initial Uncertainty	Transfer Orientation: The Freshman Focus, Lack of Knowledge About the Campus and Available Resources, Credit Transfer Anxiety
A Period of Personal Growth	Maturity, Increased Confidence, Professional Preparation, Making it Worth it: Improved Motivation and Work Ethic
Community is Key	Smaller Schools; Location; Making Friends; Participation in Clubs, Activities, and Organizations
Academics	Differences in Academic Rigor, Academic Performance, Changing Majors, Faculty Relationships, The Dubious Role of Academic Advisors

Perceptions of Campus Culture	Friendly and Accommodating; Exclusive, Ingenuine, and Judgmental
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A Time of Spiritual Exploration

The range of experiences recounted regarding the spiritual impact of attending a faith-based or religiously affiliated institution was far-reaching. While the majority of the participants who took part in this study identified as Christian, some of the participants who took part in this study did not share the same religious beliefs as their institutions, and more than one participant identified as Agnostic. However, regardless of one's personal spiritual grounding, a few things became certain as the participants shared their experiences pertaining specifically to the faith-based or religious aspect of the respective institutions.

The religious aspect present at both faith-based and religiously affiliated institutions allowed transfer students to explore their personal beliefs in a safe space, surrounded by the resources needed to make an informed ideological decision. Reflecting on the religious aspect of her school, Lauren said, "I would say that I was not a religious person before college, but I will say that while I was at [my religiously affiliated institution], I kind of explored my faith a little bit." Later in the interview, she went on to say, "I think that a lot of the situations I was put in [at my religiously affiliated school] really helped me explore my faith, and I wouldn't necessarily have done that at a school that was not faith-based."

Scott and Rachel echoed Lauren, that while neither was particularly religious, they both enjoyed participating in religiously focused activities. Rachel participated in her institution's InterVarsity program, citing it as a great way to meet people in her new environment. She said, "InterVarsity was a program that I attended every week, and that was also a nice way to meet new people. Even though I'm not really religious, it was just nice to go out and meet other

people, you know, in my campus.” Scott mentioned attending at least one church service during his time at his religiously affiliated institution but preferred to attend theological discussions at a local restaurant in town, stating, “The other big faith-based event I knew of was ‘Theology on Tap’ at the local restaurant. I attended a handful of those events.”

For many of the participants in this study, the religious aspect of their receiving institutions led to some level of spiritual engagement, whether that be solidifying one’s beliefs or engaging in some degree of spiritual introspection; the overall consensus among participants was that the spiritual atmosphere was positive overall, regardless of one’s personal religious beliefs.

Cemented Spiritual Beliefs

There was a much greater spiritual impact recounted among those who transferred to faith-based institutions compared to those who attended religiously affiliated institutions. Two participants, Hannah and Madison, had previously attended secular institutions prior to transferring to their respective faith-based institutions. Both experienced faculty members at their secular institutions singling them out and making derogatory comments regarding their faith. Madison recounted an episode in which a professor at the community college she had attended made negative comments regarding her Christian beliefs:

It was English class, you know, with the literature and stuff, and he asked, like, raise your hand if you don't believe in, like, kind of a typical, like, evolution and there was, I think, one or two other people and we raised our hands, and he was like, ‘you're dumb’ basically. I think he said, like, ‘that's moronic’ or something.

Being in an environment that encouraged spiritual growth and emphasized faith allowed participants to be more confident and expressive, not fearing ridicule or discrimination on the basis of their religious beliefs. In regard to transferring to a faith-based institution from a secular

institution, Madison claimed that transferring “helped me be more confident in my faith.”

Hannah echoed this remark, stating, “It’s definitely enabled me to be more open about what I believe.” Hannah later went on to describe how transferring to her faith-based institution helped her to grow in her beliefs, stating, “It’s really helped me to kind of cement my personal beliefs and to fully have a grasp and to really go from kind of my parent’s beliefs, so to speak, to having my own and being really sure of what I believe.” The institutional atmosphere, coupled with the spiritual guidance provided through campus events and the tone set by faculty members in class, really helped to foster a strong sense of community and comfort, allowing transfer students to openly explore their beliefs and grow personally as well as spiritually.

John also attended a faith-based institution, and although he grew up in a relatively Christian environment, it wasn’t until college that he truly became a Christian. In his interview, he claimed, “When I got there... I wasn’t a Christian.” However, he went on to say that his time at his faith-based institution after transferring was “a very formative time for me spiritually” and that he “learned a lot that would help me in my spiritual growth later.” When asked to sum up his experience as a transfer student at the faith-based institution, John proudly stated that:

My transfer from a secular institution to a Christian one, particularly one that emphasized the spiritual life over the academic, was invaluable to me in that the Holy Spirit used it to shape me in ways that still define who I am in Christ personally and in ministry professionally.

While Hannah, John, and Madison cemented their beliefs in support of the Christian faith and the religious groundings of their institutions, Jacob solidified his beliefs in a different direction. Going into his faith-based institution, Jacob did not consider himself to be a Christian or to be very religious at all. After transferring to his receiving institution, he reflected on his decision not

to align himself with the religious beliefs of his school. He described the religious aspect of his school to be “very much reminiscent of Sunday school, affiliated with an actual church” and to be burdensome, stating, “It did kind of feel like a burden for the most part, like, needing to go to chapels every year and that kind of thing was always way more of, like, a chore than it is, like, something I'm getting anything out of.” When asked whether transferring had any impact on him spiritually, Jacob deliberated for a moment before responding, “I'm trying to determine if it, like, contributed to me not being a Christian anymore, and I don't really [think so]... It didn't make me want to go to church any more. It didn't make me want to not go to church any more.”

While some participants found the spiritual aspect of their receiving faith-based or religiously affiliated institution to bolster their faith or lead them on the path of spiritual growth, that was not the reality shared by all participants in this study.

Spiritual Introspection

Transferring to a faith-based or religiously affiliated institution had varying impacts. Some participants, such as Lauren, found the religious grounding of the school to cause her to explore her own spiritual beliefs. Others, such as Michael, found the judgmental nature of his institution to be rather off-putting, calling his beliefs into question.

As a member of the Christian sorority Sigma Alpha Omega (SAO), Lauren found herself asking questions regarding her own personal religious beliefs in light of her participation in her sorority. “Before doing [SAO], I really didn't have much religious background,” she said. She had joined the sorority as a way to make friends and become involved in the campus community.

However, her participation in SAO led her to question her beliefs, leaving her searching for answers.

I mean, I think that's, like, something that I hadn't thought about before... Oh, yeah, like, sure, you believe in God... then when you were confronted with, like, while I'm in this Christian sorority, do I actually identify as a Christian? Do I need to? You know, this is something that I need to actually explore if I'm gonna be a part of this organization.

For Lauren, this period of exploration led to spiritual growth.

Michael, on the other hand, experienced a very different reality at his faith-based institution. The school he attended was a lot less welcoming of difference and led him to question his faith. In his interview, Michael described this phenomenon regarding the religious aspect of his receiving institution, stating, “It's weird because in some ways it's kept me grounded, but in some ways, I feel like it's kind of pushed me back from Christianity.” Even though he identified with the same religious beliefs as the institution, Michael felt that the religious aspect of his faith-based institution was not always entirely positive.

Positive Spiritual Atmosphere Regardless of Personal Beliefs

For many participants in this study, attending a faith-based or religiously affiliated institution was not a critical factor in their transfer decision. As a number of participants did not share the same religious beliefs as their receiving institutions, the religious aspect of the school was either not important or, in some cases, unknown. This was most common among those who transferred to religiously affiliated institutions. “The religious affiliation had no bearing on my selection. I was looking for a smaller and more focused institution,” said Scott. Lauren echoed Scott’s statement, offering, “I did not choose [my religiously affiliated institution] specifically

because it was faith affiliated. I chose [the institution] for the atmosphere and student opportunities.” Ashley, on the other hand, was altogether unaware of her institution’s religious affiliation. When asked if her institution’s religious affiliation influenced her decision to transfer, she answered, “No, I didn't know it was.” One participant was even skeptical about attending an institution with a religious grounding. Rachel mentioned in her interview, “I actually didn't even really want to attend a religiously affiliated college because I thought it was just gonna be strict that I had to attend certain activities, and I'm Agnostic.” Rachel went on to discuss how her fears turned out to be all for naught. She stated, “I don't really affiliate with any religious beliefs, but the fact that I could still attend a religiously affiliated college without really believing in their beliefs, I thought was pretty cool.”

Across the board, participants noted that the spiritual atmosphere at their respective faith-based or religiously affiliated institutions was generally positive regardless of their own personal religious beliefs. Reflecting on the religious aspect of his institution, Scott said:

In retrospect, I think having the college be part of a religious institution was a benefit for me in, like, a personal sense just because I have a lot of nostalgia from my Catholic upbringing, like, I did enjoy going to mass just because I love church architecture and, like, the overall atmosphere at most churches I've been to has been very pleasant and soothing... I attended one or two services at [the school], but it was mainly more for the sake of just finding a place that you can kind of just get away from the stresses of college life... it wasn't really important to me at the time, but in retrospect, I think it helped.

Those who attended faith-based institutions were more likely to feel an increased level of comfort at their institutions due to the presence of corporate worship opportunities and other

faith-based activities present on campus. “I felt more than comfortable at [my faith-based institution] as a whole,” stated Jacob. “Overall, I felt mostly comfortable,” echoed Natalie. Madison discussed the importance of the spiritual aspect at her institution and the feeling of community it engendered, “[it] was something I looked forward to each week. The time of corporate worship led by incredible worship leaders, followed by biblical teaching from renowned pastors, was truly remarkable. This helped keep me grounded during periods of stressful academic seasons.” In addition to feeling grounded, participants also reported feelings of peace. Remembering his time as an undergraduate transfer student, John recalled that “I was never, ever afraid [there]. I could walk anywhere on campus at any time at night that I was allowed to, and I never felt any fear there... I always felt peace there.” These feelings of comfort were cited as reasons why participants were confident in their decisions to transfer into their respective receiving institutions, as well as reasons why they decided to persist at their institutions.

Birds of a Feather vs. Opposites Attract

When speaking with the participants, it became clear that two schools of thought emerged among them. While all were interested in the new and exciting opportunities their receiving institutions had to offer, some were more interested in communing with others who shared their same beliefs, while others were eager to meet people from different walks of life. Many of the participants who chose to transfer to faith-based institutions were interested in the protected environment their institutions provided. John mentioned that, “there weren’t a lot of secular negatives that I might have experienced at another school, so I got the college experience with some spiritual protections in place and that I think that was phenomenal.” Madison shared the same view as John, stating that, “[my faith-based institution] offered a Christian worldview and

faith-based education with parameters in place that protected against the typical and sometimes damaging secular college experiences.” While some enjoyed a more sheltered college experience, others, like Lauren, were looking for a more traditional college experience. She shared that, “coming from a very small school (500 students) I was looking for something that matched the more typical college experience.” She further went on to say that she “like[d] the diversity of the student population.” This study revealed that while some birds choose to flock together, in some cases, opposites do, in fact, attract.

Comfort in Like-mindedness

Among those who transferred to faith-based institutions, a common theme that emerged was that students sought out an institutional environment that encouraged and celebrated a culture of like-mindedness. Many did not want to participate in what some may term a more typical college experience. Natalie discussed her reasons for attending a faith-based institution over a secular institution, saying, “I knew if I had to live on campus, I wanted it to be a religious institution... I was not comfortable attending a secular institution if I had to live there/be away from my family/faith community.” She later reiterated that if she “was going to live in a dorm, I wanted it to be Christian.” Madison also shared a similar view, stating that one of the things that attracted her to a faith-based institution was the gendered dorms, “I was not interested in living in co-ed dorms or experiencing what some may call a ‘party school,’” she said.

In addition to the protections in place at faith-based institutions, many participants noted that being surrounded by like-minded individuals was a source of comfort for them. Speaking to this, John stated, “There's always a camaraderie... when you meet a Christian somewhere... there's that instant ‘OK, this person gets me to a degree.’” Madison also discussed the comfort she found in being around like-minded peers, stating that “it was very empowering, and it felt

enriching to be among people who were like-minded and just, like, to kind of normalize Christianity.” Natalie also shared that this was a positive factor that contributed to her overall transfer experience, saying, “I’m mostly around, you know, like-minded people. And so, it was just nice. Like, it was encouraging.” Speaking again to the camaraderie that exists among people who share the same religious beliefs as John previously mentioned, Hannah said, “There’s that connection and that common tie that we all had and that, in a way, kind of opened up conversation and made conversation easier.”

Hannah also went on to describe how, ideologically, the education provided at her faith-based institution was more comfortable, as it was more in line with her own personal beliefs, claiming, “As a Christian, I knew that for me to get the education I needed, I was going to have to go to a place that puts the student above political or scientific agenda[s].” She also went on to discuss her opinion regarding the education she received at the two state schools she attended before transferring to a faith-based school while also offering a piece of advice to other students who may be considering transferring from a secular to a faith-based institution:

Don’t waste your time with state schools. Unfortunately, they’re not going to give you the foundation that you’re looking for. They’re not gonna increase your knowledge and your learning. It’s just gonna be indoctrination, like, there’s no other way to describe it.

For many of the students who attended faith-based institutions, comfort was found in being surrounded by similar ideologies, practices, and worldviews.

Celebrating Diversity

Diversity was celebrated among those who transferred into religiously affiliated institutions. Rachel spoke of her school’s general culture of acceptance, stating how surprised

she was at how open-minded people were. She said, “I thought that the institution’s...faith would be more prevalent on campus. I saw very quickly that all faiths were represented and welcomed here. For a small college, the campus was diverse; there was even a dormitory dedicated to students from foreign countries.” As mentioned previously, the diversity of the student body at Lauren’s school was a strong draw for her. Ashely also found the diversity of her school to be extremely attractive, choosing to live in a dorm that housed a significant number of the institution’s international and foreign exchange students.

Initial Uncertainty

Each of the participants in this study discussed feeling some level of uncertainty in the initial stages of their transition into their respective receiving institutions. Jacob expressed, “I was nervous, certainly, like, going into a new school on my own, kind of being the new kid; it was nerve-wracking.” Natalie also discussed how initially she struggled, but she gained confidence as time went on. She said, “Naturally, at first, in a new place, it can be a bit awkward, but the longer you stay, the more you learn your way around, understand people better, and learn how you fit into the larger community.” She shared that much of the anxiety she felt about transferring was in regard to adjusting and “getting the lay of the land,” so to speak.

Scott spoke of how being introverted was an added pressure that he felt in regard to making friends at his receiving institution. He stated, “If you're really introverted like I am, that could be very scary.” At the very beginning of his transition, he “would almost say it was a bit lonely.” Ashley shared a similar sentiment in that “just the whole process itself can be very intimidating and kind of scary to just be, like, thrown in with other people that don’t know the school and everything.” Ashley struggled with social anxiety and expressed that finding friends was difficult at first because she “kind of struggle[d] with the initial approaching...because

you're going into some already formed groups.” Lauren also shared that breaking into already established friend groups was “definitely difficult because everybody, by the time you transfer, everybody kind of already has their own group, so if you're not joining [a] club or [a] sorority or whatever it is, [it's] like, where do I fit it in?”

John felt a degree of trepidation regarding the prospect of acclimating to dorm life after attending two community colleges. He said, “I was nervous about moving in[to] the dorm and transferring,” but all of his worries were quickly resolved as he “immediately [got] to meet people that were strong in their faith, that had the same religious background and common values, and all of that definitely made it easier, especially moving into the dorm.” Rachel shared a similar experience to John's, stating that moving in was a time of apprehension because she “didn't know anybody and ... just felt like an outsider,” but as Natalie shared earlier, as her involvement increased, her feelings toward her new school improved too. Rachel shared, “At first, I was scared, a new experience, but the more I became acclimated with the campus, the more I just wanted to stay and continue taking more classes even after I graduated.” What started out as initial uncertainty blossomed into a love for her receiving institution. Reflecting on her experiences as a transfer student, Rachel said, “I fell in love with the campus...I loved the whole experience of it.” When asked if she could sum up her transfer experience in one sentence, Rachel did one better, stating, “I could [sum up my experience] in one word. Phenomenal. It was just an amazing experience.”

Transfer Orientation: The Freshman Focus

For most of the participants in this study, orientation was not as beneficial as they would have liked it to be. Michael described his frustration with his faith-based institution's orientation program, stating, “They hosted an [Orientation] Week, primarily focused on the incoming

freshmen, while non-freshmen, like myself, were isolated.” This notion resounded throughout this study as many of the participants felt that the orientation initiatives at their respective receiving institutions were more geared toward incoming freshmen, and transfer students were simply along for the ride but not a priority. Michael continued on about his frustration with how his receiving institution handled orientation, “it was freshmen, and it was transfers kind of meshed together.” He went on to explain how he was not accommodated at all as a transfer student, saying:

When I first got there, they didn't really put me with the transfer group. There was no real direction, so I was kind of with freshmen. I'm like, 'hey, these kids seem kind of immature.' You know, I'm like, 22 or 21 at the time, about to be 22, and you know, they are, like, 18, maybe even 17, and I was like, this isn't, you know, this doesn't seem like a transfer group.

He went on to explain how he didn't feel that his institution cared about transfer students, “I think the issue is they're just not prioritizing transfers as much,” he said. Natalie also experienced a similar orientation experience at her receiving faith-based institution. She attended orientation upon arriving at her new school but could not remember anything provided by her institution that was geared specifically toward incorporating transfer students. Natalie claimed:

I do not recall sitting in any special orientation programs (besides new student orientation, which all new students attend, regardless of whether you transferred or not). I also did not participate in any community-building exercises/welcome activities specific to transfer students ... Besides what was set up for all new students, I do not recall anything beyond that specifically for transfer students. I do not feel [my faith-based institution] did anything to help me adjust specifically

as a transfer student. I felt I was mostly in the same boat as the incoming freshmen, just being a new student.

Lauren echoed Natalie and Michael in that her school also did not make an overt effort to help transfer students adjust during orientation; there were some transfer-specific activities, but not nearly as many as would have been beneficial. Reflecting on her experience, Lauren shared, “I arrived for move-in with the freshman for the same year. We had move-in activities with freshman orientation groups, and I remember feeling a little excluded having already ‘done this.’” She went on to explain that her school had one specific activity for transfer students that was helpful but did not last long enough to truly be effective. She said, “Eventually, we were split up into groups for transfer students and for our major or interests. We got to know a lot of the other transfer students during this time, but it only lasted during the first day.” Lauren expressed that transfer students, while included in orientation initiatives, do not really reap the same benefits as the incoming freshmen who participate in the same activities. She said:

You definitely don't get the same experience as, like, with freshman orientation...

I think transfer students are a little bit like, well, you have that college experience already, so here you go... I really had to make myself make friends, like, I was constantly having to join clubs... I joined my sorority... I joined the equestrian team, like, you really have to force yourself to make friends and [join] clubs because you don't have that organic, like, freshman orientation ‘meeting friends’ thing.

Ashley also had mixed feelings toward her receiving institution’s orientation efforts, “there are things I liked about orientation and things I didn't,” she shared. “I remember we had orientation depending on our major,” she continued. She also discussed how her institution

endeavored to help transfer students integrate socially, stating, “Orientation was OK as a transfer there. I didn't mind it. I feel like they tried to show you the school; they invited you out to parties and things. So, they tried to help you more socially.”

Although some participants had better orientation experiences than others, the general sentiment shared was that there was very little that was specifically designed to help transfer students feel welcome, with all institutional efforts directed toward integrating the incoming freshmen instead. Regarding his institution’s focus on freshmen and combined freshman-transfer orientation program, Michael vehemently stated, “They gotta split it up. I felt like a grandpa with all the freshmen...I feel like having transfers in one spot and freshmen in another [is better].” Several other participants agreed that being thrown together with the freshmen was not the most helpful experience, and many would have liked to participate in transfer-focused activities.

Lack of Knowledge About the Campus and Available Resources

Entering a new environment can be very anxiety-provoking for transfer students, especially when they lack adequate knowledge about their receiving institutions and their surrounding communities, leaving them with many unanswered questions regarding how things work, what is expected of them, where things are located, what resources are available to them, or whom to go to if they encounter a problem in their new surroundings. Many of the participants discussed what it was like to become acclimated at their respective receiving institutions. Madison spoke of the anxiety she felt as she learned her way around her new campus. She said that one of her biggest concerns was, “Honestly, just not really knowing your way around campus. I know that sounds silly, but just the logistics of, like, OK, where do we eat lunch?” She went on to discuss how that was not the norm for a junior, which was a little unnerving at first,

“you know, most juniors know their way around campus very easily. Whereas, I had the knowledge of a freshman in terms of the logistics of getting around campus, but I was older.”

Lauren also discussed how she felt regarding the acclimation period, reflecting on the ways she felt her receiving religiously affiliated institution did not adequately prepare her to go into her first year. She commented:

I think specifically as a transfer student there, they never set you up, like, they never go through, like, these are the clubs you could be a part of, or like every Sunday we have church in the Chapel or whatever. They never, as a transfer student, broke it down for you, like, these are the religious or faith-based things you can be involved in ... as a transfer student, and I would imagine as a freshman when you're going through orientation and everything, they would have that for you, like, they would probably lay it out.

Ashley echoed Lauren, feeling that she did not have an adequate understanding of the institutional resources available to help her make the transition more smoothly. When asked how she believed institutions could better serve the unique needs of transfer students, Ashley spoke of the importance of providing “more knowledge of available resources; that kind of thing might help someone.” She also discussed how, looking back, she believes that “putting out more information on, I don't know, tutoring services, mental health services, like, all the things that the campus supplies, or maybe even just things around the area” would have helped her to be more successful overall at her receiving institution.

Similarly, Natalie also shared that the lack of knowledge about her receiving institution made certain classes more difficult for her and that had she known better, she would have approached things differently. She discussed how she had to take a Biology course upon entering

her new school, which she found to be particularly challenging, especially given the large class size. She went on to share that, “Later, I learned, like, most people take Biology online because it's easier. Like, I wish I would have known that, but I didn't know that transferring in.” Lauren also felt that she missed out on certain opportunities at her receiving institution simply because she did not know that they existed. For example, she was unaware that her receiving institution offered an honors program. She expressed, “Speaking of honors, like, I didn't know that was a program, and I don't know if you can only do that as a freshman... thinking back on it, I would have loved to have participated in that.”

Credit Transfer Anxiety

Several participants voiced an initial concern regarding their previously earned credits. Hannah expressed that, “going in transferring, I had a lot of issues getting transcripts, and it was frustrating.” She expressed that the whole credit transfer process “was a little hectic, and part of me was like, ‘this is a sign, maybe this isn’t where I’m supposed to be,’” leading her to feel a mixture of frustration and doubt regarding her decision to transfer. She described the anxiety surrounding the transfer of credits as one of the lowest points of her transfer experience. She recalled some of the thoughts she experienced during this stressful period, stating that the worst part was “the waiting periods, not knowing if my credits are gonna transfer” and worrying about “if [the institution was] gonna get my transcripts, will I get the scholarships?” Michael also expressed his feelings toward the credit transfer phase of the overall transfer experience, stating, “Credits can be kind of weird when you transfer.” Natalie experienced a time when she received conflicting responses from her receiving institution regarding her previously earned credits, causing her a great deal of anxiety. She explained:

There was one history class I had taken at a local university while I was still at home because I was told it would transfer to [my faith-based institution], and that was one less class for me to take. However, when I arrived at [my school], the class was not showing as transferred. I did not understand why it had been rejected, but after sending a copy of the syllabus to the head of the history department, they accepted it, and it all worked out. I was anxious since that was the whole reason I had taken that class, so I am glad it went through.

Despite the initial anxiety surrounding credits, most of the participants expressed that any issues they encountered were quickly resolved. Hannah said that, “Other than the transcript thing, really, it’s been a pretty smooth transition from school to school,” resulting in a positive transfer experience at her receiving institution overall.

A Period of Personal Growth

For many of the participants in this study, the period after transferring was a critical time of personal growth. Upon entering their new environment, each transfer student was expected to, as Scott termed it, “forge [their] own [way].” Several participants felt that there was no real transition time for transfer students and that they were dropped into a new environment in which they quickly had to learn to take care of themselves if they wanted to remain at their receiving institutions. Ashley described the attitude her receiving institution took toward acclimating transfer students, remembering how it felt to adjust after transferring. She said, “They just don’t really take the transfers, you know, coming in as seriously as they would freshmen. So, I think I felt treated a bit differently in that way.” Ashley also went on to say how her school took the approach of expecting transfer students to be able to make that transition more easily simply on the basis of having prior college experience, “you’ve done school before; you’ll be fine” she

said, explaining how she “felt more blindly thrown in” and expected to be able to thrive. Lauren echoed this, stating, “Here you go. You’re thrown in.” John also discussed the transition as a period of growth, saying, “There's not really anybody there to hold your hand... You just kind of have to grow up a little bit.”

In response to this ‘sink or swim’ mentality, Lauren expressed that, regarding the abrupt transition, “the positive effects are, like, you find yourself. You figure out what you need.”

Toward the end of her interview, Lauren also discussed how transferring taught her a lot about herself and helped her grow personally, stating, “I would say that it was a big learning experience about myself.” Jacob also felt that transferring allowed him to grow more as a person. He described how transferring opened up more time for self-exploration, saying, “I found myself with more time to develop emotionally and discover who I am and what I want to do.” This personal growth gave rise to a lot of other positive personal aspects, such as increased levels of motivation, confidence, improved work ethic, maturity, and a forward-thinking mindset focused on professional preparation, networking, and career development.

Maturity

Maturity played a large role in how participants handled the transition upon entering their respective receiving institutions. Many felt that being older gave them an added advantage.

Natalie expressed, “I feel it was really beneficial that I was older. I don't wanna say more mature, but sometimes, you know...I feel like I was making better choices than some of my peers.” Scott also felt that having more college experience helped him adapt to his new environment, stating, “I was probably a bit more comfortable going in... I already had had the college experience for, like, two years prior,” and this experience helped him to be “a bit more comfortable as a transfer student” as compared to the incoming freshmen. Natalie also stated that one of the positive

factors she experienced as a transfer student was that “you come in with more experience.”

Rachel echoed this as well, stating that she was more comfortable as a transfer student because she was “a bit more mature than the freshmen,” having transferred to her religiously affiliated institution at the age of twenty-three after attending a community college for several years.

Natalie also expressed how being older gave her a better perspective regarding her educational aspirations. She stated, “I feel like because I was older, I was more appreciative of my education and the learning environment.” In many ways, this increased maturity also led to increased levels of confidence among participants as they endeavored to make the transition into their receiving campus communities.

Increased Confidence

Almost all of the participants in this study found that they experienced higher levels of confidence after transferring to their respective faith-based and religiously affiliated institutions.

Natalie mentioned that maturity played a role in her increased confidence, stating, “I had more confidence because I was, you know, a little bit older, but not old enough to where I felt out of place.” She went on to say that transferring did not negatively affect her confidence at all; she said, “I feel like I had a good level of confidence, and [transferring] didn't negatively impact it.”

Scott also discussed how transferring positively impacted his confidence because it forced him to be more outgoing. He stated, “It did affect the confidence positively because I did kind of have to make more of an effort to make friends and contacts on my own.” Rachel’s experiences were very much in line with Scott’s. She discussed how transferring affected her confidence positively, saying, “I definitely felt more confident transferring” and that the whole experience “kind of helped me speak up more because I'm a shy person and kind of put me out of my comfort zone, so to say.”

Madison also spoke of how the overall transfer experience helped her gain confidence as she made a point of being more outgoing and intentional in her interactions with others. “I would say it helped me gain confidence because I wasn’t in the same boat as a lot of people. So, I had to kind of put myself out there if I wanted to make friends,” shared Madison, echoing the experiences shared by Scott, Rachel, and Natalie. Jacob spoke of a momentary dip in confidence as he entered his receiving faith-based institution but praised his institution for helping him make the transition well. He said, “I think my confidence going into any new school would be, like, slightly lower than it would be, but I think [my school] did a good job of just, like, getting me right back where I needed to be.” Overall, the majority of participants in this study reported significant increases in their overall level of confidence as a result of transferring, a result that was rather interesting.

Professional Preparation

Multiple participants who took part in this study revealed that their career aspirations factored into their decisions to attend their respective receiving institutions. Natalie attended her local community college, following a career path in the culinary arts before deciding that she wanted to pursue a career as an American Sign Language (ASL) interpreter, serving deaf communities. Natalie described her reasons behind transferring to her faith-based institution as thus:

When I knew I wanted to become a sign language interpreter, to become nationally certified, you do need a bachelor's degree. It doesn't have to be in interpreting, but I didn't really know ASL or how to interpret. So [my school] is really the only one [who offered the degree I wanted].

She went on to say that her school was the perfect fit because “they had the degree program I wanted. It was Christian. It was still within a reasonable distance from home, and it was a great choice for what I needed.” Altogether, Natalie’s receiving faith-based institution provided her with the educational foundation and the tools necessary to succeed in her desired professional field.

Michael also cited professional preparation as an important factor in his transfer decision. When he transferred to his first faith-based institution, he was studying Journalism and was very interested in Sports Broadcasting; however, his first faith-based institution did not provide him with the necessary resources. This factor, among others, motivated him to transfer to a different faith-based institution that could provide him with better tools and mentorship opportunities in his designated field of study. Upon entering his second faith-based institution, Michael stated that his entire outlook changed when he was presented with the opportunities he was not given when still at the first faith-based institution; he said, “I feel like especially with the mic, like, finally being able to have that mic, you know, and actually have the equipment that I need, the resources I need. I mean, that was a great feeling.” He went on to describe how having the right tools and receiving positive feedback gave him intense satisfaction, leading him to state:

That was the moment I knew, I was like, ‘I can do this. I can do this.’ Whether it’s a fallback job or something I can just kind of do on the side and make a little money for a game here and there, or whether I wanna try and make it to network level...[it was] a moment where transferring made sense.

John also chose his institution based on his post-graduate aspirations. As John wanted to pursue a career in ministry, transferring to a faith-based institution made practical sense, he said:

My desire was to go into ministry following my graduation, so it made sense to me to pursue a degree in Religion ... I knew pastors who had graduated from [my faith-based institution], so I was confident it would give me the education both academically and spiritually that I needed to fulfill my goals.

While Natalie, John, and Michael chose their respective receiving institutions in order to pursue specific fields, it wasn't until after transferring to his receiving faith-based institution that Jacob realized his true passion. Formally studying Chemistry and Physics, Jacob found playing drums to be his passion, and his institution's artistic leaning gave him plenty of networking opportunities, setting him up well for life after graduation. Speaking of how transferring set him on a new life course, Jacob claimed:

I started playing drums again, which was something I had done through childhood and high school and just kind of kept doing a little bit while I wasn't here, but [I] started playing drums again, and now that I am graduated 2 1/2 years, that's my career now. [I'm] just playing drums and trying to make that full-time. So, it really certainly influenced my life after the fact. And I think it was pretty much all good, really.

For most of the participants in this study, transferring to their respective faith-based or religiously affiliated institutions opened doors and offered new and exciting opportunities that may have never presented themselves otherwise.

Making it Worth it: Improved Motivation and Work Ethic

Transferring can be a daunting, anxiety-laden process with significant financial implications. For several participants, like Hannah, "money was an obstacle," so the notion of making transferring worth it was critical. For Scott, his decision to transfer led him entirely

across the country, and with that, came more pressure to make it stick. He claimed, “For me, it was a gamble, like, we're talking across the entire country... I'd say that there was definitely a bit of pressure ... to really make the decision worth it.” With the prospect of racking up excessive amounts of student loan debt looming large, this ‘make it or break it’ mentality spurred participants to rise to the challenge. Many participants found themselves to be more motivated as a result of transferring and noticed a significant improvement in their overall work ethic as well.

Rachel stated:

I think it improved my work ethic...[it] kind of forced me to do stuff instead of just, like, saying, ‘Man, I don't really wanna do this.’ It's kind of like you have to do this. You transferred into this institution that costs a lot of money. Have to do this for your grades.

Madison also found herself striving to finish in four years so as not to have to spend more time and money on her education. In regard to transferring, she stated, “Oh, it definitely helped my work ethic.” For Madison, finishing on time and being financially prudent was vitally important; these were also factors contributing to her improved work ethic and increased motivation. In her interview, she claimed:

I just wanted to make sure that I graduated ‘on time.’ I didn’t want my transferring to impact me graduating with my bachelor’s degree within four years, and I worked hard to make sure I didn’t have to spend extra time (or money) to finish my degree.

Madison was not the only one who felt an increased amount of pressure to finish in a short amount of time. Natalie discussed how transferring gave her a shorter amount of time to finish her degree, therefore giving her less of a margin for error. She said, “I'm only residential, like,

for 2 1/2 semesters, and so I knew I needed to put in the work because I'm there for a shorter amount of time, and there was no time to goof off, you know?"

Michael also found that he was more motivated once he was given the proper resources to be successful. "I felt more motivated to do class work because I was like, you know, I'm in a situation where I can call games and do things," he said; it "definitely helped my motivation." Being in the right community with a renewed focus did not only help Michael feel more motivated, but it helped Natalie as well. Discussing how transferring affected her motivation and work ethic, Natalie said:

I feel like I had a much stronger work ethic...I was like, 'I'm here to get my degree. I know what I want. I know how long it's going to take me to get there,' so I was like, 'I'm willing to put in whatever work it takes to get there'... So yeah, I feel like it definitely had an effect on my work and motivation.

John also expressed how transferring affected his motivation, saying, "I think it affected [my motivation] in a positive way." Increased institutional fit positively affected Hannah's motivation. When speaking of her upcoming semester, she said, "I'm more excited about the material that I'm going to be reading ... like, I've already purchased all my textbooks for the fall semester and everything, and I've already been, like, reading them and going through them."

While some felt more motivated simply because the academic material was more appealing to them at their receiving institutions, others felt they had to try harder to meet the expectations of their respective institutions. Reflecting on the increased rigor at her receiving religiously affiliated institution, Ashley stated, "I feel like some classes really did push me to do better." Scott also spoke to the increased rigor at his institution and how his work ethic improved as a necessity. He claimed, "I'd say that the work ethic kind of got better, if only because I knew

that, like I said before, like, if my work ethic didn't improve, then all of this would have been kind of for naught.” Lauren also felt the need to “keep up with the Joneses in a way” at her receiving institution. She reflected back on her experiences, sharing that, “at [my school], there's that perception that, like, everybody, well, at least within my friend group, everybody was really smart. So, I wanted to be like, ‘I'm getting good grades too!’ So, it affected my work ethic positively.”

Community is Key

A strong sense of community coupled with feelings of acceptance and belonging were among the positive factors that contributed to each of the participants' overall transfer student experience. Jacob expressed his satisfaction with his receiving institution by stating, “I'm thankful that I transferred away from [the state school], and I'm thankful for ending up at a school and community where I felt comfortable to learn and grow.” He discussed how his institution was a much better fit for him personally as well as socially and that, overall, he felt more comfortable and content as a result of transferring. He said, “I found myself just, like, feeling more centered in my social interactions and feeling, like, more fulfilled,” and his surrounding community played a large role in his happiness. Madison particularly benefited from the spiritual community at her receiving faith-based institution, citing corporate campus worship opportunities and smaller, faith-based groups as particularly influential. She said, “[weekly worship] was something I looked forward to each week,” and “the weekly bible studies/hall meetings offered at [my faith-based institution] allowed me to connect with other students that lived near me and helped get me connected with like-minded friends.”

While a number of participants were involved in their campus communities, several were also involved in their larger surrounding communities as well. Natalie shared that finding a

church community outside of school was important to her, stating, “The first year definitely, like, trying to find a church was really important to me. I guess that's more in the community than on campus.” Scott also took the opportunity to engage with the surrounding community through his public history classes. These courses allowed him to “go out and interview people from the community that you were studying, like, whether that be, like, the [local] black community...or the [local] LGBTQ community, etc.” These experiences helped the participants to engage with not only their fellow peers but with others outside of the school, allowing for a greater sense of belonging. This sense of belonging led to both Rachel and Scott expressing a desire to remain in the area after graduation.

Smaller Schools

Several of the participants in this study attended smaller schools, which significantly added to the sense of community felt on campus. Smaller class sizes were also a notable factor that contributed to a sense of belonging. Many of the participants noted how attending a smaller school allowed for greater personalized attention, flexibility, and more meaningful interactions with both peers and faculty members. Speaking to this aspect, Hannah said of her school, “It’s a smaller school, so sometimes it seems like they are a little more on the personal level,” noting that “they remember your name,” making it feel more intimate and caring. When discussing her reasons for choosing the school she did, Hannah also mentioned the size of the institution as being an important factor. She said, “The small community feeling, welcoming staff and students, mixed with an atmosphere that was safe and inviting, was what convinced me that [my second faith-based institution] was where I was supposed to be.” Rachel also stated that a small school was appealing to her. She claimed, “the location and size of [the school] is what drew me in to apply as a transfer student.” Scott echoed Rachel and Hannah in that he “was looking for a

smaller and more focused institution.” Lauren expressed that she did not want to go to a large school, saying, “I wanted a small school, like, I didn't want to go to a big school,” going on to say, “A small liberal arts college [is] better in a lot of ways than one of those big giant schools.”

Before transferring to a small to moderately sized faith-based institution, Jacob attended a large, public research university. He was delighted to find that his new school offered both smaller and larger classes, making it the best of both worlds. He stated, “My general education classes were big enough and diverse enough to meet people outside of my college while still having small enough major-centric classes that I felt supported and seen by professors and classmates.” He went on to speak of the highly personal experience his institution provided, saying “the personability of the people and the teachers and just kind of that atmosphere was way more fitting for me than the giant state school was.” Regarding class sizes, Jacob was pleasantly surprised to have so few people in some of his courses, leading to increased interactions with his peers. “My smallest class was literally four of us...and I mean, if people in that class aren't talking to you, then that's just weird,” he said. Having smaller, more intimate classes was a change of pace for Jacob and was instrumental in his persistence. He discussed how transferring to his receiving faith-based institution made all the difference, and he reflected upon what his life might look like today had he not transferred, deciding that transferring ultimately kept him in school. He explained that one of the “positive effects of transferring is I stayed in college. I genuinely think if there [were] no other options [and] it was either [the state school] or bust. It probably would have been bust. I probably would have dropped out.” He attributed much of the difference in experience to the size and relational nature of his institution, saying, “I think a lot of that had to do just with the school size though, and the nature of, like, the class terms there,” and that overall he “just really liked [the school]. I liked the tiny classes.”

Both Lauren and Jacob discussed the benefit of having a lower student-to-faculty ratio at their receiving institutions. Jacob discussed how it was nice to be able to approach his professors for help, that “the professors were really easy to get a hold of,” and he appreciated that “the professors are almost always in their [offices] for office hours. It's not being diverted to a TA who kind of barely understands the work better than you do.” Michael also discussed the increased attention given to students at smaller schools; he said, “I came to this institution because of the small environment, which meant I could do more than at a larger university.” This also held true for Natalie, who, despite going to a larger institution, was enrolled in a smaller academic program. The smaller class sizes in her program allowed her to make better friendships. She said, “Once I got more involved in my program, the interpreting program, because it was a smaller program, that's when I felt like I really did make, like, those friends, like, for life, you know?” She went on to discuss the impact of her smaller program in that “the further I got in the program, I feel like the closer the relationships were, ‘cause ... it is a smaller program.” Overall, attending a smaller school allowed the participants to become acclimated more easily. Reflecting on transferring, Jacob expressed that the size of the school was likely the reason his transition was so smooth; “transferring into a smaller place ... was probably an easier transfer experience than if I had done this the other way.”

Location

In addition to the smaller campus environment, many of the participants chose their respective receiving institutions based on the geographic location and corresponding attractions. Natalie found her receiving institution's proximity to home appealing, stating, “It was only 3.5 hours from my home, the campus was beautiful, and it pulled me in (in a good way).” Jacob also expressed that moving back to his hometown to attend the local faith-based institution there was

hugely beneficial for him and one of the reasons he decided to transfer. He said, “It is local to my hometown...which was beneficial while going through an emotionally difficult time to be around family and old friends.”

For others, the surrounding area was influential in their transfer decisions. Scott discussed the local community, small town, opportunities, and financial aid that drew him to his receiving institution. He said, “[My religiously affiliated institution] was attractive to me due to its location, history, and a very generous scholarship that was offered to me” and that “the small town...was also a very attractive quality, and I wanted to explore as much as I could.” Given all that the school and its surrounding area had to offer, Scott felt that all together “It was [an] opportunity that I thought would be kind of foolish to pass up.” For Michael, location played a large role in both of his transfer decisions. Michael first transferred to a faith-based institution on the West Coast of the United States that was located just outside of a major, bustling city. The numerous opportunities the city presented were attractive in his decision, as were the academic programs offered at his first receiving institution. When Michael decided to transfer for a second time, location again played a significant role. He chose to transfer to a second faith-based institution in the eastern United States that was also proximally located to a large metropolitan area with many opportunities. He stated that it was “an up-and-coming city, so that was nice to be there.”

Lauren, Ashley, and Rachel also discussed how the location of their receiving institutions influenced their decisions to transfer. Lauren stated that she “loved the location” of her receiving institution. Ashley expressed that the outdoor opportunities present in the larger community surrounding her receiving institution were extremely enticing. “I loved that it was surrounded by mountains and all the hiking and outdoors possibilities it presented,” she said, “I liked the

mountains and going on hikes and things like that... I like where the campus is located; I liked the view of the mountains.” Rachel shared Ashley’s fondness for the outdoors and claimed that the natural attractions and campus environment are what drew her to her receiving institution. She expressed, “As an outdoor enthusiast, I love the mountains and was already considering numerous colleges in that area. I knew once I toured the campus and saw how quaint and beautiful it was that I had to apply.”

Making Friends

Almost all of the participants in this study had good experiences making friends upon entering their respective receiving institutions. Many found it easy to talk to others, given their small class sizes and welcoming environments. In his interview, John stated, “I instantly made friends there, so that was helpful,” he continued on to say that he “didn't really find it hard to make friends there.” Jacob also found it easy to make friends, stating that he had established a group of friends as early as his first week at his new institution. He said, “I'm pretty sure within the first week I was, like, in a study group, like, working on homework, just with the friends in our class, like, it was very easy.” Many of the participants were surprised at how easy it was to make friends at their new schools. Despite initial concerns, many found that their trepidations were for naught in the end. Hannah spoke of her social transition, stating, “My worry was that I wouldn't connect with people, and as it turns out, where I am, they do actually include transfer students a lot. So, I've actually made more friends than I was actually anticipating.” Scott also spoke of how quickly he made friends at his receiving institution. He said, “I was fortunate to find a tight-knit group of friends relatively quickly and stuck with them throughout my years at [the religiously affiliated institution].”

One thing that stood out was that many of the participants found it easier to become friends with other incoming students, whether they be other transfer students or freshmen, than with continuing students. When Natalie arrived at her receiving institution, she found that “one of [her] roommates was actually a transfer student as well.” Lauren’s roommate, her first year, was also a transfer student. Discussing making friends, Natalie said, “I was making friends with people who were either also transfer students or new students ... I feel like I was friends with a lot of freshmen who were coming in for the [first time], you know, so it was, like, other first-year students.” Ashley also found it easier to mingle with other transfer students as opposed to trying to find acceptance with continuing students who already had established friend groups. She said, “I ended up making friends with other transfers because that was a lot easier, I thought, than trying to, you know, go to a group that already existed.” Ashley also discussed how the transfer students she met at her receiving institution became life-long friends. She expressed, “I made a solid friend group of other transfer students, and we’ve all stayed friends even after we graduated.” Rachel also found comfort in other transfer students. She described the necessity of transfer students being introduced to other transfer students. She shared, “I just think for transfer students, it’s good to just have them meet with other fellow transfer students so they have that in common before they just get thrown into campus life.” Hannah also stated. “I’m pretty sure all of my friends now are transfers.”

While it is encouraging that transfer students report finding community and support amongst themselves, this finding calls into question just how well they really are blending in on their receiving college campuses. It appears that transfer students may only involve themselves with other transfer students to lessen their initial anxiety rather than becoming involved with the

student body as a whole. This willful segregation on behalf of the transfer students may contribute to increased feelings of isolation rather than acclimation.

Participation in Clubs, Activities, and Organizations

Participation in school-sponsored clubs, activities, organizations, and events was stressed by participants as they cited these opportunities as being instrumental in their successful integration. Rachel participated in several offerings at her receiving institution including, InterVarsity, Spanish clubs, and science clubs, as those were particular areas she was interested in. She spoke of InterVarsity's impact on her transition as a transfer student, saying, "The faith-based program InterVarsity was extremely beneficial to my transition into campus life. We met weekly on Wednesday nights, and I connected with students from various backgrounds." Further, Rachel attended many school-sponsored events that allowed her to gain an understanding of the greater campus culture. She said, "The school had many school-sponsored activities over the weekends that I liked to participate in, such as concerts, dances, etc. I enjoyed attending those because I got to know my school and experience the campus culture." Madison was also active in several programs at her receiving institution, including the Student Government Association (SGA) and her institution's chapter of Young Women for America. Madison emphasized the importance of joining clubs and organizations as a transfer student as both "would enable someone to make friends more quickly and become a part of the campus culture more naturally."

Upon entering his receiving institution, Michael got involved with his institution's Sports Broadcasting program and DECA club. He discussed how the opportunities presented through this program benefitted him personally as well as professionally. Through this program, Michael achieved great success. He described some of his triumphs as follows:

We won some awards this year. We did broadcasting, did a bunch of games, probably at least over 40 games this year, so that was good. And I've kind of taken over as the leader. I'm doing the sports editing role and also supervising the play-by-play, so, like, director of communications.

These opportunities also allowed him to meet new people and to travel as well. Scott also took advantage of the programs his college offered. "I was a part of the Gamma Sigma Sigma service sorority. It's a co-ed one. I was there for, like, two and a half of the three years I was there." He even served in several leadership roles during his time in Gamma Sigma Sigma, including Treasure as well as Secretary.

Lauren described a slightly different scenario, one in which she struggled to find her niche until she decided to explore a few of her receiving institution's offerings. Lauren eventually joined a Christian sorority, Sigma Alpha Omega (SAO), and participated in her institution's equestrian team. She described her acclimation period, sharing how she struggled before hitting her stride. She offered that "being a transfer student, like, you have to join extracurriculars, otherwise you'll just fall through the cracks." She went on to explain the importance of joining clubs as a transfer student, stating, "I feel like transfers...need a club or sport to thrive; otherwise, we just float around socially, a bit unmoored."

Participating in school-sponsored clubs, activities, organizations, and events allows transfer students the opportunity to meet other students at their respective institutions who share the same interests. John, for instance, found that participating in his institution's choir helped him to become more acclimated on campus and gave him the opportunity to meet many new people. He said, "Singing in the concert choir was probably the most beneficial to me as it was an avenue to make friends outside of my dormmates." Participating in school-sponsored

offerings allowed participants to meet continuing students, find others with similar interests, and gave them an avenue by which they could successfully integrate with the campus culture at large. It should also be noted that almost all participants in this study when asked what advice they would give to future transfer students, stressed that participation in school-sponsored offerings should neither be overlooked nor underestimated, as this critical component can make all the difference in one's transfer student transition.

Academics

Academics significantly impacted the overall transfer student experience for the participants in this study. While some students found the academic climate at their receiving institutions to be a welcome change from their previous institutions, others felt the rigor of their receiving institution, or lack thereof, was rather disappointing. For some, especially those coming from community colleges, being able to choose a major and take classes in line with one's personal interests was a plus. Scott discussed how he enjoyed his classes a lot more at his receiving institution, stating, "They felt more tailored to my interests." For others, the transitional period after transferring allowed them to explore the academic options at their receiving institution, often resulting in participants changing their majors at least one time. Academic fit was critically important and was a strong determining factor of academic success and resilience. While some of the participants thrived in their new academic environments, others did not. Their academic experiences, both good and bad, have had lasting impacts on their lives.

Differences in Academic Rigor

Many of the participants mentioned how the academic rigor of their receiving institutions was quite different from what they experienced at their sending institutions. For some, this meant

that the rigor increased drastically. Hannah discussed the increased workload at her receiving faith-based institution; she said, “The workload was much more than the secular school, but it wasn’t anything I couldn’t handle.” She went on to talk about how she had to adapt to this change, stating, “The workload was completely different, so that required me to be more on top of my schoolwork and to submit things earlier in advance.” Madison also felt that there was an increase in workload at her receiving institution as she had a shorter time to complete her degree requirements. She said, “I did feel like it was a lot of government stuff, like, all slammed into the end of my two years,” and due to this, “I felt a little bit more of the weight of my academics.” Natalie also felt that her receiving institution was more difficult, especially in the general education courses where class sizes were significantly larger. She stated, “When I first got there, I was like, wow, this is kind of challenging, especially when there's a class of, like, 300, and you're all taking biology, and really no one's, like, a major.”

Scott felt the academic pressure of his religiously affiliated receiving institution as well. He said, “It was initially difficult, and some of my earlier classes were a hard transition,” and that “some classes were considerably more difficult.” He recalled that his receiving institution was more challenging than he expected, a sentiment that was echoed by Ashley. Ashley discussed how difficult it was for her to acclimate academically due to the increased rigor at her receiving institution. Ashley expressed that her receiving religiously affiliated institution “was pretty tough to get into and get A’s in and very extreme and intense.” She also shared that “it was one of the hardest schools to get an A in ... I think it's in the top 10 for that.” This level of difficulty was overwhelming for Ashley, whereas the increased rigor at Lauren’s institution was a highlight. “[My institution] was just, like, the best academic situation I could have found for me,” Lauren said, as she very much enjoyed the challenge her receiving institution presented.

For others, however, a significant drop in academic rigor was reported. For Michael, only one of his receiving institutions was rigorous. He said that “[the first faith-based school] was a little bit on the challenging side versus [my current faith-based school is] pretty easy, so I don't have to spend as much time doing studying and stuff, which is kind of nice.” Jacob echoed Michael in that his faith-based institution was also notably easier. He stated, “Frankly, I felt a sigh of relief after transferring into [my faith-based institution]. The academic rigor was much less than [my secular state school].” He went on to say, “It is a much easier school. The classwork in terms of, like, the hard sciences is not as rigorous.” This lack of rigor actually caused Jacob to exert a lesser amount of effort on his schoolwork. He said, “I realized I could slack a little bit, and then my work ethic dropped.”

Michael shared an interesting viewpoint regarding the faculty and lack of rigor at his receiving faith-based institution. He said, “My experience with that is some of the faculty seem a little bit underqualified.” He went on to explain why he felt this way. He shared that one of the faculty requirements at his receiving institution is that they must share the same religious affiliation as the institution. He did not fully agree with that requirement, sharing that his “issue with that is that that can lead to teachers who are underqualified being hired just because of their, you know, religious affiliation.” He went on to say:

I mean, obviously, it's a private school; they have the right to make their own rules. That's what you sign on to when you go there, but that's always been something. I don't think it really matters. I mean, now, if you're teaching a Religion class or a Theology class, you know, to have somebody [that shares the specific religious affiliation], that makes sense. But just someone to teach sports media, I mean, you know?

He felt that only hiring professors who share a specific religious affiliation serves to limit the pool of possible applicants and that those who do meet the requirements may not be the best fit for the position or the most qualified, thus detracting from the overall educational experience of the institution, which is the principal purpose of colleges and universities.

Academic Performance

The self-reported academic performance of participants ranged from very good to very bad. Most participants noticed that their academic performance drastically improved as a result of transferring or that there was no change whatsoever. Hannah had a particularly positive experience, stating, “It's really interesting because at the state schools when I graduated, I believe I had like a 3.7 if I remember correctly,” but after the first semester at her receiving institution, her “GPA was up to a 4.0.” She also stated, “I got A's and B's at the state schools. I got A's at [my faith-based institution].” Lauren also found that she performed much better academically at her receiving institution. “I do feel like my academic performance flourished just because the professors were better... they really took their time...also we had resources like tutoring and stuff,” she said. Scott also saw an improvement academically. He expressed, “The academic performance after transferring overall was really much more positive just because I was able to choose classes that I actually cared about that I wanted to do well in and understand better.” Rachel and Michael, on the other hand, did not find that their performance changed at all as a result of transferring. Rachel said, “I didn't really notice any change in my academic performance when I transferred.” Michael echoed, “I've been able to keep, like, pretty much an A average throughout all of college, even with all the craziness.”

One participant, however, shared that, upon transferring, the resulting transfer shock was crippling, and the negative psychological effects still impact her to this day, several years after

graduating from her receiving institution. “I struggled to adapt to the academic expectations,” she said, “I ended up on academic probation during my second year there but was able to bring my GPA up enough to not have to leave the school.” She discussed how she had performed well at her previous institutions, even earning honors; however, at her receiving institution, she said, “the grades were really tough for me.” Often, she found herself “getting lots of D’s or C’s.” She opened up about her academic struggles and how it impacted other areas of college life.

I struggled a lot ... and it was just, like, a huge, like, reverse of what I was used to, and that made a huge impact on other things too, social life, you know, mental health, you know, everything. So, it affected me a lot.

Ashley discussed how the academic pressure affected her confidence and self-esteem. She said the academics “affected my self-esteem so much, which did affect the social sphere for me as well.” There were several opportunities offered at her institution that she wanted to participate in, such as Greek life and Study Abroad programs; however, she was not allowed to participate due to her poor academic performance. She went on to describe how she felt like a failure, “I think academically that affected my confidence a lot too because I felt like a failure that I couldn’t, like, I trouble passing some classes, or if I did pass, it was, like, [just] passing so it just lowers your GPA.” Regarding her academic performance and its lasting effects, Ashley shared that:

My biggest concern, even now, are the grades I left the school with. My GPA dropped drastically after I transferred there, and I wish I had sought more academic help while I was there. I’m concerned about the GPA though, because of how it could impact me going to grad school.

Ashley shared that she likely needed more academic help but was uncomfortable seeking it at the time. Having an auditory processing disorder made lecture-based courses extremely

difficult. Ashley also offered that having access to a mental health professional during her transitional period may have been beneficial, but she was unaware of the resources available at her institution. Speaking of the lasting psychological effects of transferring, she expressed, “I haven't fully bounced back from [transferring] in terms of, like, self-esteem and shame and failure and all those heavy emotions.” Ashley’s poor academic performance still plagues her thinking, causing her to doubt herself years later in the workforce. She described how getting low grades at her receiving institution still shapes her mindset:

I still struggle with feeling like I'm good enough, and that kind of comes back to the grades I was getting then because I was comparing it to other people at the time, like, oh, but she's on the presidential role, or she's getting As and Bs. Why can't I do that? Why aren't I smart enough? You know, all the negative kind of self-talk. So, I feel like that's still affecting me a bit, or maybe now at work, I'm like, oh, well, they wouldn't want to promote me because I'm not good enough or, you know, things like that.

She explained how she recently started working with a therapist to help her reframe some of her past negative experiences in an effort to move past the transfer shock, regain her confidence, and improve her self-efficacy.

Changing Majors

Many participants in this study reported changing their majors at least once after transferring to their receiving institutions. Some participants added majors, while others changed their academic paths entirely. Jacob said, “I realized that I didn’t like the major that I was in, which was chemistry, but [was] already that deep into the major it wasn't worth it to me to just drop it entirely.” This realization led him to add another major, he claimed; “I ended up adding a

year of college, doing five total including [the state school], and finishing up double majoring [in] Chemistry and Physics.” Adding another major helped him to refocus his vision and rediscover his motivation after a period of feeling burnt out. Michael also changed his major after entering his receiving institution. He expressed, “I even changed my major twice there, so it was kind of a weird time.” Not only did he switch majors, but he also added two minors as he solidified his intended career path.

John also changed his major after transferring as his future ambitions became clearer to him. “I ... started as an English major and then switched, I think, after my first semester into the Religion program.” Lauren also found herself choosing a different academic direction after transferring in order to widen the range of possible career paths. She said, “I think I started out as a creative writing major, and then I switched to communications because I was like, ‘well, I’m not gonna do anything with creative writing.’” Rachel found herself in a slightly different position due to her visual impairment. Originally pursuing a degree in the hard sciences, Rachel was advised to change her major because some of the labs were not as accessible to her as they might be to another student. Initially feeling doubtful and disappointed, she changed her major and never looked back. She said, “Once I settled into my new degree path, I didn’t have any doubts about my decision to transfer.” For Rachel and many of the other participants in this study, transferring led not only to a fresh start in a new environment but to a completely different path academically as well as professionally.

Faculty Relationships

Faculty relationships varied from positive to negative among the participants in this study. Many of the participants who attended faith-based institutions spoke about how their professors would pray in class, a phenomenon that was altogether well received by these transfer

students. “I loved, you know, like, the professors and the classes and, like, you know, praying before class, like, that kind of thing was really cool, like, prayer requests,” said Natalie. Madison also mentioned how faculty praying in class was encouraging. She said, “They're taking prayer requests before class and things. So, it was kind of nice to, like, you know, kind of let your guard down a little more.” John noted that the faith-centered atmosphere at his receiving institution was very positive. He said that “even in the classroom, just the being able to pray, our professors praying for us and always encouraging that aspect first” really helped him.

Apart from the spiritual aspect, many of the students from faith-based institutions were able to foster more meaningful and lasting relationships with their professors. Madison claimed, “I had a really good relationship with two of my professors... I still hear from [one of them] from time to time.” She went on to describe a time one of her professors went above and beyond. She said that her professor “always had an open-door policy. He was very helpful and would answer any questions that I had” and that her professor “and his wife were kind enough to invite our whole class over to their house every semester for a dessert and espresso night” which she really enjoyed. Natalie mentioned that the relatively small size of her academic program allowed her to develop closer relationships with faculty members at her institution. She said, “It is a smaller program. So, you have the same professors semester after semester, so definitely good relationships that even continued after graduation.” She also mentioned that she looked up to a lot of her professors, which also contributed to the positive experience.

The participants from religiously affiliated institutions spoke of how their faculty members positively impacted their transfer experience. One participant, Lauren, spoke of the close friendships she was able to make with faculty members at her receiving institution. Lauren expressed, “I still have friendships with faculty from [my school] ... I think that's because it's

such a small school; you just talk to them every day, you become really good friends with them. They're just awesome people...yeah, I love them.” Rachel, on the other hand, was surprised when one of her professors showed extra consideration. She shared:

One of my professors ... really wanted me to go to Mexico [for an intensive study abroad term], but I didn't have the funds, and she really fought for me to get this scholarship in order to go to Mexico with them. So, I just thought that was pretty awesome that she was willing to, kind of, fight for me.

While many of the participants’ experiences with faculty at their receiving institutions were generally positive, some had quite negative experiences with faculty members at their receiving institutions. Ashley stated, “I didn’t really have any very positive experiences with the staff members” and that she “didn't really like a lot of teachers.” Michael echoed Ashley, claiming that “at [the first faith-based institution], it wasn't really the best experience with the faculty,” stating that “they just didn't really care for one reason or another.” As previously discussed, Michael also felt that some of the faculty members at his receiving institution were underqualified, which was a disappointment. Regarding faculty at his receiving institutions, Michael said, “There’s a couple of faculty members I kinda talked to a little bit, but I never really felt like those relationships were really made.” He discussed one instance in particular that stood out to him as being particularly negative. Upon entering his first faith-based institution, he met with the director of the program he was interested in participating in. He shared the following story:

I started telling [him] about how I'm passionate for sports broadcasting ...but he pairs me with this woman ... who's kind of like the video production person, and she kind of starts the process, but it ended up being kind of disastrous because she

didn't really care ... And they said they were gonna give me some chances to do games. Never really did; made me just record on my phone, and I guess the combination of everything just led to frustration eventually... So, I was really frustrated by that, and I felt kind of betrayed by the teacher. I kind of talked to him about that, and he never apologized, but you could tell that he acknowledged that he kind of did me wrong, and it was disappointing.

This experience, along with several others, contributed to Michael's decision to transfer to another faith-based institution.

The Dubious Role of Academic Advisors

On the whole, the role that academic advisors played in helping participants become acclimated with their new environment was, to say the least, potentially problematic. Only one participant had overwhelmingly positive things to say about his advisor, which was not the norm. Jacob claimed:

I knew... my advisor, like, right away, met him... He was one of the first faculty that I met, and he was my advisor for the four years that I was at [the school]. I had four or three classes with him and then worked in his lab and, like, as a researcher a couple times, and yeah, a lot of involvement with my advisor. My advisor knew exactly who were his students, too.

Many participants noted that their advisors were not very helpful or that their advisors devised schedules that would lengthen their enrollment time at their respective institutions. Lauren did not know who her academic advisor was. She said, "I don't really remember my advisor... I don't really ever remember going to my advisor." Rachel described how she struggled with her advisor. She said, "I did have issues with one advisor. He was just kind of not very

friendly.” Madison also shared her view of the academic advisors at her receiving institution. She stated:

Just to be frank, I feel like ... for me, my goal is to get all of my classes done in the shortest amount of time and get out of there and save money. I don't think that is the goal of academic advisors. I think they're kind people, but I just sometimes felt like I was playing Tetris, trying to fit the perfect course in the perfect semester so that I could still graduate on time, but I felt like they were available if I needed them.

Ashley shared a similar viewpoint, as she did not feel that she was properly advised at her institution, and it contributed greatly to her academic struggles. She expressed, “I do wish they had been more honest with me and my academics, though. I think I was taking five classes my first semester, and I think going forward, four was, like, the amount they suggested people take.” This made her workload extremely more demanding as she tried to get her footing at her receiving institution. Regarding her relationship with her academic advisor, Ashley stated:

I didn't love it, to be honest ... I didn't really like my academic advisor. I thought he sucked, to be honest ... I went to see him because we had to, but I just created my own schedules. I didn't listen to what he was saying because he had me staying there an extra year, that I didn't think was necessary when he did the schedule for me. [I decided] ‘No, I'm just gonna do it myself.’ [I] Graduated a year before he said [I would]. I didn't really like the academic advisor.

Overall, it appeared that many of the participants' advisors were unhelpful and even sometimes elusive. This led to confusion, frustration, and disappointment for some.

Perceptions of Campus Culture

The final theme that was deduced from the data deals with how participants viewed the overall campus culture at their respective receiving institutions. Identifying with the culture of one's campus contributed to increased or decreased feelings of institutional fit as well as institutional commitment. Some participants found it easy to feel at home on their respective college campuses, while others felt like outsiders. Rachel was surprised at how friendly and welcoming the people on her campus were. She said, "I had a student come up to me, and he was just so friendly, and he said I'll help you find your classes. I know where they are." She described feeling that "it seemed like every day was a new positive experience" on her receiving campus. One participant, Michael, felt that the overall campus culture at his receiving institution was "draconian," discussing some of the more restrictive rules in place. Overall, the findings show that the participants' perceptions of the campus culture at their respective faith-based and religiously affiliated institutions were either very positive or very negative. Some felt that their campuses were friendly, welcoming, accepting, and accommodating, while others felt that their institutions could be exclusive, ingenuine, and judgmental.

Friendly and Accommodating

Most of the participants in this study expressed how friendly, welcoming, and accommodating their receiving institutions were. In many cases, this perception of the campus culture allowed the participants to feel more comfortable and at home on their respective campuses, leading to positive growth. Speaking of her receiving institution, Hannah offered that "the environment here is very welcoming." Rachel also expressed how she felt a strong sense of belonging on her receiving college campus. She said, "From the beginning, I felt like I belonged. I was never treated differently or felt unwelcome." Jacob also expressed how welcoming his

receiving campus was. He claimed, “[I] don't have any memories of people being, like, mean or having pushed back against me or being anything other than just welcoming.” He went on to explain that he “never really came across kids just, like, not interested in talking or, you know, meeting somebody.” Much of this he attributed to the smaller environment, but also to the type of student that would seek out such an institution; he said, “I think it attracts a certain kind of student who maybe doesn't want to go to [a big state school], like, I think it kind of, it does serve its own purpose in fostering a certain feeling of community there.”

Scott also felt that the overall culture on his receiving campus was positive. He said, “The college was really, really welcoming and accommodating. I didn't really feel out of place there.” When asked if he ever felt treated differently due to his status as a transfer student, Scott said, “no.” He went on to say, “There was never really a time where I kind of felt like a stranger, or I felt like I had to push through some major obstacle to, like, feel welcome there.” Despite Ashley’s struggles at her receiving institution, she also claimed that her institution “did a good job at welcoming new students.” Natalie shared a rather non-committal response regarding whether her receiving institution was welcoming or not. She stated, “I think as far as, like, the people and, like, the welcoming, I think there's nice people and not so nice people everywhere.” While some of the participants had wonderful experiences, others felt that their receiving institutions were a little less welcoming.

Exclusive, Ingenuine, and Judgmental

This final finding was only present among those who transferred to faith-based institutions. Across the board, the participants who transferred to religiously affiliated institutions reported that their institutions were welcoming and accepting of difference; however, among some of those who transferred to faith-based institutions, an element of exclusivity and

judgment was present that exhibited how the religious aspect in particular, regardless of whether one shared the same beliefs as the institution, could also serve to detract from the overall transfer student experience at these institutions.

Natalie discussed how some people at her institution appeared to be very fake. “As far as, like, the other stuff on campus, sometimes I feel like people were not super genuine, and it was kind of more religious than, I guess, more genuine, like, spiritual, relational type of stuff,” she said. This led her to become more involved in spiritual offerings in the larger community rather than on campus. She said, “I got more involved ... outside of campus, like, the church community rather than the specific, like, campus [offerings].” She also found that students who were serving in leadership roles on her hall were rather exclusive, which served to limit her friendships, leaving her feeling left out. She said:

I felt like the one challenging aspect to the social thing is, because I feel like the first two years that I lived on campus, because you're not a prayer leader and you're not an RA, you're not an RS, like, it was...you did kind of feel a little, you know, left out, but they definitely had their own group. And you know you can't penetrate it. I kind of even noticed that the second year as well, and, I know there's like that leadership, but at the same time, I'm like, ‘hey, we're all kind of doing the same thing here. We all have similar goals,’ and so sometimes, I think that would limit my friendships.

When asked what advice she would give to future transfer students at her institution, she offered, “Be confident and don’t be afraid of rejection by your peers. Everyone is not going to like you, and that is 100% okay. Your experiences are valid and valuable ... Just be you, and you will attract your tribe, but remember why you are truly there. Learn and grow as much as you can.”

Michael also shared that the judgmental attitudes and exclusionary mentality of his peers was an intensely negative factor that impacted him as a transfer student at not one, but two separate faith-based institutions, each located on opposite ends of the country. When discussing the culture at his receiving institutions, Michael stated, “They try to exclude people.” He mentioned that meeting people and making friends was difficult, even for someone as extroverted as himself, because “a lot of people are very cliqued off there.” He went on to discuss how, in his experience, attending a faith-based institution made building relationships more difficult. He said:

The biggest thing with transfers, especially when they're moving to a Christian school, is just kind of how people view people. You know, there's a lot more judgment when you move to a Christian school. I feel like that kind of makes things difficult when it comes to meeting friends.

He also discussed how many of the people on his campus “are a little bit more uptight, more judgmental, you know, not as adapted to the times” and that “some people are more judgmental than others.” He also found it very disappointing how people at his receiving institution would assume things about him solely based on his race and appearance, not knowing anything about him. “They'll even look at you and assume that you're not Christian,” he said. He went on to explain how he even felt some elements of racism at his institution.

Even just kind of, like, the racism aspect, you know, in the South being at [my current school], you know, you kind of run into that sometimes. But I don't like to talk about that topic too much. But you know, that's something that I've kind of noticed a little bit.

Michael was left feeling discouraged and disappointed. The negative experiences he endured left him questioning his faith. Although he shared the same beliefs as his institutions, even the same denominational beliefs, it did not make his transition any easier. He shared:

I feel like it's kind of pushed me back from Christianity. I'm obviously still gonna be a Christian, but I feel like seeing how judgmental some of these people are and how they kind of look at people and go about things. It's kind of like, man, you know, like, you just kind of push back for a second, and you're like, you don't even know this person, you know, but you're kind of judging them, and it's not even about, just, like, social topics, this is just off base, you know, just on appearance, you know. So, it's just one of those things where it's a little disappointing.

The overall campus culture at his receiving institutions led Michael to doubt his decision to transfer. He mentioned a time when he felt a real low in reference to transferring, sharing that he even considered dropping out because he did not want to attend his receiving institution anymore. He revealed:

There were some nights where I was just sitting in bed. I would call my mom, and I'm like, 'I hate it. I don't wanna go to school anymore. I wanna drop out and get a 9 to 5 whatever I have to do. I can't do it anymore.'

Despite his myriad difficulties, Michael was determined to make it work. Finding a few friends and getting involved with student groups and activities made a world of difference for Michael. While he feels that, overall, things are improving, he still does not feel that his institution did a good job of prioritizing transfer students or making them feel welcome.

Outlier Data and Findings

This section provides a discussion of the outlier findings revealed by the data. These are standalone themes that, while present and important, did not directly answer any of the study's guiding research questions.

Needing Special Accommodations

Two of the participants in this study discussed needing special accommodations. Rachel had a visual impairment, and Ashley had an auditory processing disorder. While Rachel sought the help she needed at her institution to be successful academically, Ashley did not. Rachel discussed how her institution provided a disability counselor to help disabled students receive the accommodations they needed. Discussing her special accommodations, Rachel said, "Because I have a visual impairment and transferring into a private college, it was a bit difficult for me to kind of, like, get what I needed as far as coursework and accommodations went." She also described how some of her courses were inaccessible due to the nature of her impairment, which ultimately resulted in a decision to change majors. "I took science courses, so the labs were just inaccessible to me, even with accommodations. There was just so much that they could have done."

Ashley, on the other hand, did not take advantage of any special accommodations, but looking back, she wishes she had. "Looking back on things now, I definitely needed more help," she said. Describing her struggles, she explained, "I have an auditory processing disorder, so I struggle with sounds more, and I think lots of the teachers at that school would do lectures, but lots of it was just them talking." She described how taking advantage of the special accommodations provided would have helped her out greatly. She said, "I'm trying to take notes, but maybe I'm misunderstanding what's being said or something, so maybe having someone in

the classroom taking notes that I can look back at later. Maybe that would have been helpful.”

Ashley did not seek the help she needed because she was unaware of how her school could help her.

Distance Learning

One participant, Hannah, was an online student for most of her higher educational journey, having just begun in-person classes mid-way through the data collection phase of this study. “I have only been online thus far, but my experiences with professors and classmates have all been positive,” she said. She also discussed how being an online student limited her participation in clubs and activities simply because she was online. She said, “The only social involvement was really just through class discussions and things like that. I didn’t really participate in any organizations. I tried to ... but that didn’t really take off.” Although distance learning had its limitations, Hannah felt that it was a positive educational experience overall.

Research Question Responses

The following section supplies answers to the research questions that guided this study. The central research question is addressed first, followed by each of the three sub-questions. These answers are not meant to be exhaustive but to introduce the material that will be further discussed in the next chapter of this manuscript. Each of the following answers has been crafted in keeping with the thematic deductions gleaned from the data collected from the participants.

Central Research Question

What are the lived experiences of undergraduate transfer students at faith-based and religiously affiliated institutions in the United States?

The participants in this study shared, overwhelmingly, that their experiences at each of their respective receiving faith-based and religiously affiliated institutions were positive overall.

While each participant discussed having personal struggles at various stages of the transitional period, all were able to find the silver lining and make their receiving institutions work for them. For many, transferring to a faith-based or religiously affiliated institution offered participants a time for personal, professional, and spiritual exploration and growth. Many shared that the welcoming and accepting culture at their receiving institutions made the transition easier, both socially as well as academically. Even the students who felt less accommodated by their institutions were able to find their niches, allowing them to thrive. With some highs and lows, Michael referred to the transfer student experience as “a wild, wild rollercoaster.” When each participant was asked if they still would have transferred to their receiving institutions, knowing everything they know now, every single one of them answered that they would. Overall, the undergraduate transfer student experience at faith-based and religiously affiliated institutions in the United States can be summed up simply in Michael’s words: “a promising journey.”

Sub-Question One

How does the religious aspect of attending a faith-based or religiously affiliated institution affect the transfer student experience?

Overall, the participants felt that the religious aspect of their respective receiving institutions had a positive influence on their experiences, regardless of whether they shared the same religious grounding as their institutions. Many of the participants in this study were not religious and did not share the same religious affiliations as their receiving institutions. While some participants felt that the overall culture at their receiving institutions could be a little exclusive and judgmental at times, they were able to find groups where they felt welcome and included; it simply took them longer to adjust. Transferring to an institution with a religious grounding allowed participants to explore their own religious beliefs in order to better determine

for themselves what their own personal worldviews were. Many expressed that, had they not attended such an institution, they would have missed out on those exploratory opportunities. Lauren stated, “I think that a lot of the situations I was put in [at my religiously affiliated school] really helped me explore my faith, and I wouldn't necessarily have done that at a school that was not faith-based.” Hannah also discussed how attending an institution with a religious grounding helped her to develop her own beliefs and grow individually. She said, “It's really helped me to kind of cement my personal beliefs and to fully have a grasp and to really go from kind of my parents' beliefs, so to speak, to having my own and being really sure of what I believe.” The religious aspect of faith-based and religiously affiliated institutions enhances the transfer student experience, so long as the religious aspect is not used as a means of exclusion.

Sub-Question Two

How does attending a faith-based or religiously affiliated institution affect the self-efficacy of transfer students?

Each of the participants reported higher levels of motivation, confidence, and self-esteem as a result of transferring, with only one exception. Overall, participants felt compelled to make their decision to transfer worth it by working harder and being more intentional in their interactions. Many of the participants noted that there was a feeling of comradery on their campuses due to an understanding of like-mindedness that made them feel more comfortable and at ease at their receiving institutions. Additionally, many of the participants reported receiving better grades as a result of transferring, a phenomenon that only served to improve their self-efficacy. Hannah mentioned, “I got A's and B's at the state schools. I got A's at [my faith-based institution].” Many participants also felt that getting out of their comfort zone helped them to gain confidence in their new surroundings. Rachel said, “I was kind of forced to get out and meet

new people, and it was really amazing.” This study revealed that attending a faith-based or religiously affiliated institution positively affected the self-efficacy of transfer students in most cases.

Sub-Question Three

How does attending a faith-based or religiously affiliated institution affect the perceived levels of integration (Tinto, 1975; 1993) of transfer students?

The participants in this study shared how transferring led them to be more outgoing and to “forge [their] own way,” so to speak, as Scott termed it. All of the participants who attended traditional, in-person classes stressed the need for transfer students to be involved in a school-sponsored club, activity, or sports team to prevent them from “fall[ing] through the cracks,” as Lauren said. Almost all participants were involved in some sort of offering, whether it be academic or social. This helped them to become acclimated in a more organic way. Most participants reported finding friends quickly, and for many, these relationships persisted long after graduation. On the academic side, participants took advantage of faculty office hours, study groups, internships, and mentorship opportunities. Socially, they participated in Greek life, sports teams, clubs, religious groups, and exercise classes offered at their institutions. Regarding the academic sphere, Lauren said, “[my religiously affiliated institution] was just like the best academic situation I could have found for me” and that, years after graduating, she still maintains close friendships with some of the faculty members. Socially, Jacob described feeling more fulfilled at his receiving institution. He said, “I became more like what I would want out of my social life here ... I found myself just, like, feeling more centered in my social interactions and feeling, like, more fulfilled.” This suggests that attending a faith-based or religiously affiliated

institution serves to increase transfer student involvement, both academically as well as socially, within the context of these two institutional types.

Summary

This chapter delivered an exhaustive explanation of the study's thematic findings in narrative form, giving a voice to each of the ten participants. Chapter four began by presenting a portrait of the study's participants. Next, the ten participants were introduced, accompanied by a brief description of their respective backgrounds. A thorough presentation of the various themes and sub-themes that were uncovered following a rigorous analysis of the data collected through individual interviews, journal prompts, and a single focus group session was provided. The two outlier findings revealed by this study were also addressed in this chapter. Finally, I offered answers to the research questions guiding this study. The findings revealed that attending a faith-based or religiously affiliated institution can positively impact transfer students in a variety of ways. This study showed that faith-based and religiously affiliated institutions provided transfer students with opportunities for spiritual, personal, and professional exploration, leading to overall individual growth. Furthermore, participants reported higher levels of confidence, motivation, and self-esteem as a result of transferring to their respective faith-based or religiously affiliated institutions. Lastly, the results displayed that attending a faith-based or religiously affiliated institution positively impacted transfer student involvement, both academically as well as socially.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to gain an understanding of the lived experiences of undergraduate transfer students at faith-based and religiously affiliated institutions in the United States. This final chapter provides a discussion of the study's findings. The theoretical, empirical, and practical implications of my research are addressed, complete with an evaluation of the study's findings in light of the guiding theories and scholarly literature. An interpretation of the study's findings is presented first, followed by the implications for practice. Next, the theoretical and empirical implications are presented. Finally, this chapter closes with a discussion of the study's limitations and delimitations, followed by recommendations for future research.

Discussion

Transfer students often struggle to adjust to their receiving institutions for a variety of reasons, leading to lower retention and graduation rates among this student population. Research shows that academic and social integration are critically important for transfer students as both help students succeed (Astin, 1999; Tinto, 1975). Spiritual integration has also been a noted factor contributing to student success when paired with both academic and social involvement (Ekwonye & DeLauer, 2019). This study examined the spiritual, psychological, and behavioral aspects of the transfer student experience in light of the three aforementioned types of student involvement: spiritual, academic, and social.

The goal of this study was to gain an understanding of the experiences of undergraduate transfer students at faith-based and religiously affiliated institutions in the United States and to explore how the experiences of transfer students at these particular institutional types compare to

the experiences of transfer students at secular institutions. It is my aim to contribute to the broader discussion of transfer students having examined a setting heretofore absent from the scholarship and to contribute necessary information to the field that may serve to inform best practices going forward that would assist institutions in meeting the unique needs of transfer students, not only within the present context but various other institutional contexts as well. In this discussion, I provide an interpretation of the findings, followed by a presentation of the practical, theoretical, and empirical implications of my study. Next, the study's limitations and delimitations are revealed. Finally, this discussion section will close by offering recommendations for future research regarding transfer students.

Interpretation of Findings

In this section, I provide four interpretations of the study's findings. Phenomenological research relies heavily on the experiences of participants and the interpretations of those experiences (Moustakas, 1994; van Manen, 1997). Data was collected from ten participants through three methods of data collection: semi-structured, individual interviews, journal prompt writing protocols, and a focus group session. All data was horizontalized through inductive coding procedures, giving rise to seven themes and two outlier findings.

Summary of Thematic Findings

Seven themes emerged during the analysis process: (a) a time of spiritual exploration, (b) birds of a feather vs. opposites attract, (c) initial uncertainty, (d) a period of personal growth, (e) community is key, (f) academics, and (g) perceptions of campus culture. These themes were developed in keeping with the scholarship surrounding transfer students and addressed the spiritual, psychological, and behavioral effects of transferring to faith-based and religiously affiliated institutions. In addition to the seven themes, two outlier findings were also present: (a)

needing special accommodations and (b) distance learning. These findings, while unrelated to the research questions, provided vitally important information regarding the transfer student experience within the present context.

Holistic Participation. Consisting of spiritual, academic, and social components, holistic participation provided a strong foundation from which participants could grow spiritually, personally, and professionally. This focus on meeting the needs of the individual as a whole was beneficial, overall, in aiding the participants in successfully navigating the adjustment period at their receiving institutions. Astin (1999) defined *student involvement* as “the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience” (p.518).

Participants were engaged in many activities on their respective campuses, taking part in various clubs, school-sponsored events, Greek life, sports teams, and faith-based small groups. In addition to the social activities that participants were involved in, many took advantage of faculty mentorship opportunities and internships. Many of the participants discussed that having accessible faculty members was a huge benefit to them. Jacob, in particular, enjoyed being able to meet with his professors when he needed extra help as opposed to being diverted to a TA, as was standard practice at his sending institution. Smaller settings, whether that be at the campus, class, or program level, were also noted as factors that aided in facilitating an easier transition.

Participants also reported investing more time and energy into their schoolwork and social interactions as they were forced to get out of their comfort zones and forge their own way at their new institutions. For some students, spiritual participation was required at their institutions, but for others, it was strictly optional. Although none of the participants who attended religiously affiliated institutions were required to partake in any of the religious offerings at their receiving institutions, three of the four chose to engage in faith-centered

activities, despite two of them identifying as Agnostic. *Spirituality* is defined as the feeling of well-being and sense of purpose one derives from engaging in a relationship with nature, higher power, or divine figure (Ekwoney & DeLauer, 2019; Weathers et al., 2016). Many of the participants reported that the religious atmosphere present on their campuses helped them to feel grounded, while others felt that having religious offerings presented a nice change of pace compared to the challenging and sometimes stressful demands of college life. For those who attended faith-based institutions, the religious aspect provided not only certain protections but also a sense of camaraderie, as there were many reports of increased comfort due to a perceived understanding of like-mindedness. Higher levels of self-reported holistic participation aligned with higher levels of institutional satisfaction among the participants, suggesting that each individual element, spiritual, academic, and social participation, was necessary in producing an overall positive effect.

A Fresh Start. For many of the participants in this study, transferring to a new school was viewed as a fresh start. For Lauren, transferring provided a “do-over” where she was able to go through the college application process again, having a better understanding of what she wanted and what she needed out of an institution. Research shows that many transfer students begin their higher educational journeys at two-year institutions (Aulck & West, 2017; Foster et al., 2020; Mobley & Brawner, 2019; Worsham et al., 2021; Yang et al., 2018) with the intention of transferring at a later point in time (Mobley & Brawner, 2019; Worsham et al., 2021). This was true for each of the eight participants who attended community colleges prior to transferring. Many chose the community college route for financial reasons, while some chose to attend a community college due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

As studies have demonstrated that up to a third of students at the undergraduate level have reportedly transferred, with approximately a quarter of students reporting having transferred more than once (Gere et al., 2017), it was not surprising that many of the participants in this study had attended more than one institution previously. Four of the participants had transferred more than once, with Hannah attending four institutions over the course of her college career, while Michael, Ashley, and John each attended three institutions in total. Many of the participants stated that a lack of institutional fit, social integration, or desired academic program at their sending institution spurred their decision to transfer in keeping with claims made by Ishitani and Flood (2018). This new beginning offered each of the participants the opportunity to explore themselves, choose academic programs that were interesting to them, build meaningful and lasting relationships with their peers and faculty members, and find surrounding communities that they could call home, at least temporarily.

Astin (1999) and Tinto (1975) both stressed the importance of institutional fit in their seminal works. For the participants in this study, it was clear that institutional fit made a world of difference. With feelings of increased institutional fit came reports of increased motivation, improved work ethic, and more confidence, which resulted in higher levels of self-efficacy. Each of the participants discussed how they felt more comfortable at their receiving institutions, which prompted them to be more outgoing and more engaged, not only socially but academically and, in many cases, spiritually as well. Some of the participants who attended faith-based institutions discussed how the teachings and general atmosphere at their institutions felt safer and more in line with their personal beliefs, allowing them to feel more relaxed, which promoted learning and growth. The majority of participants reported changing their majors after transferring to their receiving institutions, which not only allowed them to focus on areas important to them but also

set them on new life paths. All participants shared that being more mature and having more experience going into their receiving institutions afforded them a better perspective and a better appreciation of higher education altogether. In many cases, this resulted in a strong sense of personal duty to make their decision to transfer worthwhile by being more intentional in their academic and social interactions, investing more time into their college experience, and making a point of extracting every bit of what their institutions had to offer.

Inverse Initial Issues. It should be noted that the experiences of those who attended faith-based institutions differed considerably from those who attended religiously affiliated institutions in regard to how they experienced transfer shock at their receiving institutions. *Transfer shock* is generally described as an academic phenomenon in which transfer students experience a sudden and often temporary decline in academic performance as they adjust to the new requirements and expectations at their receiving institutions (Chamely-Wiik et al., 2021; Clausen & Wessel, 2015; Gere et al., 2017).

For those who attended religiously affiliated institutions, transfer shock was present. Three out of the four participants who attended religiously affiliated institutions expressed that the academic rigor of their receiving institution was much greater than that which they had experienced at their sending institutions. This increased rigor presented a challenge at first as participants adjusted to the demands of their new institutions. Of those who attended faith-based institutions, many of the participants felt that the academics were less rigorous than they had experienced previously. This resulted in the opposite of transfer shock, as participants reported that their grades improved or stayed the same as a result of transferring.

Interestingly, while the participants who attended religiously affiliated institutions felt the initial effects of transfer shock, they reported better social experiences than did those who

attended faith-based institutions. All of the participants who attended religiously affiliated institutions discussed how welcoming and accepting their receiving institutions were and how easy it was for them to get involved and make friends. While some of the participants who attended faith-based institutions had decent social experience, others did not. Two participants, in particular, discussed feeling excluded at their receiving institutions, which limited the friendships they made. Much of this exclusivity was a result of a less accepting and more judgmental attitude due to the religiosity and pervasive culture of like-mindedness at the institutions.

A Necessary Reorientation for Orientation. Many of the participants in this study discussed a dissatisfaction with how their receiving institutions handled transfer orientation. Orientation serves to introduce transfer students to their receiving institutions (Mayhew et al., 2010; Robbins, 1942). Many of the participants felt that their institutions did not do an adequate job of providing them with the necessary information to be successful at their new schools, leaving them to find various resources on their own. Some discussed how their orientation programs were so heavily focused on the incoming freshmen that they felt isolated and ignored. Others felt that their schools did a better job of accommodating transfer students, but the transfer-centric activities provided were too short or too infrequent to be of much help. Participants felt that they were given less attention because they had more experience coming in; however, they still wished they had been presented with more information regarding how things operated, what opportunities were available, and what student services were offered.

Implications for Practice

The results of this study hold many potential implications for future practice. For many of the participants, a paramount concern was that they were not afforded as much attention as were

incoming freshmen. The stigmatization of transfer students can lead to a native-centric mindset among faculty and administrators in which precedence is given to those native to the institution rather than transfer students (Shaw et al., 2019). In many cases, transfer students are not taken seriously or are overlooked by their institutions (Tobolowsky & Cox, 2012). This necessitates that something more be done to incorporate and accommodate transfer students, not only during the initial stages of their transition but throughout their time on campus.

The results suggest that having transfer-centric orientation initiatives may serve to better introduce incoming transfer students to each other and to their new campus environments. It is also advisable that institutions design transfer orientations to be as robust as freshman orientation initiatives, as this may provide transfer students with a better understanding of all that is offered on their receiving campuses. Transfer-specific admissions events may also be beneficial, in which a transfer-specific advisor meets with students prior to enrollment in order to help mitigate credit transfer anxiety and to answer any questions the student may have before committing to the institution. As many of the participants in this study did not take full advantage of the transfer orientation initiatives offered at their receiving institutions, I would also recommend that institutions make participation in transfer orientation initiatives mandatory in an effort to promote involvement among transfer students.

Advisors can play a critical role in assisting transfer students. The results of this study suggest that assigning transfer students academic advisors who are specifically trained to help students successfully navigate the transitional period may serve to benefit transfer students greatly. I would suggest this pairing be maintained for at least the student's first semester. In addition to transfer-specific advisors, this study indicates that having a transfer-specific staff member available to answer any questions transfer students may have regarding campus

offerings, student services, and miscellaneous other areas relating to college life would also be advantageous. Providing transfer students with a point of contact at their receiving institutions might potentially increase the likelihood that students would ask questions rather than become frustrated and withdrawn. Finally, although attending a faith-based or religiously affiliated institution is a choice, I would urge community colleges located proximally to various faith-based and religiously affiliated institutions to develop articulation agreements with these institutions in an effort to help local students who are interested in attending these schools make the transition from sending to receiving institution more easily.

Theoretical and Empirical Implications

Although a considerable amount of literature presently exists regarding transfer students, no prior research has explored the transfer student experience within the context of faith-based and religiously affiliated institutions. This research was conducted to fill that gap and to address the transfer student experience through a holistic lens, examining the extra-personal (spiritual), intra-personal (psychological), and inter-personal (behavioral) impacts of transferring within the present context. This study sought to gain an understanding of the lived experiences of undergraduate transfer students at faith-based and religiously affiliated institutions in the United States and to explore how the religious underpinnings of these institutions impacted the overall transfer student experience. The following sections serve to provide a discussion of the various theoretical and empirical implications of this study in light of the findings.

Theoretical Implications

This study was grounded in Tinto's (1975) theory of student engagement and Astin's (1999) theory of student involvement. Tinto's theory was predominantly behavioral in nature and discussed how the behavioral aspects, such as academic and social integration combined with

family background, could impact the student experience. Astin, on the other hand, provided another theory that complimented Tinto's by focusing predominantly on how the psychological aspects such as time spent, institutional fit, and psychological energy expended could impact the student experience. As transfer students are influenced by both behavioral and psychological factors, combining the two theories provided a holistic lens through which the transfer student experience could be examined. When the behavioral and psychological aspects are combined, several positive factors such as goal commitment, sense of belonging, institutional commitment, increased interactions with peers and faculty members, and higher levels of motivation emerge (Astin, 1999; Tinto, 1975). These factors are what contribute to increased levels of student engagement, as defined by Tinto, and student involvement, as defined by Astin. Both theorists posited that increased levels of engagement and involvement could positively influence student success, retention, and persistence. Astin also claimed that students who share the same religious beliefs as their institutions may be more likely to persist owing to heightened feelings of institutional fit. The findings of this study were generally in line with both theories but deviated slightly in some regards.

Tinto's (1975) theory of student engagement stresses the need for physical participation in both the academic and social spheres in order for one to be successful. This was true for all of the participants. Those who actively engaged with their coursework and sought out help from their professors reported better results academically than those who did not. Additionally, those who participated in school-sponsored clubs, activities, organizations, and events found the acclimation period easier as it allowed them to integrate more organically into the larger campus community. Tinto also suggested that students who have a higher commitment to their goals are more likely to persist. Almost all of the participants in this study discussed having higher levels

of motivation and a strong determination to complete their degrees in the shortest amount of time possible as they wished to be more financially prudent.

Institutional commitment was also a factor for many of the participants. Several of the participants fell in love with their receiving institutions and had well-established support systems. Many reported having found life-long friends at their receiving institutions, and some reported a desire to stay in the surrounding area after graduation. It should also be noted that Tinto believed that institutional type played a role in student satisfaction and retention, with private schools having the highest retention rates of all. All of the faith-based and religiously affiliated institutions represented in this study were private institutions. Eight out of the ten participants successfully graduated from their respective receiving institutions, and the two current students intend to persist until graduation, corroborating Tinto's claims.

Astin's (1999) theory of student involvement differs from Tinto's (1975) in that it discusses the importance of time spent and energy invested in the college experience. Astin posited that students have a finite amount of psychological energy to devote to various situations, people, and objects, suggesting that one can expect to extract only that in keeping with what one exerts. This was not necessarily true among the participants. For example, no matter what Ashley did to help her academic performance, she still struggled. Additionally, Michael sought out various opportunities at his first receiving faith-based institution, but nothing ever came to fruition as he felt that the institution simply did not care enough to help him.

In addition to active participation in social and academic endeavors, Astin (1999) also highlighted the importance of institutional fit. Astin posited that students who share the same religious beliefs as their institutions are more likely to feel a stronger affinity for their schools, resulting in higher levels of retention and persistence. While this was true for some of the

participants, it was not true for all. Many of the participants who attended faith-based institutions lauded the like-minded culture of their institutions, citing it as a source of comfort for them. Two participants who identified with the religious groundings of their institutions felt that the judgmental attitudes and culture of exclusivity at their receiving institutions detracted from the overall experience. Three of the ten participants identified as Agnostic yet felt that the religious element at their institutions exerted a positive influence. These findings suggest that sharing the same religious affiliation as the institution does not always increase one's feeling of institutional fit, nor does it necessarily earn anyone a greater amount of acceptance.

Empirical Implications

Research has shown that many transfer students struggle to adjust to the new demands of their receiving institutions (Gere et al., 2017; O'Connell & Resuli, 2020). Gere et al. (2017) identified several areas that present difficulties for transfer students during this transitional period, such as adapting to different workloads and instructional approaches, understanding the academic and social cultures at their receiving institutions, connecting with peers and faculty members, and understanding what resources are available. Furthermore, the stigmatization of transfer students, the transfer shock phenomenon (Gere et al., 2017; Tobolowsky & Cox, 2012), anxiety surrounding the transfer of credits (Yang et al., 2018), and feelings of doubt (Ishitani & Flood, 2018) can also negatively impact transfer students. The findings of this study reveal that while not entirely mitigated, these pejorative effects may be lessened for transfer students within the context of faith-based and religiously affiliated institutions, due in large part to the smaller nature of the institutions coupled with the underlying religious undertones present on campus. This section serves to evaluate the previous scholarly contributions to the field in light of this study's findings.

Many of the participants in this study reported a smooth transition from sending to receiving institution. This alone stands in contrast to claims made in previous research. Many of the participants felt that the warm and welcoming environment at their institutions made a world of difference. As many of the participants' receiving institutions were relatively small, the highly personalized experience and accommodating attitude was something that participants claimed helped them to adjust well to their new environment because they felt like they mattered. Although several participants expressed initial doubts and uncertainty regarding transferring, many of their worries were quickly alleviated. Transfer counselors were present at some institutions to speak with transfer students during the application process to discuss their previously earned credits, outlining how their credits would transfer. This helped to lessen the confusion and credit transfer anxiety discussed by Yang et al. (2018). Additionally, participants found it easy to make friends and approach their professors due to smaller programs and class sizes, contributing to a quick, easy, and organic acclimation period as it served to increase the participants' engagement both academically as well as socially at their receiving institutions. This increased engagement in both the academic and social spheres contributed to feelings of belonging and acceptance, as stressed by Tinto (1975).

Transfer shock, or a temporary drop in academic performance during the transition period (Chamely-Wiik et al., 2021; Clausen & Wessel, 2015; Gere et al., 2017), was also not as severe among participants; however, it was reported that some of their receiving faith-based institutions were less rigorous than expected, which may have contributed to the lack of transfer shock present. The participants who attended religiously affiliated institutions reported higher instances of transfer shock than did those who attended faith-based institutions due to the increased academic rigor of their respective institutions. Those who attended faith-based institutions

actually reported experiencing the inverse of transfer shock, in which their grades improved as a result of transferring.

The stigmatization of transfer students often plagues the transfer student experience at many institutions. Transfer students are often viewed as being less motivated, less prepared, and less capable than continuing students (Gere et al., 2017; Mobley & Brawner, 2019), leading to marginalized treatment by both their peers as well as faculty and administrators at their receiving institutions (Tobolowsky & Cox, 2012). This was not the case among the participants who took part in this study. Across the board, participants did not feel that they were treated any differently at their receiving institutions due to their status as transfer students. The “transfer student stigma” appeared to be altogether absent at these institutions, suggesting this stigmatization may not be as pervasive as previously thought. This lack of stigma made it easier for participants to connect with their peers and become involved in clubs, organizations, and teams, as they did not feel singled out on their campuses for having transferred.

The results of this study suggest that the transfer student experience at faith-based and religiously affiliated institutions may be more positive overall, as faith-based and religiously affiliated institutions provide students with another level of integration that is often absent at secularly-focused institutions. Ekwonye and DeLauer (2019) discussed how faith-based and religiously affiliated institutions offer students the aspect of spirituality and provide them with the option for spiritual integration in addition to the standard academic and social integration present on most campuses. While many of the participants did not choose their receiving institutions specifically for the religious aspect, many of them felt that it contributed to a more positive atmosphere overall. The findings of this study corroborate what Ekwonye and DeLauer (2019) found, in that when taken together, higher levels of academic, social, and spiritual

integration were positively linked to student success. Further, the findings of this study suggest that higher levels of academic, social, and spiritual integration led to increased motivation, confidence, and self-efficacy among participants.

Astin (1999) and Tinto (1975), along with countless other studies, discuss the need for both academic and social engagement; however, as this study indicates, the spiritual aspect cannot be underestimated. The findings of this study suggest that attending a faith-based or religiously affiliated institution may serve to diminish the negative effects traditionally associated with transfer students due to the holistic focus of the institutions.

Limitations and Delimitations

Limitations are factors that are outside of the control of the researcher that may serve to limit or weaken the strength of the study. Delimitations, on the other hand, are parameters placed upon the study before conduction that serve to restrict the range of the study. While limitations are uncontrolled by the researcher, delimitations are dictated by the researcher. A discussion of the study's limitations and delimitations is provided.

Limitations

There were many limitations present in this study. While I sought to recruit participants from faith-based and religiously affiliated institutions grounded in various religious doctrines, only institutions associated with various denominations within the Christian faith were represented in this study. Additionally, I sought a racially and ethnically diverse sample; however, nine out of the ten participants were White, with only one participant identifying as an African American. This may have served to limit the range of possible experiences as only two racial groups were represented. Of the ten participants, eight had already graduated, serving to limit the range of responses, as practices regarding transfer students at their respective receiving

institutions may have evolved since the time they were on campus. Only two of the participants who took part in this study were classified as current students, and one of the two was an online student for the majority of her transfer experience.

Delimitations

There were only three delimitations present in this study. Firstly, the sample size was small, consisting of only ten participants. Recruiting participants for this study was extremely difficult and took nearly three and a half months. Secondly, only students between the ages of 18 and 24 at the time of transferring were considered for this study, making them traditional-aged transfer students. No one under the age of 18 was considered, as participants were required to be above the legal age of consent. I chose to study traditional-aged transfer students within the present context because I felt that this population was not only the most representative but also would yield the richest data. Due to the various difficulties I encountered while recruiting participants, I chose to include former transfer students as well as current transfer students in an effort to widen the pool of possible participants. Finally, this study only examined the experiences of undergraduate transfer students at faith-based and religiously affiliated institutions within the bounds of the United States of America. I chose to study faith-based and religiously affiliated institutions due to the dearth of literature regarding transfer students at these institutions. I limited my study to faith-based and religiously affiliated institutions within the United States for convenience but also for the sake of consistency and commonality.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study sought to examine the experiences of undergraduate transfer students within the context of faith-based and religiously affiliated institutions in the United States. As few studies have been conducted regarding this underrepresented student population, many additional

studies must be conducted in order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the transfer student experience within the context of faith-based and religiously affiliated institutions. This study employed a transcendental phenomenological research design and was grounded in the qualitative research method. Taking the aforementioned limitations and delimitations into consideration, I offer the following recommendations for future research in the field.

Future qualitative studies should seek larger, more representative samples, including a greater number of racial and ethnic groups. Researchers may also consider broadening the research setting to include all faith-based and religiously affiliated schools within the United States. This would include Catholic, Islamic, Buddhist, Hindu, Mormon, and Jewish institutions of higher learning. As this study only examined the experiences of undergraduate transfer students at faith-based and religiously affiliated institutions rooted in the Christian faith, it is unknown how different belief systems may influence the transfer student experience at other religiously grounded institutions. Researchers should also study transfer students who span the gamut of gender identities, making sure to incorporate those who belong to the LGBTQ+ community. Studying how gender identity impacts the transfer student experience within the context of faith-based and religiously affiliated institutions would provide much-needed information regarding this understudied population within the present context. Researchers should also explore the experiences of first-generation transfer students as well as transfer students from foreign countries, as these groups have been heretofore underrepresented in the current scholarship. Non-traditional aged transfer students also represent a group worthy of investigation in future studies. While this study only examined faith-based and religiously affiliated institutions located within the United States, it is imperative that the range of this

research be expanded to include faith-based and religiously affiliated institutions across the globe.

Another recommendation for future qualitative research is to explore the experiences of outward-bound transfer students from faith-based and religiously affiliated institutions in order to gain a better understanding of transfer behavior at these institutions. This study only looked into the experiences of inward-bound transfer students, gaining an understanding of why students chose to transfer to faith-based and religiously affiliated institutions. However, information is scant regarding why students who initially enroll in faith-based or religiously affiliated institutions choose to leave. It should also be noted that each of the participants in this study was successfully retained by their institutions, and eight out of the ten participants graduated from their receiving institutions. One last recommendation for future qualitative researchers is to study the experiences of undergraduate transfer students at faith-based and religiously affiliated institutions who were not successfully retained by their respective institutions.

Finally, further research should be conducted employing the quantitative research method. One recommendation would be to quantitatively assess which school-sponsored offerings correlate to the highest levels of retention and persistence among transfer student populations. Such a study would reveal which programs are most valuable and efficacious, as well as which are not.

Conclusion

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to gain an understanding of the lived experiences of undergraduate transfer students at faith-based and religiously affiliated institutions in the United States. The two theories guiding this study were Tinto's (1975) theory of student engagement and Astin's (1999) theory of student involvement. In order

to explore the transfer student phenomenon within the present context, the central research question that guided this study was: What are the lived experiences of undergraduate transfer students at faith-based and religiously affiliated institutions in the United States? The following three sub-questions served to probe deeper into the central phenomenon by addressing the extra-personal (spiritual), intra-personal (psychological), and inter-personal (behavioral) impacts of transferring: (a) How does the religious aspect of attending a faith-based or religiously affiliated institution affect the transfer student experience? (b) How does attending a faith-based or religiously affiliated institution affect the self-efficacy of transfer students? (c) How does attending a faith-based or religiously affiliated institution affect the perceived levels of integration (Tinto, 1975; 1993) of transfer students?

Data was collected from 10 participants through individual semi-structured interviews, nine journal prompts, and one focus group session. The data was analyzed in keeping with the phenomenological research design, and inductive coding procedures were employed in theme development. Seven themes emerged during the analysis process: (a) a time of spiritual exploration, (b) birds of a feather vs. opposites attract, (c) initial uncertainty, (d) a period of personal growth, (e) community is key, (f) academics, and (g) perceptions of campus culture. In addition to the seven themes, two outlier findings were also present: (a) needing special accommodations and (b) distance learning. The findings of this study reflected the importance of holistic participation as well as the need for transfer-centric orientation activities and administrative supports. The implications of this study are far-reaching, as the findings suggest that transferring to a faith-based or religiously affiliated institution may serve to lessen the negative effects of transfer shock, while providing a smoother transition between sending and receiving institution, with virtually no stigmatization present.

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Appendix A: IRB Approval Letter

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

May 26, 2023

Amanda Davis
Katelynn Wheeler

Re: IRB Exemption - IRB-FY22-23-1400 Understanding the Lived Experiences of Undergraduate Transfer Students at Faith-Based Institutions: A Transcendental Phenomenological Study

Dear Amanda Davis, Katelynn Wheeler,

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB) has reviewed your application in accordance with the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) and Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulations and finds your study to be exempt from further IRB review. This means you may begin your research with the data safeguarding methods mentioned in your approved application, and no further IRB oversight is required.

Your study falls under the following exemption category, which identifies specific situations in which human participants research is exempt from the policy set forth in 45 CFR 46.104(d):

Category 2.(iii). Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met:

The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects can readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, and an IRB conducts a limited IRB review to make the determination required by §46.111(a)(7).

Your stamped consent form(s) and final versions of your study documents can be found under the Attachments tab within the Submission Details section of your study on Cayuse IRB. Your stamped consent form(s) should be copied and used to gain the consent of your research participants. If you plan to provide your consent information electronically, the contents of the attached consent document(s) should be made available without alteration.

Please note that this exemption only applies to your current research application, and any modifications to your protocol must be reported to the Liberty University IRB for verification of continued exemption status. You may report these changes by completing a modification submission through your Cayuse IRB account.

If you have any questions about this exemption or need assistance in determining whether possible modifications to your protocol would change your exemption status, please email us at irb@liberty.edu.

Sincerely,
G. Michele Baker, PhD, CIP
Administrative Chair
Research Ethics Office

Appendix B: Informed Consent Form

Title of the Project: Understanding the Lived Experiences of Undergraduate Transfer Students at Faith-Based and Religiously Affiliated Institutions: A Transcendental Phenomenological Study

Principal Investigator: Amanda Davis, Doctoral Candidate, School of Education, Liberty University

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. To participate, you must have:

- transferred to a faith-based or religiously affiliated institution at the undergraduate level
- been between the ages of 18-24 at the time of transferring

Taking part in this research project is voluntary. Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research.

What is the study about and why is it being done?

The purpose of the study is to gain an understanding of the lived experiences of undergraduate transfer students at faith-based and religiously affiliated institutions in the United States.

What will happen if you take part in this study?

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following:

1. Participate in a virtual, video-recorded one-on-one interview that will take no longer than 1 hour.
2. Fill out and return a list of journal prompts. This activity should take no longer than 1 hour to complete.
3. Participate in a virtual, video-recorded focus group if selected. This activity should take no longer than 1 hour.
4. Participate in member checking after the interview and focus group (if selected) after data has been transcribed to ensure that data accurately reflects the perceptions of the participant. This activity should take no longer than 1 hour.

The procedures listed above should take no more than six hours over a six-week period to complete.

How could you or others benefit from this study?

Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study.

Benefits to society include aiding college and university administrators and faculty members in understanding the lived experiences of undergraduate transfer students at faith-based and religiously affiliated institutions with the goal of informing best practices going forward that may serve to better accommodate the needs of transfer students, not only within the present context, but various other institutional contexts as well.

What risks might you experience from being in this study?

The expected risks from participating in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

How will personal information be protected?

The records of this study will be kept private. Published reports will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records.

- Participant responses will be kept confidential by replacing names with pseudonyms.
- Interviews will be conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
- Confidentiality cannot be guaranteed in focus group settings. While discouraged, other members of the focus group may share what was discussed with persons outside of the group.
- Data will be stored on a password-protected computer and any hardcopy records will be kept in a locked file cabinet. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted, and all hardcopy records will be shredded.
- Recordings will be stored on a password-protected computer until participants have reviewed and confirmed the accuracy of the transcripts and then deleted. The researcher will have access to these recordings.

How will you be compensated for being part of the study?

Participants will be compensated for participating in this study. At the conclusion of the study, participants will receive a \$25 Amazon gift card.

Is study participation voluntary?

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you apart from focus group data, will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study. Focus group data will not be destroyed, but your contributions to the focus group will not be included in the study if you choose to withdraw.

Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?

The researcher conducting this study is Amanda Davis. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact her at [REDACTED]. You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Dr. Katelynn Wheeler at [REDACTED].

Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the IRB. Our physical address is Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA, 24515; our phone number is 434-592-5530, and our email address is irb@liberty.edu.

Disclaimer: The Institutional Review Board (IRB) is tasked with ensuring that human subjects research will be conducted in an ethical manner as defined and required by federal regulations. The topics covered and viewpoints expressed or alluded to by student and faculty researchers are those of the researchers and do not necessarily reflect the official policies or positions of Liberty University.

Your Consent

By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. The researcher will keep a copy with the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.

I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

☐ The researcher has my permission to video-record me as part of my participation in this study.

Printed Subject Name

Signature & Date

Appendix C: Social Media Recruitment Flyer

The flyer has a dark blue background with light blue and white geometric shapes. At the top, a light blue banner contains the word "ATTENTION" in white. Below it, a larger white banner with blue arrows at both ends contains the words "TRANSFER STUDENTS" in blue. Underneath, the text "PARTICIPANTS NEEDED" is flanked by blue chevrons. The research title is in white. Two white rounded rectangles contain the sections "I Am Looking For..." and "Requirements...". A white rounded rectangle contains the list of activities under "Participants Will...". A white rounded rectangle contains the purpose of the research. At the bottom, a white rounded rectangle contains the contact information. A graphic of a \$25 Amazon Gift Card is also present.

ATTENTION

TRANSFER STUDENTS

PARTICIPANTS NEEDED

RESEARCH TITLE: UNDERSTANDING THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF UNDERGRADUATE TRANSFER STUDENTS AT FAITH-BASED AND RELIGIOUSLY AFFILIATED INSTITUTIONS: A TRANSCENDENTAL PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

I Am Looking For...

CURRENT OR FORMER UNDERGRADUATE TRANSFER STUDENTS AT FAITH-BASED OR RELIGIOUSLY AFFILIATED INSTITUTIONS

Requirements...

- ✓ Must have transferred to a faith-based or religiously affiliated institution at the undergraduate level
- ✓ 18-24 years of age at time of transfer

Participants Will...

- Participate in a virtual one-on-one interview (~1hr)
- Complete a journal prompt writing activity (~1hr)
- Participate in a virtual focus group, if selected (~1hr)
- Participate in "member checking" to ensure data accuracy (~1hr)

\$25 AMAZON GIFT CARD

The purpose of my research is to illuminate the lived experiences of undergraduate transfer students at faith-based and religiously affiliated institutions and to inform best practices going forward that may serve to better accommodate the needs of transfer students.

For More Information

This study is being conducted by Amanda Davis, a doctoral candidate in the School of Education at Liberty University. Please contact Amanda at [redacted] if you are interested in participating

Appendix D: Criterion-Based Screening Survey

Survey Questions

1. What is your age?
2. What is your gender? (M/F)
3. What is your race/ethnicity?
4. What year are you in school? (Freshman, Sophomore, Junior, Senior, Graduated)
5. Are you/were you a transfer student? (Y/N)
6. Do you/did you attend a faith-based or religiously affiliated institution? (Y/N)
7. Are you/were you enrolled in a degree-granting program at your institution? (Y/N)
8. How old were you when you transferred?
9. Did you earn credit toward a degree at your previous institution? (Y/N)
10. Are you/were you an online student? (Y/N)
11. Do you identify with the same religious grounding/beliefs as the institution you transferred to? (Y/N)
12. If you are interested in participating in the study or have any questions and would like to be contacted, please list your contact information:

Name:

Email address:

Cell Phone:

Appendix E: Individual Interview Questions

1. Please describe your educational background. CRQ
2. Please describe your experiences at your prior institution. CRQ
3. Please explain the reasons behind your decision to transfer. CRQ
4. How would you describe your experience as a transfer student at your new institution?
CRQ
5. Was attending a faith-based institution important to you? SQ1
6. Please describe your spiritual involvement at your new school. SQ1
7. How has transferring from one institution to another affected you spiritually? SQ1
8. How has the religious aspect of your new school affected your experience as a transfer student? SQ1
9. Please describe the positive effects of transferring. SQ2
10. Please describe the negative effects of transferring. SQ2
11. How has transferring affected your confidence? SQ2
12. How has transferring affected your motivation? SQ2
13. How has transferring affected your work-ethic? SQ2
14. Please describe your social life at your new school. SQ3
15. How has transferring from one institution to another affected you socially? SQ3
16. Please describe your academic involvement at your new school. SQ3
17. How has transferring from one institution to another affected you academically? SQ3
18. Please describe what it was like to meet new people and make friends as a transfer student. SQ3
19. Please describe your relationship with faculty members and advisors. SQ3

20. Please describe a moment when you experienced a “high” in reference to transferring.

CRQ

21. Please describe a moment when you experienced a “low” in reference to transferring.

CRQ

22. Is there any additional information you would like to share that may enhance this study by helping myself and others to better understand the transfer student experience? If so,

what? CRQ

Appendix F: Journal Prompts

Please provide a thoughtful and complete response to the following journal prompts.

Please make sure to include not only a description of your experience, but your thoughts, feelings, and opinions related to each experience. Take as long as you need to complete each prompt.

1. What made you choose a faith-based/religiously affiliated institution over a secular institution? CRQ
2. What was it that drew you to this specific faith-based/religiously affiliated institution? CRQ
3. Please describe how the faith-based/religiously affiliated institution facilitated your transition as a transfer student from your previous school in detail. Was there an orientation program that you participated in, special welcoming activities, or community-building exercises for transfer students? How did your new school help you get connected with the campus culture, your peers, and faculty/staff members? Feel free to elaborate on your experiences in addition to these topics. CRQ
4. Please describe in detail any school sponsored or faith-based programs/activities you found to be particularly beneficial to aiding in the transfer experience. SQ1
5. Please describe what it was like to adapt to the requirements and expectations of your new school. SQ2
6. How well do you fit in at your new school? SQ3
7. Please explain some of the obstacles you have overcome as a transfer student. CRQ
8. Please list any concerns you still have/had regarding transferring. CRQ

9. What advice would you give to incoming transfer students just starting at your school?

CRQ

Appendix G: Focus Group Questions

1. How did your expectations differ from the reality of attending your new school? CRQ
2. Please describe in detail any programs or activities you found to be particularly beneficial to aiding in the transfer experience. CRQ
3. What do you enjoy about the religious aspect of your new school? SQ1
4. What do you not enjoy about the religious aspect of your new school? SQ1
5. Please describe a time you experienced doubt regarding transferring. SQ2
6. Please describe a time when you experienced frustration as a transfer student. SQ2
7. Have you ever felt that you were treated differently, either positively or negatively, due to your status as a transfer student? Please describe your experiences in detail. SQ2
8. How did these experiences affect your confidence? SQ2
9. How did these experiences affect your commitment to achieving your goals at your new school? SQ2
10. Please describe any interactions with peers, faculty, or staff that stood out as being particularly positive. SQ3
11. Please describe any interactions with peers, faculty, or staff that stood out as being particularly negative. SQ3
12. What would you change about the transfer experience to make the transition easier for transfer students in the future? CRQ
13. Is there anything we have not touched on that you would like to share that you think may enhance this study by helping myself and others to better understand the transfer student experience? If so, what? CRQ

Appendix H: Research Questions

