PROMISES MADE, PROMISES KEPT? A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY EXPLORING

THE EXPERIENCES OF CALIFORNIA COMMUNITY COLLEGE PROMISE PROGRAM

STUDENTS AND THEIR PURSUIT OF A BACHELOR'S DEGREE

by

Eric Richard Garcia

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

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APPROVED BY:

Kristy Motte, EdD, Committee Chair

Lucinda Spaulding, PhD, Committee Member

Abstract

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of students formally enrolled in a California community college promise program at Mountain View Community College, Lakeview Community College, Hillcrest Community College, and Ocean Valley Community College, each located in Southern California. The theoretical framework guiding this study was grounded in Astin's theory of student involvement which provided a lens to analyze the experiences of promise students and their pursuit of bachelor's degrees. The central research question under investigation was: What do promise program students previously enrolled at a California community college that have transferred to a four-year university describe as their experiences? Participants who transferred to a public California four-year university were selected using purposeful sampling. Data were collected through individual interviews, letter writing, and a focus group, and analyzed using Moustakas's modification of the van Kaam method of analysis of phenomenological data. Four themes were revealed during the data analysis process including shaping academic self-perceptions, community college sentiments, community of support, and racing against time. A major finding of the study was that although participants faced innate stress attempting to transfer within a two-year period, all were able to accomplish their goals through perseverance and leveraging support from others.

Keywords: promise program, community college, transfer, retention, student success, free tuition

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my wife, Breanna Garcia, and our three beautiful children, Reese, Ryan, and Rowan. Without your patience, love, support, and sacrifice, accomplishing this doctoral endeavor with have never came to fruition. I count my blessings every day and I am so thankful to have such a wonderful loving family.

Acknowledgments

First, I would like to acknowledge the participants in this study. I appreciate you entrusting your lives with me by allowing me to tell your stories. It was a pleasure working alongside each of you throughout this process.

Also, I want to acknowledge my dissertation committee, otherwise known as the dream team. To my dissertation Committee Chair Dr. Kristy Motte; you are quite simply the best! Your wisdom, words of encouragement, and prayers throughout this research study was much needed during those long nights. I naturally gravitated toward your student first mentality and approach. This project would have never come to fruition without your guidance and direction. I would also like to acknowledge Dr. Lucinda Spaulding who served as my Committee Member. Your expertise and recommendations were invaluable and truly aided in shaping this dissertation to be the best it could possibly be. I thank you both so much.

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List of Abbreviations

Associate Degree for Transfer (ADT)

California Community Colleges (CCCs)

California State University (CSU)

Inputs, Environment, Outputs (IEO)

University of California (UC)

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

Free tuition college programs have gained recent political traction at the federal and state levels (Odle & Monday, 2021). Also known as promise programs, these placed-based scholarships aim to increase students' access to higher education (Miller-Adams, 2015; Perna & Leigh, 2018). Existing literature has suggested that promise programs increase college enrollment among all student demographics, including those from disproportionally impacted populations (Bartik et al., 2021; Gándara & Li, 2020; Gurantz, 2020). However, minimal research has been conducted investigating student experiences within a program, or the intentional actions they employed leading to their collegiate success (Davidson et al., 2020; Littlepage et al., 2018). The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of students formally enrolled in a promise program at Mountain View Community College (MVCC), Lakeview Community College (LCC), Hillcrest Community College (HCC), and Oceanview Community College (OVCC), four California community colleges (CCCs) located in Southern California separated by approximately 50 miles. Using Astin's (1999) student involvement model as a theoretical framework, the significance this study intended to capture is the voices of former students involving their perceptions of the promise program. Chapter One serves as an introduction to the study and highlights current literature on this topic, illuminates gaps in the research, and provides an overview of the historical, social, and theoretical contexts of the background. Further, the problem statement, purpose statement, significance of the study, research questions, and definitions are also addressed.

Background

Over the past several years, there has been a renewed focus on preparing American

citizens for meaningful employment opportunities through the attainment of a college credential

at the federal and state levels (Davidson et al., 2020). Today's modern economy demands a

workforce with education beyond secondary schooling. Over 60% of all current and future jobs

require postsecondary education, as do 80% of jobs that support middle-class lifestyles

(Carnevale et al., 2018; Venezia & Jez, 2019). Recognizing the importance of training

Americans for in-demand jobs in the 21st century, former President Barrack Obama challenged

the nation by setting a goal of 60%-degree attainment for adults ages 25–34 by 2020 (Chimel,

2020). However, according to statistical projections on adult growth and degree attainment, 2041

is the projected year by which the nation can anticipate reaching the federal government's goal

of 60%-degree attainment (Nettles, 2017). This number is even more concerning for Blacks,

American Indians, and Hispanic populations, as national projections predict reaching this

benchmark by 2060.

To address this concern, the Obama administration proposed the America's college

promise program initiative with the goal of making the first two years of college free of cost

(Perna & Leigh, 2018). Designed to improve affordability, increase attainment, and close equity

gaps in achievement, community college promise programs have the potential to promote higher

education attainment throughout the country (Perna et al., 2017). Considered open-access

institutions which historically enroll high numbers of students from marginalized backgrounds,

Americans look to community colleges to provide educational opportunities to change their life

trajectory and upward social mobility (Cahalan et al., 2020; Monaghan & Sommers, 2022).

Given the importance of increasing college completion, federal and state legislatures are turning

to the nation's community colleges to increase enrollment and produce additional associate degree graduates and transfer students.

After Obama's proposal, promise programs throughout the country have grown dramatically. In November 2016, 23 states had considered free college legislation, six had enacted legislation (Kentucky, Oregon, Tennessee, Delaware, Minnesota, Rhode Island), and five had pending legislation (California, New Jersey, New York, Illinois, Massachusetts; Pingel et al., 2016). Today, however, there are approximately 300 community college promise programs represented in most states nationwide (College Promise, n.d.). According to Kanter et al. (2016), promise programs have several benefits, including promoting increased confidence for students so that they can pursue a college education leading to a rewarding career and that education beyond secondary school is available for all and not just those from affluent backgrounds.

Historical Context

According to Jones and Berger (2018), few pieces of legislation have altered the landscape of higher education like the current promise movement. The movement was the direct result of the country's shifting racial and economic demographics, and a recognition among policymakers that colleges needed to change to meet the individual needs of those in society, and the thought that higher education was only available for the wealthy and elite. To fully understand the impact of the free community college movement, it is necessary to focus on the historical legislation involving government intervention for financial support of years prior.

The Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, also known as the G.I. Bill of Rights, is considered by most historians as the most influential American social policy ever enacted (Mettler, 2005; Thelin, 2011). The first G.I. Bill revolutionized both the culture and structure of higher education in America by providing millions of WWII veterans financial relief during the

Great Depression and the opportunity to attend college (Olson, 1973; Thelin, 2011). For the first time in U.S. history, educational administrators faced non-traditional student enrollments who often harbored disabilities, supported families, and were academically unprepared based on college admission standards (Thelin, 2011). Although numerous colleges throughout the country were free to attend, the government paid colleges that charged students a maximum of five hundred dollars a year to cover tuition, fees, books, and supplies.

Over the next few decades, students continued to enroll into college at unprecedented rates. Looking to capitalize on student enrollment increases, colleges began to raise tuition prices throughout the nation. In response, President Johnson signed the Higher Education Act of 1965 into law to strengthen the resources of small and less-developed colleges and universities and provide additional financial support to lower- and middle-income students. Federal funding in the form of loans and grants provided financial awards to all students based on established eligibility criteria. However, following decades of subsequent amendments to the Act, federal funding for students has not correlated with inflation and the increased costs of higher education (Goldrick-Rab & Steinbaum, 2020). Li (2017) posited that state legislatures determine funding for public higher education institutions, and colleges and universities rely on state appropriations to assist in covering operational costs. In 2016, however, higher education funding at the national level was $9 billion less than in 2008 after adjusting for inflation (Mitchell et al., 2017). To mitigate costs, colleges raised tuition to make up for the difference and as a result, students are taking on more loans and relying on federal aid to help cover costs (Hanson, 2023; Li, 2017).

In addition, while free community college tuition presents an attractive option for first-time, full-time freshmen, countless may not be able to complete their transfer studies within a two-year window. While reliable federal databases tracking community college transfer and

graduation rates at 4-year colleges are nonexistent, the National Student Clearing House

Research Center (2020) reported that only 40% of community college students graduated within

six years. Further, only 16% of community college students who intend to earn a four-year

degree accomplish this in five years (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022).

Conversely, nearly 50% of students who choose this route drop out of college altogether. These

statistics are alarming considering that community college promise program students seeking a

bachelor's degree are only funded for two academic years. As a result, a substantial number of

promise students may delay or abandon their pursuit of a degree and drop out of college

completely.

Given the current national and political significance of promise programs, both in terms

of increased enrollment figures and taxpayer spending, it is apparent that there will be an acute

focus on the educational outcomes of these students in policy implementation and practice.

Without qualitative studies exploring the experiences, transfer outcomes, and graduation rates of

promise program students, advocating for continued financial support for free tuition may be

challenging. Any potential cuts to promise program funding may have an adverse effect on

student's ability to transfer and earn a bachelor's degree to compete in today's workforce.

Social Context

Student loan debt throughout the country is a societal concern. According to Hanson's

(2023) projections, the student loan debt in the U.S. is approximately $1.75 trillion, with more

than 43 million borrowers having an outstanding debt. Estimates suggest that the average student

leaves school with more than $37,000 in student debt. Coupled with the rising costs of college

tuition and fluctuations in financial aid options, many college students have little option than to

borrow and incur some debt (Fuentes, 2022). Student loans may seem like an attractive short-

term solution because unlike other loans, repayment does not begin until months after exiting college. However, for vulnerable student populations, the accrual of student loan debt may lead to challenges with securing future financial freedom and the opportunity to build economic wealth post-graduation.

Given the trends in rising costs in higher education, a small body of literature suggests that college debt is racialized and disproportionately troublesome for students of color (Houle & Addo, 2019). Compared to their White counterparts, research shows that Black students have higher student loan balances, have higher interest rates, and are more likely to have trouble paying back their loan balances. Further, Salinas and Hidrowoh's (2018) work with Latinx students suggested some students lack social capital and are not provided adequate financial literacy about the benefits of saving, budgeting, and money management, and would rather drop out of college than ask for or receive assistance (Peña & Rhoads, 2019; Salinas & Hidrowoh, 2018). With the rising costs of postsecondary intuitions, many are turning to the affordability of community colleges, especially those from disproportionally impacted groups (Houle & Addo, 2019; Salinas & Hidrowoh, 2018).

Although promise programs share a unified mission of promoting higher education attainment by providing scholarships or grants to students living in specific geographical areas, each program is uniquely designed, and thus, the transferability of findings to the general population is unclear (Perna & Leigh, 2018). Further, while many states are investing in free tuition initiatives, promise programs are not without controversy (Kanter et al., 2016). Several critics believe that funding for free college programs is too expensive and cannot be sustained over time (Dilworth, 2022; Rauner et al., 2018). Also, promise program initiatives may have a negative effect on four-year college enrollments by diverting students into these community

college programs (Nguyen, 2020). Finally, by only funding the first two years of college without guaranteeing similar support for transfer students at a four-year university, students may experience financial barriers, decreased motivation, and may drop out of college altogether.

Theoretical Context

Education practitioners and researchers have examined the various transitions community college transfer students experience in higher education (Garcia, 2017; Gray et al., 2022; Hearn, 2018) usinb Schlossberg's (1981, 1984) and Anderson et al.'s (2012) theoretical adult transition model. Commonalities among many students transitioning into community college, who often self-identify as first-generation and/or low-income, include various hardships and barriers that impede personal progress toward obtaining postsecondary education (Collom et al., 2021). Additionally, several authors (i.e., Fong et al., 2016; Hoogendoorn, 2021; Kosiewicz & Ngo, 2020) have incorporated self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2002; Ryan & Deci, 2000) in their research to understand how student intrinsic motivation and social contexts may foster or impede an individual's innate disposition for personal growth and development. Theorists contend that enhanced levels of academic achievement are achieved when students' higher education experiences are satisfied after their psychosocial needs are met and that students are self-motivated to achieve when their colleges grant self-flexibility within their decision-making process (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Although community colleges offer an array of campus support services to its student population to assist with personal or academic barriers, only 2.5% of students transfer to a university within two years (Reddy & Ryan, 2021). While these theoretical constructs are often utilized to understand community college student populations and the variables employed in combatting attrition, this study aims to analyze student persistence, those who have already transferred, and the experiences within the promise program setting

specifically. Consequently, this study sought to identify the experiences community college promise program students utilized that promoted their successful transfer to a four-year university. Additionally, this study intended to unveil the institutional and personal support mechanisms promise programs students used when attempting to accomplish their transfer goals.

Problem Statement

The problem is that while recent federal legislation allocates resources for community colleges to launch free tuition programs, colleges are distributing state funding inequitably among their student populations (Davidson et al., 2020; Perna et al., 2021; Perna et al., 2020). Referencing a report conducted by Georgetown University's Center on education and the workforce, Dilworth (2022) suggested that free college programs may unintentionally block out deserving low-income students who need the aid the most and reward wealthier students instead. He posited that most free college programs are last-dollar programs, meaning the government pays for the remaining tuition balance only after students' existing financial aid is applied. These programs offer less support to financially disadvantaged students and more support for higher-income students. Additionally, Dilworth proposed that free tuition programs do not consider other college expenses including housing, books, child-care, food, and high-speed internet. Students could potentially "wind up worse off if they enroll and invest in attending college and then are forced to drop out due to financial pressures" (Dilworth, 2022, p. 2).

While a four-year degree continues to be important for professional success and financial health (Belfield & Bailey, 2019; Song et al., 2021), and promise programs are positioned to help adults complete the first two years of that education conveniently and affordably (Rauner & Smith, 2020; Smith & Rauner, 2020), many community college students struggle to complete their degree (Evans et al., 2020; Umbach et al., 2019) or continue to a four-year institution

through transfer (Davidson et al., 2020; Johnson & Mejia, 2020; Perez, Johnson et al., 2021). While the experiences of struggling community college students have been extensively cataloged (Crumb, 2021; Marine Nin & Gutierrez Keeton, 2020; McPherson & Arbelo Marrero, 2021), the experiences of promise program students who have successfully persisted and transferred to a four-year institution are not yet understood. Therefore, the experiences of promise program students previously enrolled in community college are a significant topic worthy of further investigation. Community colleges can benefit from learning about the experiences of transfer-bound promise program students, as minimal attention has been devoted to this population. This study fills a void in the literature by capturing the lived experiences of community college promise program students seeking a bachelor's degree while informing government and educational leaders of the collective needs of this group that facilitate a timely transfer (Garcia, 2017). Although researchers (Gandara & Li, 2020; Perna & Leigh, 2018) have examined the impact promise programs have on college enrollment trends among various racial demographics using quantitative methods, little qualitative research has focused on the experiences of students in these free tuition programs (Rauner & Lundquist, 2019). The problem this study sought to examine is the dearth of qualitative data involving the student experience in a promise program and their intentional acts that facilitated a timely transfer to a four-year university.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to understand the experiences of former CCC promise program students who successfully transferred to a four-year university. A promise program student is defined as an individual enrolled in a community college who is receiving tuition and other financial support for two academic years.

Significance of the Study

The participants of this study described their experiences in a CCC promise program and the actions they took that either promoted or hindered a timely transfer to a four-year in-state university. The findings of this study will be significant because community college campus leaders could benefit from learning about how to engage the promise student population while developing an understanding of the social and academic needs of those pursuing bachelor's degree attainment. This topic is important because numerous students arrive at institutions of higher education with limited financial resources and may incumbent additional stress in attempting to achieve academic success at an expedited rate because of free tuition time limitations. Failure to rapidly persist within their allotted two years of funding may limit promise program students' retention, ability to transfer, and acquisition of a four-year degree.

Theoretical

The theory that guided this study was Astin's (1999) theoretical model of student involvement. This model is grounded in theory and provides a theoretical lens that assists in understanding the various intentional measures college-aged students engage in while enrolled in higher education. Examining the experiences of promise program students as they adapt to higher education culture, immerse themselves into campus programs and initiatives, establish new routines and relationships, and understand the physical and psychosocial energy they devout to these experiences could add to the nascent body of promise program literature and build on existing theory. As such, it applies Astin's theory to a new population, namely, promise program completers.

Empirical

The purpose of this study was to fill a gap in literature involving the experiences of students enrolled in a free community college tuition program, as little is known about student persistence, success, and college supports that aided students in reaching their transfer goals (Odle & Monday, 2021; Smith & Rauner, 2020). Current literature involving promise programs focuses on programmatic aspects such as design and implementation, and thus, not on students' experience in a financial support program. The results of this study may inform community college leaders of strategies to best serve incoming promise program students, many of whom or marginalized and unprepared for higher education (Buchanan & Wilson, 2017). Furthermore, the results of this study may have empirical significance by adding to the scarcity of qualitative literature that contributes to this population's success. There is potential to inform new matriculating promise program students of what is needed for collegiate success. The findings from interviewing students may provide empirical results to federal and state policymakers and education practitioners to advance equitable policy and practice for promise students.

Given the rigid state policies and regulations governing free tuition programs that students, who often enter intuitions of higher education as developmental learners, must conform to, students may become frustrated when attempting to balance multiple roles while adjusting to higher education culture. Acquiring collective knowledge from degree-seeking promise program students will be beneficial to researchers, educators, and state policymakers to advocate for this population. Ultimately, gaining a universal understanding of the experiences of promise program students may be fundamental in creating equitable policy and practice at the federal, state, and local levels. This awareness will provide insight into the collective strategies that either advance or inhibit the success of the promise program student body. Furthermore, the findings can assist

promise program administrators and campus support staff in improving their unique programs by tailoring interventions specifically targeting their student population.

Practical

Community colleges play a critical role in providing an access point to students seeking a post-secondary credential, especially those from at-risk populations (Fuentes, 2022; Kolbe & Baker, 2019; Whatley & Raby, 2020). With a decrease in state appropriations (Li, 2017), combined with many community college students having to pay out of pocket (Davidson et al., 2020), the implementation of promise programs has practical significance by increasing student confidence in the ability to attend a postsecondary institution (Buchanan & Wilson, 2017). Thus, by capturing the lived experiences of students, the results of this study could improve promise program implementation, delivery, and practice. Program faculty, staff, and administrators can benefit from learning about the various institutional support services and interventions that promoted student success, completion, and transfer to a four-year college (Rauner et al., 2018). Finally, there is a potential benefit to new promise program students in attempting to understand and navigate the various academic success measures needed for retention and persistence within the program and ultimately transferring out to a four-year university.

Research Questions

This study was guided by a central research question and two sub-questions. These questions were used to understand the shared experiences of promise program students who enrolled in a community college program and then transferred to a four-year university. The lens through which these experiences were examined, and these questions are framed in Astin's (1999) theoretical model of student involvement.

Central Research Question

What are the lived experiences of promise program students previously enrolled at a California community college who have transferred to a four-year university?

In this study, examining promise program student experiences through the lens of Astin's (1999) theoretical framework of student involvement was utilized. According to Astin, the collegiate experience is determined by the motivation the student invests and the level of time and energy they devote to the learning process. The quantity and quality of the student's academic efforts influence their individual success. Therefore, the involvement model provided an opportunity to describe the lived experiences of former students as they reflected on their higher education experiences in the promise program.

Sub-Question One

What experiences promoted a timely transfer for students previously enrolled at a California community college who have transferred to a four-year university?

Astin (1999) theorized that increased involvement in academics, social aspects, and extra-curricular activities affects student achievement. He suggests that students are not passive recipients of their institution's intentional actions to educate them but are personally responsible for any progress they aspire from their higher education experiences. A successful student demonstrates various characteristics, including self-regulation, self-motivation, commitment, and being goal orientated. As a result, promise program students attending a four-year college articulated the successful and intentional actions they pursued at their community college that promoted a timely transfer.

Sub-Question Two

What experiences hindered a timely transfer for students previously enrolled at a California community college who have transferred to a four-year university?

Like sub-research question two, this question intended to examine the level of involvement promise students had at their community college. Astin (1999) contended that faculty-to-student interaction is vital to student involvement. Students who connect with faculty regularly develop relationships that lead to enhanced involvement on both academic and social levels. Further, participation in campus initiatives and programs such as the honors program, student government, and athletics contributes to community college students' academic and social success. However, the American Association of Community Colleges (2021) reported that the average age of community college students was 28 years, with 15% being single parents, 72% working part-time, and 62% reporting working full-time while attending school. When considering that most community college students are older, have family obligations, and work while attending college, making a concerted effort to self-involve in campus programming initiatives may be challenging (Broton et al., 2022; Penrod et al., 2022; Stofer et al., 2021). Consequently, refraining from these activities may detract from the collegiate success of students. Promise program students who are not actively engaged with on-campus initiatives may not be fully committed to their academic studies and, as such, may hinder their opportunity to transfer to a four-year university within a reasonable timeframe.

Definitions

The following terms were pertinent to the study and are defined to add clarity to the research and inform readers for further context.

1. *Attrition* - A student who discontinues enrollment at an intuition of higher education despite not having completed a college credential (Miller, 2019).

2. *First dollar programs* - The term first-dollar program implies that promise funds are provided directly to the student before any other grant or funding sources one may be entitled to such as the federal Pell Grant (Poutré & Voight, 2018).

3. *Last dollar programs* - The term last-dollar promise programs implies that the state covers any tuition and fees not already covered by other aid a student qualifies for such as Pell Grants (Poutré & Voight, 2018).

4. *Persistence* - The desire of a student to remain enrolled in an institution of higher education until a college credential is completed (Miller, 2019).

5. *Promise program* - There is variation in the programmatic features that use the promise program name or share similar characteristics and thus, makes it difficult to define (Rauner et al., 2018). However, most researchers agree that promise programs provide financial support for students attending postsecondary institutions and have set eligibility criteria based on the geographical area in which the student lives (Perna & Leigh, 2018).

6. *Transfer* - A student enrolled and completing coursework at a community college who transferred to a four-year university to complete a bachelor's degree (Zhang et al., 2018).

Summary

Examining the experiences of students formally enrolled in a promise program that transferred to a four-year university served as a basis for this study. This chapter presented a brief summary of the research, the purpose statement, problem statement, and research questions. This research investigated the lived experiences of students formally enrolled in a CCC and the actions that either promoted or hindered their transfer to a four-year university. Studying this

phenomenon, which has traditionally focused on quantitative measures to analyze promise program student enrollments, sought to narrow a gap in the literature regarding their collective community college experiences. This dissertation is organized into five chapters, with Chapter One serving as an introduction to the study. In Chapter Two, a critique of the literature is presented. In Chapter Three, the methodology that guided this study is introduced. Chapter Four discusses this study's findings. Finally, Chapter Five provides a summative synopsis, as well as implications for practice and future recommendations for research.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to discover the experiences of former CCC promise program students and how these experiences may have either promoted or impeded a timely transfer to a California university. The perspectives of students enrolled in free tuition community college programs have had minimal attention and promise program students' voices are essential in establishing equitable policy and practice in higher education. The theory used to frame this inquiry is Astin's (1999) model of student involvement, which is addressed in the first section of this chapter. The second section of this chapter highlights related literature, which involves the genesis of the community college movement, the CCC master plan, the birth of community college promise programs, CCC promise programs, and transfer challenges within the CCC system. Evidence is provided to demonstrate the literature gap concerning the perspectives of former promise program students and their experiences that either promoted or hindered a timely transfer to a four-year university.

Theoretical Framework

This research study examined CCC students' involvement in the promise program and the experiences that either promoted or hindered a timely transfer to an in-state four-year university. The theoretical framework utilized in this study involved Astin's (1999) student involvement model, which focuses on student engagement and its crucial role on student learning and development. The impetus for Astin's theory derived from a longitudinal study concerning college retention and dropouts and the factors in higher education that affected student persistence. Astin argued that statistically, the chances of students dropping out increase significantly at a two-year college versus a four-year college due to a variety of factors, including

lack of faculty and student interaction, the number of classes taken, community college's

commuter nature, and the large proportion of faculty being employed on a part-time basis.

Astin (1993, 1999) further refined his model after analyzing various student success

theories, speculating that many researchers treat and view students as a *black box*. Simplistically

interpreted, Astin defined inputs as the personal qualities, skills, and abilities that a student

initially brings with them at the time of initial entry to college. The environment involves a

college's internal policies and programs; the outputs concern the student's characteristics after

exposure to the environment, such as achievement measures (grade point average [GPAs] or

scores on standardized exams). Consequently, the lived experiences of the students are often

unaccounted for in research. Astin argued that college personnel are often unaware of the

theories that guide their own actions, making it necessary to focus on these implicit pedagogical

theories. As a result, the student involvement model can be utilized when connecting implicit

pedagogical theories and student outcomes because students' experiences are considered.

Astin's (1993, 1999) model of student involvement is defined as the extent of

psychosocial and physical energy the student commits to the academic experience. A highly

involved student generally devotes increased energy to studying, is actively involved with on-

campus initiatives, and regularly connects with faculty and their collegiate peers. Astin (1999)

justified the vitality of his student involvement model for the following reasons:

> First, it is simple. Second, the theory can explain most of the empirical knowledge about
>
> environmental influences on student development. Third, it is capable of embracing
>
> principles from widely divergent sources such as psychoanalysis and classical learning
>
> theory. Finally, the theory of student involvement can be used both by researchers to

guide their investigation of student development – and by college administrators and faculty to help in designing more effective learning environments. (p. 518)

Figure 1

Astin's (1993) Theoretical Model (The I-E-O Model)

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                    ┌──────────────────┐
                    │   Environments   │
                    └──────────────────┘
            ↗                              ↘
┌──────────────┐                    ┌──────────────┐
│    Inputs    │ ─────────────────→ │   Outputs    │
└──────────────┘                    └──────────────┘
```
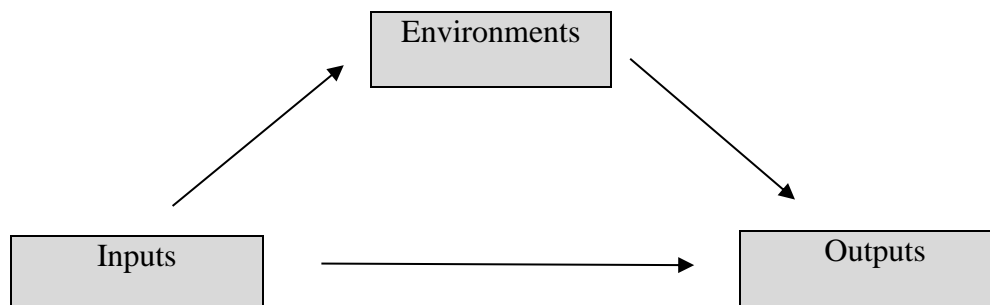
Note. This figure demonstrates the interconnectivity of the inputs, environment, and outputs of Astin's (1993) model. Student growth in higher education is determined by comparing both input and output characteristics. The basic premise of the model is to assess the level of impact of varying environmental experiences and whether students change differently under these conditions.

Astin's (1999) involvement theory consists of five main postulates: (a) investment of physical and psychological energy, (b) involvement occurs along a continuum, (c) involvement has both qualitative and quantitative features, (d) learning and personal development is directly proportional to the quality and quantity of student involvement, and (e) educational effectiveness is related to policy and practice to increase involvement. According to Astin, the last two propositions are integral because they provide effective educational programs for students. His research suggests that the more personally involved students are in higher education, the greater the likelihood of increased learning and development. Further, Astin contends that the strength of

a college policy is directly correlated to its ability to enhance student involvement and engagement.

Accordingly, Astin's (1993, 1999) student involvement framework was used to examine the experiences of promise program students in the CCC system to determine the specific factors that promoted or hindered their timely transfer to a four-year university. These specific factors, as Astin postulated, may involve the amount of time and energy a student dedicates to studying and their time on campus, their active participation in student organizations, and frequent interaction with faculty and others on campus. Conversely, an unmotivated student may neglect their studies, is not connected with campus initiatives, and abstains from regular and substantive contact with faculty and other students.

Astin's (1999) research shows that student attrition rates are significantly higher at community colleges when compared to four-year universities, and given the time restrictions of promise program students, this finding takes on increased significance given the scope of this study. This model provides an excellent framework for examining the integration of students into a CCC promise program, and a critical lens to examine the phenomena under investigation, all while illuminating the research questions. Astin's model provided a framework of understanding on how community college campus officials can develop effective and equitable promise programs to enhance student success.

Related Literature

There has been an acute focus from scholars on promise program design (Miller-Adams, 2015; Perna & Leigh, 2018) and its effects on student enrollment, affordability, and access (Gándara & Li, 2020; Poutré & Voight, 2018). Further, some researchers have examined the effects of specific placed-based scholarships on student GPAs and college units attempted in

comparison to their peers who were not enrolled in a promise program (Carruthers & Fox, 2016; Plutha & Penny, 2013; Taylor & Lepper, 2018). However, limited attention has been given to community college promise program students in pursuit of transferring to a four-year university and their ongoing needs (Davidson et al., 2020; Littlepage et al., 2018).

Through a critical review of the related literature, the following section provides a synopsis regarding the experiences of students enrolled in free community college tuition programs, while attempting to draw correlations to the challenges associated with transferring to a four-year California university within a fixed period. The literature review is comprised of key topical areas: a brief history of community colleges, the CCC master plan, the birth of the community college promise movement nationally and locally, and transfer and student challenges and success rates in California.

The Genesis of the Community College Movement

Community colleges in the U.S. provide higher education access to over 10 million students annually (Bailey et al., 2015; Jacoby, 2021). Considered open-door institutions serving anyone seeking a college credential, community colleges represent economic growth and upward mobility to people seeking educational opportunities (Boggs & Galizio, 2021). Traditionally, the role community colleges play in providing post-secondary options to all, including underrepresented students representing low-income, first-generation, and students of color statuses, is at the forefront of their mission (Buchanan & Wilson, 2017; Davidson et al., 2020). To fully comprehend the emergence of today's free community college tuition movement, it is integral to first trace the beginnings of two-year colleges.

The birth of the nation's community college dates to the early 20th century (Cohen & Brawer, 2008). The rise of community colleges is directly attributed to societal demand to train

workers for industrial careers and provide educational opportunities to improve social equality. In addition to providing career-related training to local communities for immediate employment, lower division college preparation has been an integral mission of the nation's community colleges (Ells, 1931). Although throughout the country their mission has evolved to include providing associate degrees, certificates, and workforce development, community colleges have also afforded a second chance and gateway to students seeking a transfer to pursue a bachelor's degree who were previously denied access to higher education (Kasper, 2003).

In 1862, congress passed the Morrill Act, which provided each member in their congressional delegation 30,000 acres of western federal land to fund the construction of agricultural and mechanical schools to train citizens in local communities. The act established that at least one college in every state be accessible to educate students for real world application and advance the social classes of all in the U.S. As a result, several states throughout America established colleges to train and support their citizens for in-demand trades. However, as new colleges opened throughout the country, so did negative sentiments from university officials regarding students' lack of preparedness for college-level instruction (Diener, 1986). Several university presidents shared the idea that they had to "protect the institution from the tide of allegedly immature and ill-prepared students" (Diener, 1986, p. 47). This collective concern from university employees was shared by University of Chicago President, William Rainey Harper, who suggested that first-year students were ill-prepared for the university's academic rigor.

In 1900, President Harper proposed for the addition of two academic years of extended high school to prepare students for university-level instruction (Diener, 1986). Harper envisioned separate levels of study for lower and upper-division studies and advocated for an associate degree for those completing a two-year program (Cohen & Brawer, 2008). Further, it was

anticipated that extending high school an additional two years would alleviate the university's responsibility of providing lower-division instruction (Lucas, 2006). This led to the creation of the first community college in the nation, Joliet Junior College. In the 1900s, a few junior colleges emerged as an extension of high school to prepare students for immediate employment opportunities, improve higher education access, and promote social equality for disenfranchised student populations (Cohen et al., 2014). Soon after, additional community colleges were created throughout the nation. Students lived and worked in their communities and would not pay tuition for attending college (Diener, 1986). This proposed higher educational structure eventually reached California and was formalized into law under the Upward Extension Law in 1907 (Boggs & Galizio, 2021). By 1910, the extension of high school in Fresno prompted the creation of the first community college in California, Fresno City College.

CCC Master Plan

Immediately following the Upward Extension Law, California experienced a burgeoning of community colleges. By 1917, California had 16 junior colleges that offered various college level courses important to local economies including English, history, economics, mathematics, modern languages, and training for technical traits (Boggs & Galizio, 2021; Simpson, 1984). In 1921, the California District Junior College law passed legislation paving the wave for the formation of junior college districts, and by 1929, California had 49 junior colleges (Boggs & Galizio, 2021). This surge in community college growth matched that of student enrollments. At the conclusion of World War II and the passing of the Serviceman's Readjustment Act of 1944, or commonly known as the G.I. Bill of Rights, community college enrollments doubled.

As California experienced an upsurge in community college enrollments from veterans and the Baby-Boom population, educational leaders throughout the state were concerned with

accommodating this mass influx of students. In response, the California Master Plan for Higher

Education was created to establish roles and boundaries for each segment of higher education in

the state (Baker et al., 2021; California State Department of Education, 1960). The plan outlined

a separation of community colleges from secondary schools and established the system as part of

the three-tiered structure in the state. Through the Master Plan, community colleges in California

were designed to provide higher education access to all Californians by:

> offering instruction through but not beyond the fourteenth-grade level, including but not
>
> limited to one of more of the following: (a) standard collegiate courses for transfer to
>
> higher institutions, (b) vocational-technical fields leading to employment, and (c) general
>
> or liberal arts courses. (California State Department of Education, 1960, p. 2)

Due to the expansion of community college and the increase in student enrollments,

Simpson (1984) suggested that Master Plan encompassed several new objectives. These included

offering expanded course offerings and student support services including general education,

occupational training, transfer courses to four-year universities, college and career guidance, and

course remediation. Unlike the CSU, which accepted 33% of high school graduates, and the UC

colleges, which accepted the top 12% of high school graduates, all students who graduated from

high school were guaranteed admission within the community college system (California State

Department of Education, 1960).

Charged with providing access to all students who could benefit, the Master Plan also

specified that there were to be no mandatory fees for course enrollment within the CCC system

(Academic Senate for California Community Colleges, 2004). According to Brady and Konczal

(2012), this tuition free policy remained in effect until Ronald Reagan was elected governor in

California. The researchers suggested that when Reagan assumed office, he cut funding for

higher education and laid the foundations for a tuition-based funding model. They theorized that Reagan argued for a tuition-based funding structure because "if students had to pay, they'd value their education too much to protest" (Brady & Konczal, 2012, p. 10). As a result, fees were introduced in 1984 at $5 per unit thus marking the end of free tuition within the CCC system.

Over the next several decades the cost of higher education rose exponentially. While California has had a long tradition of providing low tuition rates for students enrolled in public colleges, the state broke away from that policy in the 2000s (Boggs & Galizio, 2021; Jackson & Warren, 2018). Mainly due to economic rescissions, inflation, and cuts to higher education, tuition increased throughout all three higher education sectors in the state (Murphy, 2004). For example, the tuition and average fees at a UC and CSU increased by over 300% in 2000, even after adjusting for inflation (Jackson & Warren, 2018). Since 2011, tuition and fees have continued an upward trend, especially within the UC and CSU systems. In 2017–2018, the UC system charged around $14,000 a year, the CSU cost about $7300, and the community college tuition totaled $1,100.

To mitigate tuition costs, the state increased spending on financial aid to assist students most impacted. Jackson and Warren (2018) postulated that tuition increases coincide with lower enrollments at the two public university systems. Their research shows that historical increases in tuition rates inhibits students' ability to access higher education. Since 2000, high school graduates enrolling to UC and CSU has fluctuated with rates dropping over the past two decades. The UC enrollment rate in 2007 was less than 9% and has since fallen to 7.5% today. At CSUs, 30% of high school graduates are admitted; however, only around 11% enroll. With the rising costs of higher education, Californians are turning to the community college system to commence with their pursuit of degree attainment.

Recognizing the importance of earning a college credential to compete for high paying jobs in the 21st century, former President Barack Obama proposed the American Graduation Initiative which sought to bolster the workforce by producing millions of additional community college graduates by 2020 (Brandon, 2009). Although the funding was reduced from the proposed $10 billion to $2 billion, Obama's plan stressed the importance of producing an American workforce that can compete globally, proclaiming that nearly two-thirds of all future jobs domestically would require at least some college. The president declared that the U.S. will be seven million degrees short by 2030 if Americans fail to enroll in college, and there would be a shortage of three million workers needing an associate degree or higher. In 2012, while stressing the importance of providing college access and affordability to all Americans, President Obama announced the $8 billion Community College to Career Fund and set a national college completion plan to produce 10 million additional graduates from community colleges and four-year universities (Friedel, 2013). He advocated for every American to complete at least one year or more of higher education in their lifetime. Since the president's proposal, several initiatives have been enacted to enhance the success and completion rates of community college students including Complete College America, Completion by Design, and the Voluntary Framework for Accountability frameworks.

Understanding that annual tuition costs outpace the national inflation rate and the affordability gap for tuition at community and technical colleges, President Obama pressed for congressional action in his 2015 State of the Union Address (Holland, 2015). Obama (2015) posited that, by 2020, over 60% of jobs would require college (Chimel; 2020; Venezia & Jez, 2019. According to statistical projections, however, 2041 is the year in which the nation will reach this benchmark (Nettles, 2017). Obama further elaborated by stating the following:

That's why I'm sending this Congress a bold new plan to lower the cost of community

college – to zero. Keep in mind 40 percent of our college students choose community

college. Some are young and starting out. Some are older and looking for a better job.

Some are veterans and single parents trying to transition back into the job market.

Whoever you are, this plan is your chance to graduate ready for the new economy

without a load of debt.

The Birth of Community College Promise Programs

The origin of the current free tuition movement is often linked to the Kalamazoo Promise

in Michigan (Miller-Adams, 2015). Funded through anonymous donors, the scholarship program

guaranteed to every high school graduate who has been enrolled and resided in the district since

kindergarten a scholarship covering 100% of tuition and mandatory fees at public postsecondary

institutions in the state. Research suggests that after decades of Kalamazoo district enrollment

declines, enrollment grew 24% since the announcement of the scholarship program. Further, data

show a reduction in secondary school suspensions, an increase in units attempted, a higher GPA

for Black students and for those enrolling into college, a 33% increase in completion among

Kalamazoo students. While the transferability of these findings to the broader population of other

promise programs is still not clear, the initial results are encouraging.

A decade later, Oregon Promise was passed by Oregon legislature and made available to

students in fall 2016 (Perna et al., 2017). The scope of the program, also known as the 40:40:20

goal, intended to advance statewide educational goals of having 40% of Oregon adults earning at

least a bachelor's degree, 40% earning at least an associate degree, and the remaining 20%

completing high school by 2025 (Cannon & Joyalle, 2016). Designed to be a last-dollar award,

the program covers the cost of tuition for up to 90 credits at any one of Oregon's 17 community

colleges (Cox et al., 2016). To be eligible for the promise grant, high school graduates in the state must: (a) be an Oregon resident at least 12 months prior to college enrollment; (b) be a recent Oregon high school or GED test graduate; (c) graduate with a cumulative GPA of at least a 2.50 or higher; (d) enroll at an Oregon community college within six months of high school graduation; and (e) have no more than 90 college units attempted or completed at their postsecondary institution. Additionally, all students are required to fill out an Oregon State Grant Application as well as file a Free Application for Federal Student Aid. To maintain eligibility, students must remain enrolled in at least six credits or more during the fall, winter, and spring terms, complete a first-year college experience component, and maintain satisfactory academic progress. While student success metrics are currently being studied, early program data appears to show minimal impact on college enrollment (Cannon & Joyalle, 2016). In 2016, 18.5% of public high school graduates were receiving the Oregon Promise scholarship, compared to 16.3% of graduates enrolled in community colleges two years earlier. Cannon and Joyalle's research showed that Oregon Promise students represent only 5% of community college enrollments.

Also, in 2015, Tennessee Governor Bill Haslam signed the Tennessee Promise Act, which made technical and community colleges tuition-free for high school graduates throughout the state (Poutré & Voight, 2018). In his plan, Governor Haslam outlined the need for at least 55% of all adults in Tennessee to earn a postsecondary credential by 2025. To qualify for the scholarship, eligible students must meet all of the following criteria: (a) graduate from a Tennessee high school or earn a GED before reaching age 19; (b) complete both the Tennessee Promise and FAFSA applications; (c) maintain satisfactory academic progress (2.0 GPA); (d) complete a mandatory mentoring program; (e) complete eight hours of community service; and (f) maintain continuous enrollment through the program (unless approved for a medical or

personal leave of absence (Davidson et al., 2020; Perna et al., 2017). While recognized by many to be the vanguard of the free tuition movement (Poutre & Voight, 2018), the key metrics that measure the program's success in increasing college completion are concerning.

Spires' (2022) research shows that college enrollment rates have declined since 2017 and reached a 10-year low in 2020. Like national trends, disruptions brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted community college student enrollment especially for students of color (Brock & Diwa, 2021; Bulman & Fairlie, 2022; Perez, Jackson, et al., 2022). The hurdles posed by the pandemic, in conjunction with a labor market that offers more opportunities and wage increases among workers without a college education, are largely attributed to the decline in higher education enrollments (Bauer et al., 2021). As a result, Tennesse Promise showed the percentage of promise students that earned a credential within three years declined from 35.4% to 34.1% during the 2015–2017 (Poutré & Voight, 2018). While data shows the state is on track of meeting its goal of having 55% of Tennessee residents earning a postsecondary credential by 2025, the current attainment rate is 46.8%.

Nonetheless, in 2015 President Obama announced the America's College Promise program. This $60 billion matching grant program had the goal of making the first two years of community college free and accessible to all students in the nation (Perna & Leigh, 2018). President Obama highlighted the success of the Tennessee Promise, and urged states to emulate similar programs at their respective community college campuses (Tamburin, 2015). Since the inception of the Kalamazoo and Tennessee Promise programs, several colleges throughout the country have adopted similar goals and initiatives (Chimel, 2020). As of July 2022, 362 promise programs are in existence nationwide, and 88 in the state of California (College Promise, n.d.).

Although promise programs generally share a goal of promoting higher education attainment by providing grants and scholarships to cover college costs, eligibility requirements, program structure, and characteristics vary (Perna & Leigh, 2018). According to researchers, programs differ regarding their demographic and eligibility requirements, high school attendance, residency requirements, timing of student commitment, costs covered by financial aid, availability of student support services, funding sources, and sustainability and scalability (Hemenway, 2016; Perna & Leigh, 2018). This variation in goals, requirements, and structures creates challenges for state policymakers interested in conducting research to ascertain the effectiveness of any given program in hopes of generalizing the results (Perna & Leigh, 2018).

To address this knowledge gap, Miller-Adams (2015) reviewed roughly 50 promise programs throughout the nation and placed them into four categories: (a) expansive and universal; (b) restrictive and limited; (c) expansive and limited; and (d) restrictive and universal. Her research shows that of the promise scholarship programs in 2015, about 50% permitted students to enroll into a variety of postsecondary institutions, while the others restrict students in attending local institutions only. Further, about half of the programs incorporate eligibility provisions similar to the Kalamazoo Promise, where others are based on merit requirements such as maintaining a minimum GPA and continuous enrollment, requiring community service (Tennessee Promise), or meeting both merit and financial need (Denver Scholarship Foundation). Miller-Adams noted that the quantitative evaluation of these programs is limited since programs have yet to produce student success metrics.

Expanding on Miller-Adams' (2015) research, Perna and Leigh (2018) created an inventory of 289 promise programs using descriptive and cluster analyses. To meet the scope of their study, the programs met the following criteria: had a primary goal of increased

postsecondary attainment, provided a financial award to eligible students, have a local residency requirement, and the primary focus was on traditional college-age students. They discovered three distinct clusters resulting in a differentiation among programs throughout the nation which included financial aid award structure (first versus last dollar programs), the type of educational institutions where the scholarship can be used, and eligibility criteria. While the researchers highlight that further research is needed, their findings suggest that these vast differences can determine the effectiveness of the program and its impact on student access and persistence. Further, Bell (2020) argues these factors influence the equitable distribution of scholarships and thus, affects whether college outcomes are equitably distributed within the student population.

Since student success, access, and equity are the mission of several promise programs throughout the country, Gándara and Li (2020) conducted research to discover the effects of promise program enrollments on different ethnicity and gender classifications. Gándara and Li analyzed national data on 33 promise programs at two-year colleges and compared enrollment data to similar community colleges that did not have a program. Although Asian, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander student enrollments remained stagnant, their research showed positive enrollment increases for White, Black, and Hispanic males and females. The researchers found that first-dollar programs increased White student enrollment over last-dollar programs, and those with merit requirements were associated with female student enrollment increases.

While Gándara and Li's (2020) research suggested that marginalized student populations are enrolling into college at higher rates, Perna et al. (2021) argued that contextual conditions in program design may have consequences for student equity. Perna et al. conducted case studies at four purposively selected community colleges in different states and evaluated each for design and its effect on equality. The researchers found that the consequences of implementing

programs for equity depend on the design and structure of the program. Program components such as financial awards and eligibility requirements may either exacerbate or reduce equity. For example, one college limits promise program student eligibility to full-time enrollment only. While some educational leaders argue that full-time enrollment increases completion rates, Perna et al. suggested that attending college full-time may limit the participation of students from underserved groups who need to work. Further, program structure involving income eligibility requirements award has consequences for equity. Each of the four colleges studied is designed as a last-dollar program as compared to first-dollar programs. Due to this design, low income students who qualify for Pell Grants receive less funding than students who are ineligible for Pell. Poutré and Voight (2018) theorized that last dollar programs distribute state funding inequitably, and do not consider additional costs associated with higher education such as books, transportation, childcare, room and board, and food.

CCC Promise Program

Today, the CCC system represents the largest system of public higher education in the United States (Boggs & Galizio, 2021). The system plays a critical role in degree completion because it is the largest and most accessible system of higher education in the state (Johnson et al., 2019; Rios-Aguilar & Lyke, 2020). Most Californians start their educational trajectories at one or more of the state's 116-colleges, which educate more than 2.1 million students annually (CCCCO, 2021). Considered open access institutions available to all, the CCCs represent the largest provider of workforce training in the country (Boggs & Galizio, 2021). While the CCC system has been nationally regarded as the leader in providing occupational and career training pathways to students, their mission has evolved to include academic preparation for those seeking a transfer to four-year universities (Cohen et al., 2014). Research shows that over 50% of

CSU graduates and nearly 30% of UC graduates transferred from a CCC, totalling over 100,000 student transfers from CCCs annually (CCCCO, 2021).

Although the CCC system has some of lowest tuition rates in the nation, and over one million students receive $2.8 billion in state and federal financial aid annually, the average net price for students representing low-income backgrounds is significantly higher when compared to public universities in the state after factoring in total cost of attendance (books, transportation, health care, child care, food; Brymner, 2020; Rios-Aguilar & Lyke, 2020). For low income students enrolled in the CCC system, about 50% of their family's total income is needed to fully cover the total cost of attendance. Consequently, the state's most vulnerable student populations face increased financial burdens in pursuit of earning higher education credentials.

In response to Californians' concerns centering around college affordability, in conjunction with efforts to increase college access and success rates for students representing marginalized backgrounds, state legislation passed Assembly Bill 19 (AB 19) in 2017. AB 19, also known as California college promise, allocated funding to community colleges to close achievement gaps, improve college readiness, and increase persistence, completion, and transfer rates (Rauner & Lundquist, 2019; Rios-Aguilar & Lyke, 2020). In its first year of inception, AB 19 awarded $46 million to community college districts that opted into the program, and nearly doubled funding the following year with the passage of AB 2 (Rauner & Lundquist, 2019). While state funding guidelines were flexible for each college, the goal of the dispersed funds were aimed at waiving tuition for up to two years for any student who enrolled full-time at a CCC who had not previously earned a postsecondary degree or certificate. State allocations could be used to cover a myriad of associated college costs including textbooks, transportation vouchers, and childcare expenses, or to hire additional support staff such as counselors or tutors.

Like programs nationally, CCC promise programs vary in the programmatic and institutional characteristics that encompass personal institutional features (Miller-Adams, 2015; Rauner et al., 2018). Although researchers debate these defining features, most concur that financial support, which encourages students to attend higher education institutions, as well as eligibility criteria based on the student's residence, are key defining metrics that define a promise program (Perna & Leigh, 2018).

Rauner and Smith's (2020) inaugural study highlighted the landscape and evolving structures of existing programs in California. As part of their analysis, the researchers analyzed programs that met the following six selection criteria: (a) provided direct financial support for college costs, (b) served students based on where they live or attend college, (c) established an objective selection process for eligible students, (d) expected the program would be ongoing, (e) developed programs locally to meet college and community needs, and (f) provided financial support to students as of fall 2019. Based on the established criteria, 121 California programs were included in their analysis. Rauner and Smith found that each program was uniquely designed and differed in size, scope, eligibility requirements, the supports they offered, and length of student participation. The varying nature of each promise program, such as requiring a minimum high school GPA, enrollment immediately after secondary school, and implementing full-time student status may limit higher education access for students from underrepresented backgrounds (Davidson et al., 2020; Perna et al., 2020; Rauner & Smith, 2020). Additionally, while over 75% of those surveyed were offered non-financial support such as counseling, career services, and dedicated tutoring, Rauner and Smith suggested that doing so does not necessarily improve student outcomes. They argued that for vulnerable populations such as first-generation students, mandating participants to take part in multiple, time-consuming activities is challenging

because it detracts from the limited time they must occupy to their studies, attend to family obligations, or work. The researchers implied that because promise programs proliferated across the state in recent years, more data is needed to ascertain which model is most efficient in establishing equity, access, and successful student outcomes.

In a follow-up study, Smith and Rauner (2020) investigated 70 CCC promise programs over a three-year period through formal data collection including program surveys, internet searches, direction communication with program administrators, and Google News alerts. The programs included in the analysis all shared the following six criteria: (a) were based in California, (b) provide direct financial support for college costs, (c) served students based on where they live or attend school, (d) used an objective selection process to determine student eligibility, (e) expected the program to be ongoing, and (f) were developed to meet the local needs of its citizens. Although a key limitation of the study is the data collected provides limited insight on whether AB 19 funds contributed to program structures that reduce achievement gaps, their findings from the analysis do provide implications for state policymakers and education practitioners looking to leverage funding to develop or expand promise program initiatives. For example, the decision to limit program participation to first-time, full time freshmen may be directly attributed to national data showing that part-time students are less likely to complete a higher education credential than their full-time peers and are twice as more likely to drop out of college (Juszkiewicz, 2020). Further, Smith and Rauner reported that 83% of AB 19 programs required students to be recent high school graduates, and 89% of programs limited participation to students within their local communities through high school attendance or city residency requirements. In both instances, these eligibility requirements are not included in the legislation. The researchers suggested that unless state law changes to discontinue the flexibility of CCCs to

interpret how to use AB 19 funding, the relationship between legislation and program structure will continue to be ambiguous. They argue that it is imperative for legislation to succulently state promise program goals, and to examine the impact legislation has on program structures and student outcomes.

Since districts and colleges are granted considerable discretion in program design, structure, and how they allocate and distribute funding, CCCs funding has resulted in disparities across racial and ethnic student subgroups. Rios-Aguilar and Lyke (2020) found that Latinx and White students received the majority of funding under AB 19, where the majority of aid for White students went to fees, compared to Latinx students, where the extent of fees covered other college costs. Further, the average financial aid awarded from AB 19 funds for White students during the first year of inception was around $460, compared to $281 for Latinx students and just $265 for Black students. As a result, the authors argue that AB 19 is a decentralized financial aid system that unevenly distributes spending across diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds resulting in inequities in the amount and type of aid received. Furthermore, among other concerns concerning AB 19 funding is that beneficiaries of the California promise program are restricted to first-time, full-time students. Given that 70% of CCC students are enrolled part-time, a trend that has existed for over a decade (Zinshteyn, 2018), the vast majority of the students in the system are either unable to participate in the program or are facing a significant barrier in attempting to meet full-time enrollment requirements in hopes of benefiting from the program (Rios-Aguilar & Lyke, 2020).

Rios-Aguilar and Lyke (2020) found that in addition to the unequal distribution of AB 19 funds across racial and ethnic backgrounds, similar inequities were visible geographically within the state. The researchers found that during the 2018–2019 academic year, of the $14 million

awarded in financial aid from AB 19 funds, 40% was concentrated in four counties (Los Angeles, Orange, Sacramento, and Santa Clara). In addition, their research showed that over 20 counties in the state did not distribute AB 19 funds to their student population, which contradicts the bill's goal of reducing and eliminating achievement gaps. These concerns are exacerbated for students living in rural areas that do not have reliable access to state issued financial aid.

California Transfer Challenges

Despite the findings associated with the inequities perpetuated through promise program funding (Rauner & Smith, 2020; Rios-Aguilar & Lyke, 2020), California's public higher education system is designed to send 70% of undergraduate students to one of the state's 116 community colleges to commence their higher education journeys (Baker et al., 2021; Lee at al., 2021). With the allure of low college fees and the opportunity to attend college tuition free, CCCs are an attractive option for students representing low-income backgrounds, older adults, those who are first in their families to attend college, and students from underrepresented groups (Martinez et al., 2017). Additionally, with the current economic uncertainties stemming from the COVID-19 recession, increased enrollment of students choosing a transfer path through community college to defray the costs of higher education is expected to continue (Baker et al., 2021; Carales, 2020).

While in theory, the cost effectiveness for CCC students completing lower-division curriculum before transferring to a four-year university is evident given the lower tuition rates and the higher state subsidies at public universities, in practice the cost advantage dissipates as students take longer to transfer (Baker et al., 2021; Johnson & Mejia, 2020). Although most Californians enter community colleges with aspirations of transferring to a university, only 2.5% accomplish this goal within two years, 25% after four years of enrollment, and 38% after six

years of enrollment (Perez, Johnson, et al., 2021; Reddy & Ryan, 2021; Shapiro et al., 2018).

Although CCC are pivotal in providing an access point for bachelor's degree attainment, low

transfer rates raise questions about how California's public institutions of higher education are

not providing the appropriate support mechanisms needed to ensure transfer success (Crisp et al.,

2020; Lee at al., 2021). These statistics are exacerbated for students of color (Crisp et al., 2020;

Felix, 2020). While 51% of the CCC student enrollments are of Hispanic decent and considering

67,000 students transferred to an instate public university in 2016, only 25,000 Latinos

accomplished this goal (Felix, 2020; Johnson & Mejia, 2020). Further, less than 3,000 Black

students transferred to a UC or CSU (Johnson & Mejia, 2020).

This alarming data for students who started at a CCC equates to paying roughly $40,000

more to obtain a bachelor's degree than a student enrolling directly at a four-year public

university (College Board, 2022). Although full-time CCC students pay less than $1,500 a year

in tuition, the burden of cost rises drastically when students do not complete their degree

objectives in a reasonable period (Bustillos, 2017). Delaying transfer yields additional costs,

including paying for housing, transportation, and textbooks (Cooper et al., 2020). Further, on

average CCC students accumulate 75 units at an additional cost of more than $7,500 each year

they are enrolled in the system. Finally, as a result of delayed transfer, students relinquished an

opportunity of over $30,000 in lifetime earnings had they been able to work (Bustillos, 2017).

Moore et al.'s (2009) seminal transfer research highlighted the challenges facing CCC

transfer students, implying that "the maze of requirements facing students designing an

individual transfer plan is frustratingly difficult to navigate" (p. 5). Moore et al. speculated that

CCC students must elect an educational pathway and transfer destination early because

articulation agreements vary between each university. If a student is interested in transfer

opportunities among multiple universities for the same major, most students are required to take additional courses in order to be considered for each university's unique admission requirement. This results in an increased educational and financial cost for transfer students and ultimately extends their time within the CCC system.

Approximately a decade later, Bustillos (2017) found similar results. She argued that while progress has been made with several CCC reforms (elimination of assessment exams and pre-requisite remediation courses), transferring to an in-state university remains complex for students. As Bustillos posited, "students have described bureaucratic, inconsistent, and confusing (practices). Students are required to piece together an education plan with little to no overlap between general education and major requirements demanded by different systems, schools, and departments" (p. 25). Compounding the dilemma is the effect these inconsistencies have on counselors and their ability to assist transfer students pursuing admission to multiple universities (Amey, 2020; Felix et al., 2022; Maldonado, 2019).

Venezia and Jez (2019) highlighted that in California, faculty working within the two university sectors of public higher education have autonomy in determining the undergraduate requirements at their respective campuses. This freedom often results in the unalignment of curriculum with other campuses, resulting in a complicated transfer process for students because each individual campus has different requirements (Jacob et al., 2019; Johnson & Meija, 2020). Although the admission demands at one community college may satisfy transfer requirements, they may not meet the requirements established by the receiving four-year institution. Bustillos (2017) suggested that the unique identities and institutional governance structures at UC and CSU campuses represent barriers for students seeking transfer. Her research found that over 100,000 articulation agreements exist among CCC and the UCs alone that articulate what

students must do to be considered for admission. This variation accentuates the impediments transfer-bound students encounter and the reason behind taking additional courses to meet the admission requirements of multiple colleges (Jacob et al., 2019; Johnson & Meija, 2020). This lack of alignment between the three public systems of higher education creates confusion for counselors and students in determining the required coursework needed to transfer (Amey, 2020; Baker et al., 2021; Cooper et al., 2020). Jacob et al.'s research showed similar complications, finding that articulation agreements are campus specific. The college courses accepted at one four-year university might not be accepted at another (Johnson et al., 2019; Jacob et al., 2019. These variations in articulation agreements ultimately keep students in the community college system longer or deter them from transferring altogether (Baker et al., 2021; Crisp et al., 2020).

Lewis et al.' (2016) research on the complexities of transfer supports this confusion; they found that CCC students collectively had difficulty accessing and receiving consistent information from counselors and support websites that are designed to simplify the process. Although CCC campuses are required to provide student support services at their respective institutions, colleges do not have the financial resources to provide this support to their entire population (Felix & Trinidad, 2017; Venezia & Jez, 2019). CCC counselors, who are identified as the primary point of contact to aid students in the transfer process, are faculty members with master's degree training in personal, academic, and career-related services (Lewis et al., 2016). Counselor responsibilities include developing individualized academic plans, helping students plan their courses and set personal goals, and understanding transfer requirements. Currently, however, many CCCs are struggling to provide their student population with academic guidance because of insufficient counseling staff. Lewis et al.'s various focus group members mentioned that students required counseling intervention in determining their career and academic goals but

did not have access because of limited staffing. Although the American School Counselor

Association recommends the ratio of students to counselors at the community college level

should be 250:1 (Jones, 2022). Lewis et al. and Venezia and Gatlin Jez showed ranges from

600:1 to more than 1,500:1 at some CCCs. For incoming community college students, many who

represent first generation backgrounds, the lack of counselor availability poses significant

barriers and frustration even before commencing their educational journeys (Bustillos, 2017).

Even for those that can connect with campus support services at their community college,

students face additional problems. CCC students have several options to complete their lower

division general education transfer requirements including the Intersegmental General Education

Transfer Curriculum (IGETC) and the CSU General Education-Breadth (GE-Breadth). The

inherent challenge students face is in knowing the differences between the two general education

patterns and which one represents the best option in meeting their educational objectives (Lee at

al., 2021). For undecided students not knowing which pattern to follow, they may complete

inappropriate courses resulting in a complicated or delayed transfer to a university.

The IGETC is a comprehensive pattern of lower division general education courses that

can be used to satisfy requirements for both UC and CSU transfer admissions (Venezia & Jez,

2019). While completing the IGETC is not recommended for students pursuing high unit majors

such as engineering or in the physical sciences, completing the IGETC is encouraged for

students seeking flexibility of transfer options or for those that are undecided on a campus or

major. Completing the IGETC is neither a requirement for transfer admission consideration, nor

does completion of the pattern guarantee admission to students at any of the UC campuses.

Conversely, the CSU GE-Breadth are a series of courses used to satisfy the lower division

general education requirements for the CSU system. Of the 45 lower division unit requirements,

CSUs require completion of 30 units prior to transferring. Like the IGETC pattern, completion of the CSU GE-Breadth is not an admission requirement and does not guarantee transfer admission for students to the campus or major of their choice.

Bustillos (2017) found that these slight difference between the two general education patterns can further add to transfer complications. For example, if a student commences their education by following one pattern but later decides the alternative option is more conducive to their goals, they will be required to take additional courses to satisfy the new option. These variations and nuances of the two general education patterns add to the complexity for CCC students because it presents multiple possibilities that will further delay transfer.

Exacerbating the problem are the courses themselves. Students attending certain CCC campuses may not have access to transfer course requirements because they are either full or are not offered regularly (Brohawn et al., 2021; Johnson et al., 2019). Largely due to state budget cuts stemming from the 2008 Great Recession that have persisted even a decade later, funding at community colleges in 2017 was $9 billion less compared to 2008 levels (Robles et al., 2021; Venezia & Jez, 2019). When colleges face budgetary constraints, it often reduces course offerings and sections resulting in students being unable to enroll in the courses needed to fulfill degree or transfer requirements (Robles et al., 2021). In California, community colleges have cut over 20% of their course offerings resulting in on average over 5,000 students per community college being waitlisted for classes (Bustillos, 2017).

Robles et al.'s (2021) fundamental study on a large CCC located in the Bay Area used local randomization approach to regression discontinuity analysis to compare students who signed up for waitlisted courses who were eventually unable to enroll in their courses. Their research found that students who were unable to enroll in their preferred course sections due to

oversubscription were more likely to sit out the term. For students stuck on waitlists and shut out of course enrollment, they were almost 30% more likely to take zero courses that term. Consequently, nearly 35% of these students were more likely to transfer to an alternative CCC within a 30-minute driving radius. According to their research, these nearby CCCs have lower degree completion rates and lower career earnings years later which signifies not only an added barrier but a reduction in college quality. Their results show that underrepresented minority students are more likely to transfer to other two-year institutions, and White students seem to delay their transfer to a four-year college altogether. For students that did enroll, they were 5.1 percentage points less likely to enroll in three or more courses.

Despite the shortcomings of CCCs inability to transfer students, they remain an integral part of the state's economy. Research suggests that the institutions of public higher education in California have aided in growing the state's economy to the 5th largest in the world (Cooper, 2018). The CCCs enroll more students than any other system in the country (Mejia et al., 2019) and are essential to the economic stability and social mobility of the state's residents, serving two million students annually in one of the 116 colleges within the system (Reddy & Ryan, 2021). Of these two million students, a half million first-time freshman indicated that their primary goal was to transfer to a four-year university. Unfortunately, as findings suggest, less than 3% of students will transfer from the CCC system with two years.

Recognizing that California is projected to fall over one million bachelor's degree short of economic demand by 2030 (Cooper et al., 2017; Johnson et al., 2019) and that 70% of California undergraduate students are enrolled in community college, most of which represent racial/ethnic groups, the CCC Chancellor's Office adopted various systemwide reforms intended to increase the number of students to reach a defined goal while decreasing the time and cost in

doing so. Evidence shows that employment opportunities for people with postsecondary credentials has risen, and the job availability for individuals with a high school diploma or less is declining (Torpey, 2018). Furthermore, research shows evidence that workers whose highest level of educational attainment is a high school diploma earn $1.3 million in lifetime earnings, compared to bachelor's degree holders who earn $2.3 million (Cooper et al., 2017; Torpey, 2019). These lifetime earning disparities may continue to increase given that those with less than a bachelor's degree have a higher unemployment rate compared to college graduates. As such, transfer efforts have brought forth several innovative reforms including guided pathways, California promise, and improvements in data technology, and introduced a systemwide funding formula based on outcomes that include the number of students earning degrees, completing transfer level math and English within their first year, and the number of students transferring to four-year colleges and universities (Mejia et al., 2019; Strong Start to Finish, 2020).

Associate Degree for Transfer

While each systemwide reform is of significance concerning increasing the number of transfer students to four-year universities, the Student Transfer Achievement Reform Act, or Senate Bill (SB) 1440, arguably changed the landscape of CCCs. This historic transfer reform legislation created the associate degree for transfer (ADT), which designed a preferred pathway for students to transfer into the state's public universities (Baker et al., 2021; Reddy & Ryan, 2021). The creation of the ADT was designed to decrease confusion and excess course credits, and increase transparency and transfer rates, ultimately ensuring every CCC student who completed the 60-unit requirement an ADT (Felix, 2020; Reddy & Flores Morales; 2022; Wolzinger & O'Lawrence, 2018). In addition to earning the degree, the student would complete university-level requirements and be guaranteed transfer admission into a corresponding program

at junior level standing into the CSUs (Baker et al., 2021; Venezia & Jez, 2019). Students who earn the degree do not have to take additional lower-division coursework and are only required to complete 60 units of upper-division courses at their respective universities (Wolzinger & O'Lawrence, 2018). Furthermore, completion of an ADT provides priority admission to a CCC student and for admission purposes, are given a 0.1 GPA bump if they are applying to an impacted major, and a 0.2 GPA bump if they are applying to a non-impacted major (Venezia & Jez, 2019). Since the creation of the ADT, nearly 300,000 degrees have been awarded to CCC students (Lewis et al., 2016). Research shows that students earning ADTs graduated with six units less than students who earned traditional associate degrees. This slight reduction in units saved students $10.5 million in community college tuition.

Although the CCCs and CSUs systems describe the ADT as the Degree with the Guarantee that admits students into junior-level standing, several barriers exist (Baker et al., 2021; Reddy & Flores Morales). First, the degree admits students into the CSU system but not the CSU of their choice (Johnson & Meija, 2020; Venezia & Jez, 2019). Since the inception of the ADT program, the CSUs have faced enrollment demand that exceeds their capacity, resulting in the CSUs accepting fewer students (Reddy & Ryan, 2021; Venezia & Jez, 2019). Currently, 15 of the 23 CSU campuses are impacted at the campus level, meaning they receive more applications than their instructional or physical resources can accommodate (Lewis et al., 2016; Venezia & Jez, 2019). Of these 15 CSU campuses, seven are impacted at the program level resulting in all students needing to complete higher admission standards. For students attending a CCC outside of the impacted CSU's local preference area, upper-division transfer preference becomes highly competitive, admission consideration is primarily given to the college's local geographical area, and supplemental admission criteria is implemented (Venezia & Jez, 2019).

Although each CSU campus determines their supplemental admission criteria, common requirements include an elevated cumulative GPA, full completion of major specific coursework, and a minimum GPA in the declared major.

Over the past five years, over 60,000 transfer-eligible students were denied admission to the campus of their choice because demand surpassed enrollment capacity (Johnson & Mejia, 2020). To address problems associated with impacted campuses and programs, the CSU system established a redirection policy that ensured applicants eligible for transfer admission who were denied the campus of their choice were redirected to another CSU campus without having to complete an additional application. However, research indicates that relatively low enrollment at the redirected campus occurs, suggesting that CSU applicants are place-bound and unable to relocate to attend the four-year university (Cook & Mehlotra, 2020; Johnson & Mejia, 2020).

A few years after the implementation of the ADT, Neault and Piland (2014) examined the transfer pathway of southern CCC students and found that variations in local policy and insufficient student capacity serve as significant barriers for transfer students. Their research found that impacted CSU's have increasingly raised admission standards and are becoming more restrictive because of the increased demand for enrollment. They argue that the selective practices created by CSUs imply a disinterest in CCC transfer students, resulting in the creation of an elitism impression. Their examination of transfer policies found that the initial GPA for local CSU admission was set at a 2.0 minimum, was later raised to a 2.5, and is now as high as a 3.5 cumulative GPA at some campuses. Promise program students who apply for transfer admission consideration but are denied admission to their local CSU often remain in their CCC, accumulating unnecessary units in hopes of improving their GPA to be more competitive (Reddy & Ryan, 2021; Venezia & Jez, 2019). Despite the ADT, this shifting academic standard often

forces students to remain in community college even after they have exhausted their promise program benefits, and a vast majority of those not admitted may stop persisting in college altogether.

Although Neault and Piland's (2014) findings are nearly a decade old, these same admission problems persist today throughout the CSU system. The CSUs have established minimum admissions standards for transfer students; impacted campuses and programs raise admission requirements for all students creating an increasingly competitive environment (Reddy & Ryan, 2021; Venezia & Jez, 2019). Although the minimum GPA to be considered for transfer admission to a CSU is a 2.0, for students applying to an impacted campus/major, the GPA is significantly higher. This added barrier presents multiple consequences for students struggling to transfer into a CSU in hopes of finishing their baccalaureate degrees. Acknowledging this limitation, and in hopes of making the ADT more desirable and beneficial to CCC students, leaders from the CCC and CSU systems added admissions advantages for ADT earners. For students completing an ADT and applying to an impacted campus, they would be granted a 0.1 GPA bump to assist with admissions competitiveness.

Despite this GPA bump for ADT earners, Reddy and Ryan (2021) found that this slight increase did not provide adequate admissions assistance to the CSUs most impacted campuses, nor did it aid in getting students into their local campus of choice. The researchers imply that aspiring transfer students applying to an impacted campus often spend additional time in community college taking additional courses to satisfy supplemental admission criteria to make their applications more attractive to the receiving institution(s). They argued this runs counterinitiative to the mission of the ADT of streamlining the transfer process and reducing excess units earned by students. Further, if a student needs to stay within proximity of their

residence but is denied admission to their CSU, they may choose not to enroll at an alternative CSU or wander off the ADT pathway resulting in taking additional courses. Reddy and Ryan suggested that unless public four-year universities in California adjust their admissions standards by accommodating more transfer students, the true intent of the ADT will never come to fruition.

In their research involving ADT, Lewis et al. (2016) arrived at similar conclusions. Lewis et al. and Venezia and Jez (2019) found that a degree is helpful for students who select an academic goal early in their community college career, and do not deviate from that decision throughout their tenure. However, Lewis et al. (2016) found that around 80% of students entered community college without a defined goal, and during their first year, preferred exploring classes and taking their time to develop their academic interests and goals. In addition, they theorize that the ADT is most beneficial to students willing to enroll in a CSU beyond their local geographical boundaries. Their focus group findings revealed that students chose their CSU based on proximity of their residence, and work and family obligations. Unfortunately, the ADT does not grant admission to a CSU of choice and oftentimes redirects students to an alternative campus with a similar program (Venezia & Jez, 2019). Finally, the researchers suggested the ADT is not helpful to students who change their majors. Lewis et al.'s data showed that nearly 50% of students change their mind at some point in community college, and several students in the study focus group indicated their reluctancy to pursue an ADT in community college because they did not want to earn the same degree at their transfer institution.

Further compounding the problem are the guarantees afforded by the ADT are not applicable to the UC system (Johnson & Meija, 2020; Reddy & Ryan, 2021). According to several researchers (Douglass, 2015; Reddy & Ryan, 2021), the Constitution of California provides autonomy to the UCs by granting the system with its own powers of self-governance,

including the authority for campuses to establish their own policies related to admission and program design (Douglass, 2015). The state of California funds the UC's operational costs through enrollment-based funding providing influence over the system's decision (Reddy & Ryan, 2021). However, state legislation can only request that UCs follow similar transfer policies governing the ADT program but not enforce them. At the time SB 1440 was passed, legislation urged UCs to streamline the transfer process for students by articulating major requirements across its nine campuses and implement reforms that would guarantee admission. Unfortunately, completion of an ADT program does not factor into the admissions decision at UC campuses.

In 2018, CCCs and UCs signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) to strengthen and streamline transfer access to guarantee admission for qualified community college students (Reddy & Ryan, 2021). The MOU requested that UC campuses provide clear transfer pathways for community college students to follow and the required courses for admission. As a result, UCs developed 21 transfer pathways for the most popular majors, and campus level admission guarantees for well qualified students. While the MOU recognized the rigor of the ADT program and used the framework in developing their transfer pathways, students earning an ADT still were not provided an admissions guarantee.

Reddy and Ryan's (2021) examination of UCs transfer pathways uncovered several limitations for community college students. First, regardless if students are following a transfer pathway, UCs do not standardize lower division major coursework systemwide resulting in the need to take additional courses for those interested in applying to multiple universities. Second, because of multiple transfer reforms including the ADT, transfer pathways, and the transfer admission guarantee, students face complexity in attempting to understand which path to follow, the benefits of each program to their individual circumstances, and the variations across UC

campuses in course and GPA minimum requirements. Further, despite admissions guarantees proposed by UCs, three campuses do not participate (San Diego, Berkeley, and Los Angeles). Of the six remaining campuses, certain majors are excluded from the guarantee, and the courses required for admissions and cumulative GPA varies for each. Third, students following the UC transfer pathway generally do not receive an associate degree; doing so presents an increased likelihood of completing their bachelor's degree after transferring. Finally, UC transfer pathways do not align with the major requirements of the ADT in similar majors, further complicating the transfer process for students hoping to keep their options open to both the CSU and UC systems.

AB 705

Although the impact of the ADT of streamlining the transfer process by increasing access to four-year universities for CCC students is debatable, additional transfer reforms have been adopted. As previously discussed, each transfer reform focused on evidence-based practices driven by data to support student success (Strong Start to Finish, 2020). Furthermore, given the historic equity issues that have persisted within CCCs, each reform considered specific educational barriers faced by underrepresented student populations to find strategies to reduce achievement gaps.

In 2017, the state passed new legislation (AB 705) to broaden the scope and accelerate change for CCC students systemwide (Meija et al., 2019). For decades, the CCC has required more than 75% of incoming students to take remedial English and math courses based on their performance on standardized tests (Barton, 2021; Hern, 2019). These students were required to take remedial courses in English and math, with the vast majority never completing the requirements needed to transition to college-level courses (Hern, 2019). Although remedial courses are intended to help students become more successful, they oftentimes take two years to

complete and repeat similar material secondary schools have already taught. Research shows that these placement practices disproportionately impacted students of color who were required to enroll in multiple remedial courses which do not count toward transfer completion (Felix, et al., 2022; Ngo & Melguizo, 2016). Further, additional data suggest college placement exams are not a strong predictor of student success in college level instruction, and traditionally have under-placed students in developmental coursework when they would have otherwise succeeded in college level classes (Rodriguez et al., 2018). For example, Scott-Clayton et al. (2014) found that approximately 25% of students were under-placed in math, and nearly 33% were misplaced in English resulting in students being placed in remediation course versus college level instruction.

The new law, however, requires all CCCs to use high school success metrics based on student performance to place students in math and English courses, ultimately paving the way for incoming students to take transfer-level courses upon commencement of their postsecondary studies (Barton, 2021; Mejia et al., 2019). Considered a historic landmark reform, AB 705 fundamentally changed English and math assessment exams and remedial course support by eliminating the use of assessment tests and giving students the right to enroll in transfer-level courses (Barton; 2021; Hern, 2019). Under the new law, CCCs are required to maximize the probability that a student will enter and complete transfer-level math and English within a year. Enacted systemwide in 2019, these required changes are expected to increase the retention of nearly 50,000 students of color, returning adults, and low-income students yearly, as well as 100,000 more students completing transfer-level English, and 60,000 completing transfer-level math (Strong Start to Finish, 2020).

In their quantitative research, Cooper et al. (2017) aimed to understand the reasons surrounding CCC students' inability to transfer to a university despite having completed

admission requirements. Analyzing records of nearly two million students who enrolled in a

CCC between 2010–2011 and 2014–2015 who demonstrated an intent to transfer by completing

at least 12 transferable units within a six-year period, the researchers classified non-transfers into

five distinct categories along a continuum. These five categories included: (a) transfer explorers

($N = 893,663$), or students who were furthest away from transfer having completed between 12

and 44 transferable units, (b) momentum students ($N = 194,639$) who demonstrated transfer

momentum by completing 45 to 59 transfer units, (c) students near the gate ($N = 156,999$) who

completed 60 or more transferrable units, (d) students at the gate ($N = 135,557$) who were

transfer-ready but had not transferred, and (e) transfer achievers ($N = 583,074$), or students who

transferred to a four-year university. Among the various reasons surrounding CCC student's

inability to transfer to a university, the researchers found that of students near the gate ($N =$

156,999; 18% overall), 92% of individuals needed to complete math in order to proceed. Of

these students, over 50% were missing both transfer-level math and English. Completing these

gateway courses prevents a significant majority of students, most of whom are required to also

complete remedial level instruction, from transitioning to a four-year college (Barton, 2021;

Cooper et al., 2017).

Although data is limited, promising results have been demonstrated within the CCC

system since the implementation of AB 705. Rodriguez et al. (2018) were the first to examine the

effects of secondary schooling placement and co-requisite remediation within the CCC system,

finding that colleges have substantial positive gains in student access to transfer-level math and

English courses, and commensurate declines in developmental education enrollment. For CCCs

that implemented AB 705 in 2017, over 240,000 students systemwide enrolled in a transferrable

English course for the first time, a 7% increase compared to the year prior. During the same year,

over 260,000 students enrolled in college-level mathematics for the first time, an increase of 3%. While all CCCs surveyed experienced an increase in first-time freshmen accessing college-level English courses, West Hills-Coalinga college had the largest direct impact, doubling efforts from 32% for first-time freshmen in 2015 to 64% a year later. For math, the College of the Siskiyous experienced the most dramatic increase, showing a 51% increase for students. Statewide, however, CCCs did not experience positive increases in throughput rates, or the measurement by changes in the share of students who successfully complete a transfer-level English and/or math course within one year of enrollment. Throughout the system, CCCs saw a 1% increase in throughput rates for English, and a 2% decline in throughput rates for math for first-time freshman able to enroll in college level instruction.

Soon after Rodriguez et al.'s (2018) initial research, several studies (Brohawn et al., 2021; Hern, 2019; Johnson & Mejia, 2020) examined AB 705 and its effects on student access and success. Hern's found that, during the first year of AB 705 implementation (fall 2019), CCCs systemwide nearly doubled their transfer-level course offerings from the fall 2017 figures in both English (48% to 87%), and math (36% to 68%). However, despite data showing these drastic increases, data revealed that many CCCs are still offering remedial level instruction. For example, Hern found that community colleges are continuing to offer a substantial number of algebra course sections that far exceed student need. This volume of remedial course offerings constitutes a systemwide belief among campus faculty and administration that students need and would benefit from these classes. Hern suggested that a common interpretation of AB 705 is that even if colleges can no longer mandate students take remedial level instruction, they can still offer the classes. She argued that keeping remedial courses in the class schedule is likely to exacerbate racial and economic inequalities because historically, students of color have been

disproportionally placed in and classified as remedial learners. By continuing to offer below college level instruction, students will be steered to take these courses and thus, reinforces implicit bias within the campus community. For CCCs to reach the equitable intentions and provisions outlined within the law, Hern recommended shifting course offerings to primarily transfer-level English and math and eliminating remedial instruction completely.

Mejia et al.'s (2019) analysis had similar results, showing that while CCCs have broadened access to transfer-level math and English courses, remedial courses are still being offered to students. Their research revealed that nearly 6,000 sections of below transfer-level math courses are offered systemwide, enrolling over 178,000 students. For context, for every transfer-level math course offered in the CCCs, there is a below college-level course section as well. Findings from their focus groups show that the primary motivation in offering remediation is the belief that the courses will benefit student's preparation for transfer-level curriculum.

Despite the abundance of remedial course offerings within the CCC system, research shows that most students are electing to enroll in transfer-level classes upon commencing their educational journeys. Brohawn et al.'s (2021) data for all CCCs show that direct enrollment in transfer-level English rose to 95% in the fall of 2019, a 24% increase from the year prior. For math, direct enrollment rose to 79% in 2019 compared to 43% the year prior, accounting for over 46,000 additional student enrollments. Equally significant is the affect AB 705 has had on access for disproportionally impacted student groups. Brohawn et al.'s research shows all ethnic groups experiencing large enrollment increases in college-level English and math, with Black students having the largest gains in enrollment of 32% for English and 42% for math. Further, between 2015 and 2019, the gap in enrollment into transfer-level courses between Black and White students narrowed by 13%, and for Latinx and White students decreased to 8%. Brohawn et al.

estimated that these numbers will continue to increase as CCCs continue to implement the mandate AB 705 practices at their respective campuses.

Although AB 705 has altered assessment practices within CCCs with the underlying hope of ultimately increasing transfer rates to four-year universities, limited data exists pertaining to the collective success rates of students. Brohawn et al. (2021) and Mejia et al. (2019) reported slight decreases in the success rates of first-time students enrolling directly in college-level English and math. For example, Mejia et al. found that of the group of colleges that broadened access, on average, college-level statistics success rates dipped slightly. While this decline varied, six college colleges in her study experienced a 3% decline in success rates, two colleges saw a decline of 7% or less, and five colleges reported a decline of 10% and higher. For English, the researchers did not find a correlation between changes in transfer-level college composition enrollment and success rates, showing a 1% overall decline in success rates. Within the focus groups, English faculty noted that although there was a slight drop in overall success rates, collectively, more students are accessing and completing the course than ever before. Perceptions from the focus group revealed an inherent belief that of the students who succeeded, they otherwise would have fallen victim to the attrition problem presented from multiple levels of developmental education. Further, faculty felt of the students who were not successful in college composition, they were also not successful in their other courses, highlighting the need to work with students holistically to address barriers effecting their success outside of the classroom including food and housing insecurities and mental health and wellness.

Brohawn et al.'s (2021) research supported Mejia et al.'s (2019) findings that success rates in both college-level mathematics and English composition courses have slightly decreased. However, the researchers argued that while decreases have been observed in the success rates of

these courses, it must be taken into context given the drastic increase in overall student enrollment and completion of these transfer-level courses. For example, completion of transfer-level English showed an increase of nearly 30% from fall 2018 to fall 2019. Furthermore, over 22,000 more students completed college-level math in fall 2019 within one-year of enrollment, an increase of 47%. However, Brohawn et al. emphasized that regardless of overall course success rates, the biggest impact is on study equity. Overall, over three times as many Latinx students passed college-level math within the first year relative to those in fall 2015. Also, more than 2.5 times as many Black students passed math within one-year when compared to the fall 2015 cohort. Consequently, AB 705 implementation has produced a greater number of college-level math and English completers than ever before. While the overall impact of AB 705 and its effect on increasing transfer rates is still premature, these results indicate promise in closing both equity and achievement gaps for all CCC students.

Characteristics of Community College Student Persistence

While the institutional barriers students face when attempting to transfer are well documented (Baker et. al., 2021; Reddy & Ryan, 2021), and considering systematic reforms are being adopted to address these shortcomings (Felix, 2020; Reddy & Ryan, 2021), thousands of CCC students still transfer to in-state four-year universities annually. With the goal of enrolling one new California transfer student for every two new California freshmen, the UC system admitted over 26,000 transfers from the CCC system in fall 2019, a 76% admit rate (Johnson & Mejia, 2020). Of these students, nearly 20,000 enrolled representing a 25% increase when compared to the fall 2015 transfer class. Although the CSU system rate of growth has declined 7%, the system's numeric increase has roughly matched the UC system. Over the past three years, CSUs have enrolled over 61,000 new transfer students each year, compared to about

57,000 per year in the previous three-year period. Perhaps of equal importance, the transfer rate of underrepresented groups (Latino, Black, and Native American) has steadily increased over the last decade within both four-year segments. For example, Black and Latino transfer enrollees increased 51% and 47% respectively between 2015 and 2019. During this same period, the CSU system experienced a 26% increase in the number of Latino transfer enrollees. Additionally, where ten years ago underrepresented student groups accounted for 20% of transfers to UC and 32% to CSUs, they now account for 33% of transfers to UC and 50% to the CSU system.

Specific student characteristics needed for retention have been well documented. These include secondary school academic achievements, course taking behaviors and test scores, family education and affluence, gender and race, and non-cognitive skills such as organization, tenacity, and conscientiousness (Galla et al., 2019; Monaghan & Sommers, 2022). Taken collectively, it is challenging to ascertain which specific attribute is more predictive of combatting attrition; however, recent studies have attempted to understand the characteristics that aided in student persistence (Brohawn et al., 2020; Clovis & Chang, 2021; Karandjeff et al., 2020).

Several scholars contributed unit accumulation as an essential component to community college student persistence (i.e., Clovis & Chang, 2021; Hafer et al., 2021). Community college students who declared their intent to transfer ultimately attempted and completed more credit hours, particularly in core gateway subjects such as English, math, and the sciences (LaSota & Zumeta, 2016; Umbach et al., 2019). For example, Davidson and Blakenship's (2017) quantitative analysis using descriptive statistics investigated student success metrics of full-time community college students. The researchers found that for community colleges students, only 4% earned 30 or more units by the end of their first year. However, of the students who

completed this unit benchmark after the first year, on average 54% earned a degree within three years. Further, Carales' (2020), Clovis and Chang's (2021) and Umbach's et al. research showed that for every credit earned in community college, transfer seeking students are 1.003 times as likely to persist to the following semester. These results suggest that students who commence their higher education careers as full-time and earn 30 units within the first year are more likely to earn a college degree within three years.

Additional researchers arrived at similar conclusions, suggesting that unit accumulation is vital to student persistence within the community college setting (Clovis & Chang, 2021; Hafer et al., 2021). Johnson and Mejia's (2020) research indicated that although the majority of CCC students attend part-time and as a result, are slow to accumulate the necessary units needed to become transfer-eligible, for those that did attend full-time, a strong positive correlation existed between unit accumulation during the first year and subsequent student transfer. The researchers found that 73% of students who took at least 30 units in their first year transferred. Furthermore, both Belfield et al. (2016) and Johnson and Mejia found that for students who earned less than 30 units per academic year, the likelihood of transferring within a reasonable period diminished. For example, Johnson and Mejia's results show that among students who earned up to 24 transferable units in their first year, only 39% transferred within four years. Belfield et al. conducted a similar analysis, restricting their investigation to community college students who took at least 12 units in their first semester. The researchers concluded that enrolling in 12 units instead of 15 in the first term negatively affects degree completion as does earning fewer than 30 units after the first year. Conclusively, for students who complete 30 units or more within their first year, persistence and completion rates significantly increased (Clovis & Chang, 2021; Hafer et al., 2021).

While research has shown that academic momentum is a key factor in persistence among community college students, additional variables suggest that institutional support that fosters a sense of belonging among students are integral components in addressing attrition. Numerous researchers have found that effective community college academic advising is the most critical factor in aiding transfer student persistence and boosting their sense of belonging within the campus community (Harper & Thiry, 2023; Jabbar et al., 2022; Smith et al., 2022). Although advising appointments are unique given the dynamics of each student experience, several methods have proven to be successful. These include connecting with students early in their community college careers to establish rapport and develop positive relationships (Auguste et al., 2018; Lawton, 2018; Lopez & Jones, 2017), meeting with students throughout the academic year (Mu & Fosnacht, 2019), and providing holistic services outside of course selection such as addressing time management and study skills concerns, and providing assistance with both financial and mental health challenges (Anft, 2018; Harper & Thiry, 2023).

Harper and Thiry (2022) interviewed approximately 40 students majoring in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM). Although a limitation of the study includes drawing on a small sample size of STEM specific students only, their results may be important for non-STEM majors as well. The researchers found that roughly half of their sample size reported negative academic advising experiences stemming from conflicting advice after meeting with multiple advisors, misleading or incorrect information on course selection, lack of availability for advising appointments in crucial registration periods, and substandard support, encouragement, and friendliness from advising staff. These negative experiences often resulted in lost time, money, and credits for the students. However, several respondents reported satisfaction with their advising appointments largely due to the advisor's positive attitude,

encouragement, and treatment toward them. Advisors who adopted a friendly and compassionate demeanor were labeled as more positive and helpful, suggesting that effective advising that builds on developing one-on-one relationships with their students by providing emotional support and affirmations, can contribute to student progress and persistence (Harper & Thiry, 2023; Smith et al., 2022). Jabber et al. (2022) supported these findings, showing that positive advising experiences were essential to building student transfer capital resulting in students achieving greater self-efficacy and motivation.

Although research demonstrates that connecting with campus support staff is pivotal in integrating students within the fabric of the community college campus culture, the intrinsic characteristics of each student are also vital when considering persistence. According to Fong et al. (2017), the preponderance of literature concerning community college student persistence has focused on variables such as first-generation and socioeconomic statuses, and secondary school achievement. While analyzing background and environmental factors related to persistence in higher education is critical, of equal importance is assessing prescriptive measures related to students cognitive, motivational, and behavioral variables. These variables, also known as psychosocial or noncognitive factors, have been shown to be predictive of student persistence and academic success (Armstrong et al., 2021; Fong et al., 2018; Monaghan & Sommers, 2021). Research has shown that self-efficacy and confidence correlate with students' academic identity, achievement, motivation, and persistence (Bickerstaff et al., 2017). Scholarship maintains that students' experiences of interacting with faculty and other college personnel at their community college has a direct impact on student expectations, motivation, and goals.

Drawing on data from nearly 100 purposively selected community college students represented at three different campuses, Bickerstaff et al. (2017) conducted semi-structured

interviews to assess students' level of confidence throughout their first few semesters. Their results showed various shifts in student confidence as a result of interactions with peers and campus personnel, and when exposed to different academic experiences. Their findings reveal that student confidence is continually reconstructed based on these experiences, and can directly impact student motivation, commitment, and academic persistence. The researchers theorize that multiple ongoing experiences of earned success is necessary to maintain academic confidence. The data highlighted the potential of unique types of interactions with professors and staff as needed to encourage positive academic behaviors and prevent student attrition. Follow up studies have supported these findings, showing that psychosocial factors and the development of meaningful academic relationships affects community college persistence and achievement (Armstrong et al., 2021; Monaghan & Sommers, 2021).

Summary

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of students formally enrolled in a CCC promise program and the intentional actions they engaged in that either supported or hindered their timely transfer to a four-year university. Historically, the collective transfer rates of community college students within two years of college enrollment have been dismal, especially among those from disproportionally impacted groups (Perna et al., 2017). While promise programs were designed to increase access to higher education for all student populations to promote the completion of a college credential (Gándara & Li, 2020; Perna & Leigh, 2018), it is unclear in the literature how students are using these programs as a stepping stone to a four-year university (Davidson et al., 2020; Plutha & Penny, 2013). Nevertheless, enrollment in place-based scholarship programs present an attractive option for those seeking to commence their baccalaureate pursuits at the community college level.

Since federal databases tracking the transfer rates among community college students to four-year universities suggest that only 2.5% of individuals accomplish this in two years (Reddy & Ryan, 2021), and only 40% of community college students earn a bachelor's degree within six years (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2020), drawing conclusions about the overall impact and success of promise programs in terms of taxpayers' investment is both problematic and conjuncture (Davidson et al., 2020; Rauner & Smith, 2020). A collective effort between educational practitioners, federal and state legislators, and promise program students should be explored to ascertain the effectiveness of tuition free programs in support of this population (Buchanan & Bailey-Wilson, 2017; Perna & Leigh, 2018). Despite limited empirical scholarship, various policy measures can be adopted for promise program students to assist in their various transitions and ensure successful academic completion within higher education.

The theoretical framework that guided this study was Astin's (1999) student involvement model involving the I-E-O design (inputs, environment, outputs). This framework provided a theoretical lens to understand the various challenges students pursuing transfer face in attempting to understand and adapt to higher education culture. Focusing on the experiences that supported students integration into higher education and eventual transfer to a university, while also recognizing the level of energy and commitment needed from students for a successful educational experience, may provide promise programs information about the beneficial support programs and services this population needs to increase retention, persistence, success, and transfer of this population (Collom et al., 2021).

As a result, a gap in the literature has been identified. The need to explore the experiences of transfer-bound, community college promise program students is warranted in hopes of contributing to their collective success. The results of this study may add to the nascent body of

research involving promise program student experiences by contributing theoretical, empirical, and practical significance to higher education of student perceptions involving their participation in the program. This study will provide an opportunity to contribute to the literature involving this unique population and commence a dialogue between stakeholders in educational and governmental sectors regarding possible modifications that can be considered to ensure equitable free tuition policies afforded to students pursuing baccalaureate degree attainment.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to discover the lived experiences of former students enrolled in a CCC promise program and how their experiences may promote or impede a timely transfer to an in-state university. This chapter presents the methods of this study. In this chapter, the design is discussed, the research questions are identified, and the motivation for the setting and research participants is presented. Additionally, the researcher's role, data collecting methods, and the analysis of the data are addressed. Finally, the establishment of trustworthiness and the ethical considerations of this study are discussed.

Research Design

A qualitative research method was employed for this study. As Creswell and Poth (2018) postulated, "qualitative research begins with assumptions and the use of interpretive/theoretical frameworks that inform the study of research problems addressing the meaning individuals ascribe to a social or human problem" (p. 8). Using an explorative lens to examine a phenomenon, a qualitative perspective investigates how a participant or group of people construct meaning through social interaction within their environments (Plano Clark & Creswell, 2015). Qualitative inquiry investigates participant actions and narratives and the ways in which they intersect (Glesne, 2011). This approach is appropriate when the phenomenon under review has limited scholarship, the topic is emerging and has never been analyzed with a group of participants, and when the principal researcher is exploring an interpretive experience because the variables under investigation are not apparent (Creswell, 2013; Morrow, 2007). In attempting to understand diverse perspectives, the qualitative method will provide a vehicle for insight into the idiosyncratic experiences that promise program students endure in higher education, and the

social constructions the homogenous sample assigns to their personal perceptions, thoughts, and worldviews (Glesne, 2011). These viewpoints are observed in a naturalistic setting and become the center of the research focus (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017).

There were multiple reasons for electing to exercise a qualitative research approach for this study. Quantitative methods of inquiry, which rely on statistical measures to generalize participant viewpoints into predetermined categories, do not elicit rich and thick data regarding the understanding of experiences and situations (Patton, 2015). In contrast, qualitative research broadens the understanding of a problem "and can delve into complex processes and illustrate the multifaceted nature of human phenomena" (Morrow, 2007, p. 211). Qualitative research is paramount when attempting to uncover meanings and when acquiring a comprehensive understanding of how individual lived experiences shape participants and behaviors across an institution (Museus, 2007). This method of inquiry seeks to illuminate and extrapolate to similar situations (Hoepfl, 1997). Qualitative research also captures the voices of participants under investigation which benefits the understanding of the intricate nature of the phenomena (Green, 2007). Also, quantitative measures are used in answering research questions of *what*, whereas qualitative is better situated in answering questions pertaining to the *why* (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Finally, qualitative methods will allow participants to freely disclose their life experiences in narrative form and will permit me to retell their stories by using direct quotations (Creswell et al., 2007).

In addition, a phenomenology research method was utilized. Phenomenology is understood as a radical style of philosophizing, which emphasizes the attempt to unveil the truth and describe phenomena (Moran, 2000). As van Manen (1990) theorized:

Phenomenology is the study of the lifeworld – the world as we immediately experience it pre-reflectivity rather than as we conceptualize, categorize, or reflect it. Phenomenology aims to gaining a deeper understanding of the nature or meaning of our everyday experiences. It attempts to gain insightful descriptions of the way we experience the world pre-reflectively, without taxonomizing, clarifying, or abstracting it. Anything that presents itself to consciousness is potentially of interest to phenomenology, as consciousness is the only access human beings have to the world. And thus, phenomenology is keenly interested in the significant world of the human being. (p. 9)

The philosophy of phenomenology provided a catalyst for unearthing new experiences and knowledge (Moustakas, 1994). Since proponents of qualitative research assert that knowledge is linked to a phenomenon, there is an inherent relationship within the human experience regarding the artifacts we discover or rely on. This assertion was instrumental in understanding the realities of promise program student experiences. The phenomenological method enabled me to focus on the wholeness of experience through first-person accounts in informal conversations and interviews, which was imperative in interpreting human behavior used as evidence in data collection.

Phenomenology provides researchers with an understanding of the commonalities among participants and the phenomenon they are experiencing (Creswell & Poth, 2018). These experiences provide a discourse for dualism where the participant and environment are different and apart from the distinct world (Paul, 2017). The phenomenology research method provided an opportunity to explore the duality promise program students face when transitioning into and through higher education and the intricacies of transferring to a four-year college in California.

Further, a transcendental phenomenological approach was employed to gather participant perspectives on their experiences in higher education. Edmund Husserl is credited with founding transcendental phenomenology (Moustakas, 1994). In this approach, Husserl theorizes that a sharp contrast exists between the discovery of meaning or facts, and essences, or between what is known as real and non-real. This presents a challenge among researchers when allowing thoughts to enter a conscience state while comprehending its meanings while self-reflecting on its existence. This process entails uniting the present with the imagined and its possible significance or the blending of the real and the imagined. Information that enters the consciousness interacts with the object in nature resulting in meaning and knowledge. Thus, using a transcendental phenomenological approach allowed me to acquire a thorough understanding of the students' lived experiences without altering their individual perspectives. Therefore, this enabled me to accentuate the investigated phenomenon while excluding personal background and experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). As a result, by using a transcendental phenomenological approach, I captured an objective understanding of the phenomenon in the study.

As a community college counselor serving hundreds of promise program students, I have observed the innate stress this population endures when attempting to successfully navigate higher education within a two-year window. As such, transcendental phenomenology enabled me to discount personal experiences to recognize the phenomenon not influenced by current experiences or knowledge. Consequently, epoché was critical. Epoché is defined as abstaining from judgment and refraining from the traditional way of perceiving things (Moustakas, 1994). Through epoché, preconceived judgments and knowledge is set aside, thus allowing the researcher to revisit the phenomena naively (Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2015). This process facilitated a reframing of personal thought patterns by observing the current state of participant

experiences and illustrating these authentically in an observable format. At the conclusion of

epoché, I committed to transcendental phenomenological reduction, where participants

experiences were considered individually. This allowed me to acquire a thematic understanding

of the collective experiences on the phenomenon being studied while adding a textural

description from the participants perspectives (Moustakas, 1994).

Research Questions

Central Research Question

What are the lived experiences of promise program students previously enrolled at a

California community college who have transferred to a four-year university?

Sub-Question One

What experiences promoted a timely transfer for students previously enrolled at a

California community college who have transferred to a 4-year university?

Sub-Question Two

What experiences hindered a timely transfer for students previously enrolled at a

California community college who have transferred to a 4-year university?

Setting and Participants

This section discusses the selected research sites used to execute this study, as well as the

participant profiles. A pseudonym was employed to discuss the sites. Further, the size of the

colleges, its operating budgets, the promise program student body, and the justification for their

selection are explained. Finally, the criteria for selecting the study's participants are examined.

Site

This transcendental phenomenological study was conducted at MVCC (pseudonym),

LCC (pseudonym), HCC (pseudonym), and OVCC (pseudonym), which are four of California's

116 community colleges and are regionally accredited by the Western Association of Schools and Colleges. The colleges are situated in adjoining counties in Southern California separated within a 50 mile radius of each other. The following section provides demographic and site information about MVCC, LCC, HCC, and OVCC.

As part of a multi-college district, MVCC serves students over 14,000 students annually living in the local residential and coastal communities of Orange County, approximately 50 miles east of Los Angeles. The campus occupies over 80 acres of an allotted 100-acre site and has a total operating budget of over $100 million. Founded in 1985, MVCC has a system-wide reputation for providing exemplary instructional and student support services and currently ranks first among all CCCs for student transfer rates to four-year universities. MVCC students have the opportunity to complete courses toward transfer requirements and earn associate of science and associate in arts degrees, certificate of achievements, and occupational skills certificates in any of the 84 academic programs and 138 career technical education programs the college provides. MVCC's (2022) dedication to student success and achievement is demonstrated in their mission statement which centers on providing clear paths to success and transfer for all students.

MVCC was chosen as a site for this study because of the college's preeminent transfer rates and the recent influx of promise program student enrollments. From the first year of inception in 2018, MVCC has experienced a surge in promise program student enrollments yearly. Initially serving 128 students in its inaugural class, the program has experienced a 100% increase in full-time student enrollments (FTES) each year. Due to the proximity of several local high schools, MVCC currently serves over 1300 promise program students annually. The current promise program student population is 53% male and 47% female, and the majority indicated their primary goal is to transfer to pursue a bachelor's degree (93%). Further, 30% of promise

program students are considered disproportionally impacted, or as the CCC Chancellor's Office (CCCCO, 2017) articulated, "occurs when a subset of students based on characteristics, age, race and gender, are unjustifiably experiencing lower [academic] outcomes compared to the total student population" (p. 1). For a complete ethnic profile of MVCC promise program students, see Table 1.

Table 1

2022–2023 Mountain View Community College Promise Program Ethnic Profile

Ethnicity	Percentage
Asian	35%
White	30%
Hispanic	26%
Multiethnic	6%
Black	3%

Note. Adapted from MVCC Facts and Figures Sheet (2021).

MVCC promise students are guided in their academic achievement, social integration, and personal success through financial assistance and a unified support network of peers, faculty and staff. Funded through state assembly bills, MVCC's promise program provides financial and academic support services to its students, including paying for all tuition and enrollment fees, providing bookstore vouchers, and having designated counselors that assist with academic and career planning. The main objectives and activities provided by MVCC's promise program were created to address the transitional challenges many high school graduates encounter in higher education. These challenges often include anxiety, depression, family pressures, academic decisions, stress, current and past trauma, and financial barriers. The promise program aims to

address these barriers by providing holistic services stressing personal wellness, academics, and camaraderie, and staffing the program with college faculty and staff who are knowledgeable about these issues and empathize with promise program student needs.

Despite the prominent transfer rates of MVCC's general student population and the robust services provided in the program, the success rates of MVCC promise students are unknown. While the Office of Planning and Research tracks the total number of promise program student enrollments and demographic characteristics, disaggregate data such as transfer and graduation rates are not readily available.

Similar to MVCC, LCC is a comprehensive community college serving the southern region of Orange County with an estimated district population of over 1 million residents. Founded in 1968, LCC is operational serving over 22,000 students annually who are actively pursuing programs in credit, non-credit, and not-for-credit fields. The college offers over 270 associate degrees, certificates, and occupational skills awards in nearly 200 diverse program areas, and is renowned for its student-centered faculty and commitment to student success. The campus occupies over 200 acres and has a total operating budget of over $170 million.

LCC was chosen as a research site because of the college's distinguished transfer reputation, volume of promise program students, and the diversity of their student body. Of the 116-CCCs, LCC transfers over 3,500 students annually and ranks 8th in transfers to the UC system and 17th in transfers to the CSUs. Of the various community colleges in Orange County, LCC ranks first in transfers to various in-state universities including UC Santa Barbara, UC Santa Cruz, and San Diego State (LCC, 2022). Further, LCC serves over 1,200 promise program students annually which represents the largest number of students served in a program within Orange County. Finally, in 2020, LCC was recognized by the U.S. Department of Education as a

Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) and awarded funding to strengthen and expand education opportunities for Hispanic and other low-income students. As a HSI college, LCC leverages their grant funding to make college more attainable for Hispanic students and enhance program quality and institutional stability through curriculum development, academic tutoring, mentoring, and other student support services (Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities, 2020). For the complete ethnic profile of LCC students, see Table 2.

Table 2

2022–2023 Lakeview Community College Student Ethnic Profile

Ethnicity	Percentage
Asian	14%
White	47%
Hispanic	27%
Multiethnic	5%
Black	2%

Note. Adapted from LCC Facts and Figures Sheet (2022).

Despite serving over 1,200 promise program students annually, the retention, persistence, graduation, and transfer rates of the LCC promise program population are currently not available. Although LCC's promise program pays the first two years college for eligible students including registration fees, book costs, and the health fee, and provides wrap around services such as dedicated success coaches to assist promise program students with navigating their higher education journeys, how these institutional measures contribute to the population's collective success is unknown.

HCC is a part of a multi-college district serving the northern region portion of Orange County. Since welcoming its inaugural class of just 2,500 students in 1985, the college has experienced a tremendous growth over the last several decades. With an estimated district population of nearly 400,000 residents, HCC served over 11,000 credit students and 4,800 noncredit students during the 2019–2020 academic year. Additionally, over 5,000 of students taking credit courses were also enrolled in nontraditional apprenticeship courses (For a complete ethnic profile of HCC students see Table 3). HCC students can pursue a variety of educational opportunities including any of 67 associate of arts/associate of science degrees, 27 associate of arts/associate of science transfer degrees, 87 credit certificates, and 93 noncredit certificates the college offers. During the 2019–2020 academic year, over 1,500 HCC students transferred to universities: 800 to CSUs, 200 to UCs, and 500 to private/out of state colleges. The campus is situated on 82 acres has a total operating budget of nearly $50 million.

Table 3

2022–2023 Hillcrest Community College Student Ethnic Profile

Ethnicity	Percentage
Asian	10%
White	24%
Hispanic	55%
Multiethnic	3%
Black	2%

Note. Adapted from HCC Facts and Figures Sheet (2022).

HCC was chosen as a research site because of the college's prestige and notoriety within the CCC system (ranked among the top 1% of community college in the nation by College

Choice), is regarded as a top transfer institution in the state and is a proud HSU serving

institution. Further, HCC has designed their promise program uniquely when compared to

MVCC and LCC. Programmatically, HCC assigns each promise students with a peer mentor

who provides guidance and insight into the academic and social life at the college and introduces

students to activities and events on campus. These mentors serve as a resource for promise

students as they begin navigating their way through college by introducing them to campus

initiatives considered vital for their collegiate success. Despite these efforts and considering that

HCC serves several hundred promise program students annually, the current academic success

rates of this population is unknown.

Finally, OVCC was founded in 1956 and offers comprehensive and affordable education

and career training. Situated in Los Angeles County on 135 acres with an annual operating

budget of $53 million, OVCC is one of the five largest community colleges in the county,

serving an average of over 22,000 students annually (For a complete ethnic profile of OVCC

students see Table 4). OVCC students have the opportunity to participate in over 180 areas of

study encompassing 87 degree and certificate programs and take courses to pursue transfer to

four-year universities. During the 2019–2020 academic year, over 1,000 OVCC students

transferred to universities including 950 to CSUs and 135 to UCs.

OVCC was chosen as a research site because of the diversity of their student body, the

amount of promise program students served, and the college's success in graduating students.

During the 2021–2022 academic year, over 5100 students graduated from OVCC, a 100%

increase when compared to the prior year. Further, while OVCC offers a robust promise program

which includes personal counseling, early enrollment, and financial aid to assist students with

their educational pursuits, success metrics including the persistence, retention, and transfer rate of the program's population is unavailable.

Table 4

2022–2023 Ocean Valley Community College Student Ethnic Profile

Ethnicity	Percentage
Asian	6%
White	10%
Hispanic	68%
Multiethnic	2%
Black	6%

Note. Adapted from OCC Facts and Figures Sheet (2022).

Participants

Participants who were formally enrolled in the promise program and successfully transferred to a four-year university in California were selected to participate in the study. The participants were chosen using purposeful sampling to elicit information-rich cases for in-depth study (Patton, 2015). Employing a purposeful sample ensures that participants best inform the study under examination (Creswell & Poth, 2018), have experienced the central phenomenon of interest (Plano Clark & Creswell, 2015), and will apprise the questions under study (Patton, 2015). The sample group included participants that met the established criteria: (a) former promise program student; (b) previously attended MVCC, LCC, HCC, OVCC; and (c) transferred to a four-year university in California. To ensure maximum variation sampling (Creswell & Poth, 2018), all promise program students who were previously enrolled at MVCC, LCC, HCC, and OVCC were invited to participate. Maximum variation sampling is often used in

qualitative research because it increases the likelihood that the research findings will accurately reflect different perspectives that exemplify the complexity of the phenomenon under investigation. To achieve maximum variation in sampling, I recruited participants from diverse backgrounds such as those from different gender, age, socioeconomic, and ethnic backgrounds.

In phenomenological research, a sample size can vary from five to 25 participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). For this study, the final sample included 20 participants. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), a minimum of 20 participants is needed in a research study to reach a level of data saturation. Ranging in ages of 20–24, five males and 15 female subjects who met the established criteria were interviewed. The former MVCC, LVCC, HCC, and OVCC students roughly reflect the ethnic demographics of the current promise cohorts.

Although transfer requirements to each CSU and UC campus fluctuate yearly, several baseline admissions policies exist. To be admitted as an upper-division transfer student to a CSU, a student must have completed a minimum of 60 semester or 90 quarter units of transferrable courses, have an overall GPA of a least 2.00 in transferrable units attempted and earned, be in good standing at the last college or university attended, and have completed at least 10 general education courses (30 semester units or 45 quarter units) including courses in oral communication, written communication, critical thinking, and quantitative reasoning with a C- or higher (CSU, n.d.). To meet upper division admission requirements for the UC system, students are required to complete 60 semester or 90 quarter units of UC transferrable coursework, have an overall GPA of 2.40 (2.8 for non-California residents) in these courses, complete a minimum of seven general education courses with a grade of C or higher which includes two English composition courses, one transferrable course in mathematical concepts and quantitative reasoning, and four additional transferrable college courses from at least two different subject

areas (arts and humanities, social and behavioral sciences, and physical and biological sciences; UC, n.d.). Since private colleges in California are independent, a database to analyze transfer requirements is non-existent. In sum, promise program students that transferred to a four-year college in California met the admissions requirements criteria for at least one of these schools.

Researcher Positionality

Born into poverty to an interracial couple, my family endured prejudice throughout my upbringing. The discriminatory viewpoints we faced would foreshadow the identity challenges I would experience in secondary school. In high school, I was a habitual truant, connected with social outcasts, and performed mediocrely academically. The opportunity to attend a university after graduation never came to fruition. Feeling disconnected from society, I turned to a CCC in hopes of rewriting years of angst and confusion. Upon commencing college, I fell in love with higher education and unlocked hidden scholastic potential I never realized existed. After years of formal schooling, and considering my cultural and spiritual upbringing, I realized that my calling in life is to advocate for the disenfranchised, to provide a voice for the voiceless, all while providing a platform for students to tell their stories.

As Creswell and Poth (2018) summarized, the positionality of the researcher relates to the setting of the research and therefore, "individuals seek [an] understanding of the world in which they live and work" (p. 24). As a constructivist qualitative researcher, the goal was to study the varied realities constructed by participants and the implications of those interactions with other people (Patton, 2015), all while relying on the multiple and diverse views of the situation being investigated (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Using a social constructivism interpretive framework, I employed open-ended lines of inquiry throughout the research study to rely on the participants' views of the situation. Focusing on the contexts in which the participants attended school

provided me a thorough understanding of the phenomenon under study. Further, recognizing that my own personal background influences my interpretation of the study, my primary intent was to interpret the participants' meanings of their experiences objectively and with limited bias. To minimize any misrepresentations, I exercised reflexivity throughout the study to gain a better understanding of my own positionality all while cognitively thinking about my own cultural background and personal upbringing.

Interpretive Framework

A social constructivist lens was employed throughout the duration of this research. Social constructivists study the multiple realities created by people in search of an understanding for their lives and the world in which they work (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Patton, 2015). This interpretive framework asserts that subjective meanings of reality are socially constructed, are varied and multiple, and are interpreted broadly by the researcher rather than narrowing views into predefined categories (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Since this study explored the experiences of students formally enrolled in a California promise program, participants may have had differing viewpoints of their realities which ultimately shape their perceptions of their collegiate experiences. Taken collectively, insights from the participants offered a thematic understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. Further, social constructivism and phenomenology are connected insofar that researchers search for meaning and essences of experiences by obtaining descriptions through informal, first-person accounts (Moustakas, 1994). Thus, through positioning myself in the research (Creswell & Poth, 2018), I was able to provide a voice to participants' feelings regarding their personal life experiences.

Philosophical Assumptions

In addition to employing a social constructivist theoretical paradigm, it is important to define my philosophical assumptions and beliefs in this study. Philosophical assumptions are ingrained views and beliefs that are added to research (Creswell & Poth, 2018). These beliefs are internally embedded from a variety of sources including through formal education, life experiences, and from interactions with other people. As a CCC counselor and researcher, I recognize that I bring philosophical assumptions to this phenomenological study. Thus, my goal in this study was to enter a pure internal place while creating new ideas, awareness, and understanding (Moustakas, 1994). These philosophical ideologies include beliefs about ontology, epistemology, and axiology.

Ontological Assumption

Reality is viewed from multiple viewpoints by the participants who are experiencing the same phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). As a result, the goal of qualitative research is to discover the varied realities that individuals may experience. This subjective reality is expanded to include multiple factors including worldviews, socio-economic status, gender, age, and race. While my ontological assumption is that I consider the existence of subjective realities within each participant, I also understand that these evolving perspectives can be categorized into common themes and written texturally to describe these experiences (Moustakas, 1994).

Epistemological Assumption

Epistemology is concerned with the construction and understanding of knowledge. As a counselor educator, conducting research in the field where the participants attend college provided an important context for understanding their subjective experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Building rapport and professional relationships with the participants enabled me to

understand the phenomenon under investigation while simultaneously capturing their lived experiences in a natural setting. My epistemological assumption is that prolonged hours at the research site and prior relationship-building will aid in unearthing truth and reality among participants. I conducted interviews where they attend college and get to know the participants through direct information. Obtaining the individual personal accounts of the subjective experiences of the students adds credibility to the study and therefore, capturing the voices of their experiences will be paramount. As a result, the goal of capturing these voices is to inform educators and stakeholders of the challenges some students experience in higher education and implement equitable policy and programmatic changes to support those affected.

Axiological Assumption

My experiences across higher education have solidified my values, biases, and beliefs involving community college students' persistence and academic achievement rates. These experiences shaped my assumptions that all bachelor's degree-seeking students encounter significant challenges that often impede their ability to transfer at an expedited rate. In axiological assumptions, the researcher is transparent with the participants in the study regarding their internal biases, intuition, experiences, and values (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Acknowledging that research is value-laden and personal biases are present, I actively discussed my positionality with participants in the context and setting of the research. Consciously reflecting on the connections of my own values, beliefs, morals, and fixed attributes, while exploring this with the participants was imperative. To minimize the impact my biases could have on this study, I bracketed my presuppositions through reflective journaling, which assisted in accurate data collection (Patton, 2015). The process of epoché was used throughout the research process to

reduce assumptions regarding the phenomenon under investigation and to gain an open viewpoint without prejudice (Moustakas, 1994).

Researcher Role

As a community college counselor who works at an institution of higher education offering a free tuition program, I undertook an active role as the human instrument in this study. This role connected me to the phenomenon under study, which entailed the experiences of students who were previously enrolled in a free tuition program at a CCC. As a human instrument, I prescribed to the various characteristics Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggested, including displaying elevated levels of empathy, immediately responding to verbal and nonverbal cues, investigating atypical responses, and perceiving situations holistically. These suggested qualities were personally brought into this research study through the various interactions I had with each participant.

Although I do not personally know the participants, I am aware of the time limitations of California promise programs and the internal challenges some students face in attempting to accomplish their education goals within a two-year window. As the principal investigator of this study responsible for data collection and analysis, and to minimize potential biases, I engaged in bracketing. This process is an essential element of phenomenological reduction (Tufford & Newman, 2012) and involves suspending personal presuppositions, assumptions, and biases with the goal of being fully present when attending to participants' accounts (Gearing, 2004; Starks & Trinidad, 2007). In addition to bracketing my experiences and judgements during the data collection phase, I employed this process during data analysis. Dörfler and Stierand (2021) suggested approaching data with the attitude of relative openness to make sense of the rich information collected to acquire an elevated understanding of the phenomenon under study.

Procedures

In this section, the various phases in which the research will be executed are highlighted. The site and Institutional Review Board (IRB) approvals are discussed. Further, the recruitment plan, the sample size, and the justification for the sample size are explained. Finally, data collection and analysis are explored.

Permissions

Upon successful completion of my proposal defense, I worked collaboratively with my dissertation committee to acquire Liberty University IRB approval (see Appendix A). This process involved submitting an IRB application for the dissertation chair to review. In conjunction with submitting the IRB application, I solicited assistance from MVCC, LCC, HCC, and OVCC gatekeepers to contact prior promise program students who fit the study criteria to canvass interest from prospective participants.

Recruitment Plan

Negotiating access to the campus was granted after securing support from promise program directors (see Appendix B). To recruit participants for this project, I collaborated with MVCC, LCC, HCC, and OVCC staff who served as gatekeepers to assist in connecting with prior promise program students. A gatekeeper is the central point of contact who assists in identifying participants from the site, provides approval to conduct research, and arranges conditions of access (Glesne, 2011; Plano Clark & Creswell, 2015). I wrote an electronic recruitment letter (see Appendix C) which was sent to promise program staff and forwarded to prior students. MVCC, LCC, HCC, and OVCC staff emailed the recruitment letter twice to qualified participants approximately two weeks apart. The recruitment letter indicated monetary compensation ($25 gift card) for students who elected to participate in the study. This was used

to incentivize participation, and to compensate volunteers for their time and expertise (Surmiak, 2020). The email instructed interested participants to contact me either through email or by phone. I responded to inquiries by calling or responding to their emails.

From the total sample pool of former promise program students who transferred to a four-year university, 20 volunteers responded to the email. These participants were screened to ensure they may the criteria outlined in the study. After preliminary screening, all 20 participants were purposively selected and met the established criteria for the study. This sample size is suitable in phenomenological research studies to reach a level of saturation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Polkinghorne, 1989). Next, I invited the participants to attend a preliminary interview via Zoom at a mutually convenient date and time. This preliminary meeting was used to establish rapport with each student. Rapport is built on the foundation of displaying empathy to participants while suspending judgment or preconceived thought patterns (Patton, 2015). It was essential to build trust among participants so they felt encouraged to share their knowledge, experiences, and feelings in an authentic and transparent manner (Velardo & Elliot, 2018). All interviews were conducted via Zoom in my closed-door office to ensure privacy and confidentiality. The informed consent form (see Appendix D) was presented to each student to disclose the voluntary nature of participation in the study as well as to notify participants that they would not be placed any undue risk (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Data Collection Plan

This section focuses on the various data collection approaches I employed. The primary sources of data collection included individual in-depth interviews to describe the meaning of the phenomenon under investigation derived directly from the participants lived experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Additionally, letter writings and a focus group are the other two data

tools utilized. According to Creswell and Poth, the advantages of using these qualitative data collection methods involve time and cost effectiveness and efficiency in data retrieval and transcription. Finally, the data analysis of each approach using Moustakas's (1994) modification of Van Kaam's method of analysis for phenomenological research will be discussed.

Individual Interviews

Qualitative research is rooted in interpretivism where reality is complex, fluid, and socially constructed (Glesne, 2011). Exploring various individual perspectives by employing an inductive approach was paramount in capturing the interpretations and experiences a collective group has regarding a social phenomenon. To uncover the reality of promise program students' social world by examining their lives from the inside out (Flick, 2009), interviews were utilized as the fundamental data collection source. Interviews are an appropriate data collection tool to capture participant voices when relevant information cannot be found in document analysis or through direct observation (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). In phenomenological studies, interviews are the primary data source to connect with participants through interaction and to understand their experiences through conversation (Fontana & Fey, 2005). This process requires extended face-to-face interaction with the study's participants to understand their experiences, which is provided through interviewing (Moustakas, 1994).

I executed a semi-structured interview protocol (see Appendix E) with each participant. This approach provided the opportunity for in-depth conversations which resulted in rich and descriptive data for analysis (Patton, 2002). In using this approach, I asked each participant the same lines of inquiry in subsequent order (Patton, 2002) but deviated when needed to achieve a more organic style of conversation (Dahlberg & McCaig, 2010). Employing a semi-structured interview provided the opportunity for me to acquire an understanding of the experiences of

students enrolled in a free tuition program encountered at a community college. After securing

participant consent, each interview was audio recorded.

Prior to beginning each individual interview, the study's purpose and structure was

discussed with the participants. This meeting was also used to establish rapport with each

participant, provide an opportunity to clarify any questions or concerns, collect demographic and

biographical data (see Appendix F), and review their protective rights. Each interview was

conducted online via the Zoom platform in a private closed-door office. Before meeting with

each participant, I engaged in epoché to safeguard that personal biases or judgments did not

influence the direction of the interview (Moustakas, 1994). The individual interview questions,

as well as the connection to the research questions and Astin's (1999) theoretical model of

student involvement (inputs, environment, outputs) is listed below.

Individual Interview Questions

1. Tell me a little about yourself. Probes: Where did you grow up, discuss your family,
   friends. (CQ; Inputs)

2. Tell me about your experiences in high school. (CQ; Inputs)

3. Please describe your transition from high school to MVCC/LCC/HCC/OVCC. Probes:
   What were your initial plan after high school graduation? (CQ; Inputs)

4. Why do you enroll at MVCC/LCC/HCC/OVCC? Probes: Describe your other options.
   What were your initial feelings about attending MVCC/LCC/HCC/OVCC? (CQ; Inputs)

5. Please describe your transition to MVCC/LCC/HCC/OVCC. How did you feel? Probes:
   Please describe your family relationships, challenges experienced, problems experienced.
   (CQ; Inputs)

6. What made you feel supported at MVCC/LCC/HCC/OVCC? Probe: Peers, programs, counselors, staff? (SQ1; Environment)

7. Who did you talk to on campus if you had academic questions (selecting courses, transfer requirements)? In what ways did this person assist/not assist you at MVCC/LCC/HCC/OVCC? Probes: Tell me about one such experience. (SQ1; Environment)

8. Who did you talk to on campus for help regarding personal problems? In what ways did this person help/not help you? Probes: Tell me about one such experiences. (SQ1; SQ2; Environment)

9. What programs or services at MVCC/LCC/HCC/OVCC for promise program students have been helpful? (SQ1; Environment)

10. What programs or services at MVCC/LCC/HCC/OVCC for promise program students have not been helpful? (SQ2; Environment)

11. How prepared did you feel to transfer within two years to a California university? Please describe your transfer experience. Probe: Describe specific ways MVCC/LCC/HCC/OVCC assisted. (CQ; SQ1; Outputs)

12. In what ways did you not feel prepared to transfer within two years to a California university? Why? Probe: Describe specific ways MVCC/LCC/HCC/OVCC did not assist. (CQ; SQ2; Environment; Outputs)

13. In what ways has your promise program experience at MVCC/LCC/HCC/OVCC had a positive impact on your life? Probe: Describe specific experiences or people that impacted you. (CQ; SQ1; Environment)

14. In what ways has your promise program experience at MVCC/LCC/HCC/OVCC had a negative impact on your life? Probe: Describe specific experiences or people that contributed to this. (CQ; SQ2; Environment)

15. What were the most significant challenges you faced as a promise program student pursuing a two-year transfer to a four-year university? (SQ2; Inputs; Environment; Outputs)

16. What advice would you give a new MVCC/LCC/HCC/OVCC student enrolled in the promise program who is pursuing a two-year transfer to a university? (CQ; SQ1; Inputs; Environment; Outputs)

17. Reflecting back, what would you change regarding your overall experience in community college? Please explain. (CQ; Inputs; Environment)

18. What else about promise program students pursuing a two-year transfer to a four-year college do you feel I should know about? (CQ; Environment; Outputs)

The 18-question interview guide is specifically connected to the central research question (CQ) and two sub-questions (SQ1, SQ2): (a) What are the lived experiences of promise program students previously enrolled at a CCC who have transferred to a four-year university? (b) What experiences promoted a timely transfer for students previously enrolled at a CCC who have transferred to a four-year university? (c) What experiences hindered a timely transfer for students previously enrolled at a CCC who have transferred to a four-year university? The interview questions acted as a guide centered around Astin's (1999) theoretical framework in conjunction with the I-E-O (inputs, environment, outputs) model of student involvement. Since student growth and development in higher education fluctuates depending on their level of engagement within the campus community (Astin 1993; 1999), the interview guide aided in marking the

interviews as comprehensive and systematic and add flexibility to ask questions to illuminate the research topic (Patton, 2015).

Individual Interview Data Analysis Plan

I used Moustakas' (1994) modification of the van Kaam method of analysis of phenomenological data to examine each interview. The interviews were completed through video conference using Zoom and recorded data were auto-transcribed and personally cross-checked to ensure accuracy. Individual transcripts were member checked with each participant to ensure the validity of their statements (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). After receiving the revised transcripts, data were listed in preliminary groupings for analysis (Moustakas, 1994; see Appendix G). Next, horizonalization took place where I examined significant statements and quotes that illuminated how participants experienced the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). This process involved capturing direct participant quotes and then transferred them into an excel spreadsheet. This information contained the participant pseudonyms and answers to each interview question.

After engaging in horizonalization, I began the process of reduction and elimination (Moustakas, 1994). Reduction and elimination involve determining the invariant constituents, or the essentials of the experiences of participants in the study by testing for two requirements: if a quote is directly related to the phenomenon under investigation and if it can also be reduced to its latent meaning. To accomplish this, I incorporated bracketing where certain components of data are placed outside brackets, which then facilitate a refocusing on the phenomenon under review (Gearing, 2004). At the conclusion of the reduction process, I noted emerging themes in an Excel spreadsheet. Next, I provided a textural description for each participant by using direct quotes and excerpts (see Appendix H). A textural description incorporates what was experienced by

each individual and a description of the meaning of that experience. (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). Finally, and as part of the imaginative variation process and for data comparison, I explored a structural description of the phenomenon from each participant transcript. This description materialized from an understanding of the structural themes of the experience, the bedrock on which textural elements exist (Conklin, 2007).

Letter Writing

Collecting personal documents from participants such as letters is a form of qualitative data collection (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Each participant in this study wrote a one-page letter to an incoming promise program student discussing the challenges of transferring to a four-year college within a two-year window. The writing prompt (see Appendix I) asked participants to reflect on the challenges they experienced in the promise program, and provide examples that either promoted or delayed their timely transfer to a four-year university. Letter writing was used as a reflective activity to provide an opportunity for participants to express their voices in the promise program and therefore, was not shared with program administrators, faculty, or staff. Each participant sent their letter to me through a secure email. A follow-up email was sent after one week to participants who did not respond as a reminder.

I used Moustakas's (1994) modification of the van Kaam method of analysis of phenomenological data to examine each letter. The letters were printed, hand transcribed, and examined through the process of horizonalization. Through reduction and elimination, each participant statement was bracketed and put into an Excel spreadsheet for analysis (see Appendix J). I then developed a textural and structural description of participant experiences to analyze emerging themes. This textural description assisted in creating a composite that then provided information regarding the phenomenon being studied.

Focus Groups

Following the individual interviews with promise program participants, a focus group was conducted as a method of data collection. Like the in-depth interviews, a focus group provided an opportunity for participants to recount their experiences within the promise program that aided or delayed a successful transfer to a four-year university. Focus groups involve interviewing research participants in a group setting to capitalize on communication amongst those being questioned to generate data (Kitzinger, 1995). Group interviewing is advantageous in phenomenological research studies for participants to express multiple perspectives on a similar experience (Glesne, 2011). Further, focus groups are favorable when interaction amongst interviewees will yield desirable information, as well as when interviewing participants in a one-on-one may setting be reluctant to provide information (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The focus group encouraged participants to interact with each other to explore shared experiences regarding their involvement in the promise program. The focus group participants consisted of six former promise program students that transferred to a four-year university. According to Patton (2015), a minimum of six focus group participants are needed to generate rich and thick data. The six participants were invited via Zoom at a mutually agreed upon time and date. The 60-minute session was recorded and auto-transcribed.

Within the focus group, I followed a semi-structured interview guide centered around Astin's (1999) framework of student involvement. According to Glesne (2011), four to five questions suffice for a group interview session. I then developed a six-question interview guide that connected to both the central research question and the two sub-questions under review.

Focus Group Questions

1. Tell me a little about yourself and your experience in the promise program. (CQ; Inputs)

2. From your perspective, what are the biggest challenges promise program students face who are pursuing transfer to a four-year college within two years? (CQ, SQI, SQ2; Inputs, Environment, Outputs)

3. If you had ten-minutes to speak with state legislators regarding the promise program, what are the positive elements? What are the negative elements? What are your suggestions for improvement? (CQ, SR1, SR2; Inputs, Environment, Outputs)

4. What advice would you give to a new MVCC/LCC/HCC/OVCC student enrolled in the promise program who is pursuing a timely transfer to a four-year college? (CQ; Environment, Outputs)

5. Describe some measures that the MVCC/LCC/HCC/OVCC promise program has taken that you believe either facilitated or delayed your timely transfer to a four-year university (CQ, SQ1, SQ2; Environment)

6. What else about promise program students pursuing a timely transfer to a four-year college do you feel I should know about? (CQ, SQ1, SQ2; Outputs)

Focus Group Data Analysis

Comparable to the interviews, the focus group interview used Moustakas's (1994) modification of the van Kaam method of analysis for phenomenological data. The data was auto-transcribed using the Zoom platform. Each question and response were placed in an Excel spreadsheet where participant statements were examined through the process of horizontalization (see Appendix K). Reduction and elimination were then employed to determine the invariant constituents using bracketing, in which non-essential data were bracketed out. At the conclusion of this process, emerging themes appeared and be noted in an Excel spreadsheet. A textural description of participant excerpts was provided for each participant, and a composite structural

description was created to explore connections with different data sets. This process aided in

developing a composite description of the phenomenon and the meanings of the collective group.

Data Analysis

Analysis and synthesis were executed throughout the duration of the study through the

collection of data while also simultaneously interpreting its meaning (Glesne, 2011). Continued

reflection and analysis of data obtained through participant interviews, the focus group, and the

letter writings allowed me to raise analytic questions regarding the important ideas that surfaced

(Creswell, 2013). According to Creswell and Poth (2018), data synthesis commences using

analytic circles rather than through a linear approach. The goal of the data synthesis spiral is to

move data from the general to the specific, and involves specific steps including data

organization, memoing emerging ideas, creating meaning, and reporting the findings.

To begin data synthesis, I documented words and phrases from the data in my field notes,

wrote analytic memos in my research log, and audio recorded thoughts regarding personal

observations involving emerging ideas to assist with data synthesis, structure, and organization

(Saldaña, 2013). I maintained reflective journaling throughout the data collection process to

document how the methodological decisions were executed and highlighted the patterns and

themes that encountered (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Saldaña, 2013).

Each transcript was sent to the participants through email to member check for any

inaccurate information about their interview and were given one week to verify their transcript

and correct any errors. After receiving participant transcripts, I examined the individual, focus

group, and letter writings by reading through each segment of data multiple times to develop a

preliminary nuanced analysis (Saldaña, 2013). Charmaz (2003) posited that commencing data

analysis by reading through transcripts line by line "reduces the likelihood of inputting your

motives, fears, or unresolved personal issues to your respondents and to your collected data" (p. 94). I synthesized the data from the writing prompt activity and the participant and focus group interviews to create a "unified statement of the essences of the experience of the phenomenon as a whole" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 100). Next, engaged in the process of thematic development by grouping segments of data into categories on an Excel spreadsheet (Plano Clark & Creswell, 2015). These clusters of meaning were used to write textural and structural descriptions of what the participants experienced as it related to the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). Finally, a composite description of the essences representing the collective group were analyzed to develop themes to provide insight to the research questions under investigation.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is paramount in qualitive research. It involves the recognition of research as legitimate by practitioners and policy makers, and that the study's findings are worthy of attention (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Nowell et al., 2017). Further, it includes the degree of rigor employed in the study and whether the study can be replicated in similar contexts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To increase the trustworthiness of this study, I implemented four techniques: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

Credibility

To substantiate the credibility of this study, I employed various actions. These included maintaining an accurate research log, analyzing contradicting or negative findings from data analysis, keeping a reflexive journal to manage personal bias, and triangulating data. (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Triangulation involves corroborating different sources of evidence to compare across other sources of data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I used in-depth interviews, a focus group,

and journal writing as data gathering sources to facilitate the process of triangulation to provide

validity to my findings.

Transferability

Transferability involves whether the study's findings can be applicable to other contexts

and situations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To achieve transferability, I described the phenomenon

under investigation thoroughly by using rich and thick descriptions regarding the site and

through direct quotes obtained from the participants. Providing detailed accounts of the multiple

perspectives and site-description provides richer and more authentic results. Further, I integrated

the study with existing scholarship to ensure that the findings were consistent with previous

research. Finally, I employed maximum variation sampling to ensure I captured the most diverse

range of perspectives possible to apprise the research questions under investigation.

Dependability

To strengthen the dependability of this study, I executed triangulation of the findings with

various data points (Patton, 2015). The goal of triangulating with multiple data points is to test

for consistency and provide greater insight into how the inquiry approach and the study

phenomenon relate. The primary method of triangulation for this research involved interviewing

multiple participants individually and in a focus group setting as well as analyzing journal

writings. At the conclusion of each data collection method, I provided participants with a

complete transcript to member-check for accuracy and allowed them to add or edit responses to

determine if the interpretations are representative of their insights and perspectives (Plano Clark

& Creswell, 2015). Additionally, dependability was achieved by eliciting peer debriefers' to

determine the findings precision. These peer debriefers, my dissertation chair and an academic

scholar familiar with the topic, will analyze my coding schemes, data collection, and data

analysis procedures for this study. This process involved both written and verbal insight involving the strengths and limitations of the study.

Confirmability

Confirmability involves providing evidence that the results of the research are obtained directly from participants social constructions and are not influenced due to personal bias (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Once member-checking was completed, and to ensure the accuracy of the data obtained, I provided rich and thick descriptions of the study's findings (Patton, 2015). Confirmability was also achieved by maintaining an active research log. This log served as a daily schedule to record the organization of the study such as the methods of data collection, any imminent categories, and the execution of personal decisions. Further, the research log served as a reflexive exercise to journal presuppositions, emerging negative cases, raised questions, analytic memos, and data that connects to the literature. I elicited the assistance of a doctoral peer to code two participant transcripts to validate the accuracy of the data collection and analysis procedures of the study (Plano Clark & Creswell, 2015).

Ethical Considerations

Data collection did not commence until the IRB at Liberty University granted full approval. Once authorized to conduct research, ethical consideration concerning the protection and general welfare of the participants was imperative throughout this study (Plano Clark & Creswell, 2015). To limit any vulnerability, each participant was provided the informed consent form in advance and again prior to the start of the interview to disclose the study's procedures and their rights (Creswell & Poth, 2018). These individual consent procedures provided awareness to participants regarding this study and its voluntary nature, possible risks associated with participation, right of refusal to answer any sensitive questions, and the option to withdraw

at any point during the interview process (Saldaña, 2013). Each participant was provided monetary compensation of $25 (Visa gift card) for their participation in each activity in which they contributed (interview, focus group, letter writing), and was explained that their willingness to share their experiences could assist students with similar situations through policy development and implementation. While it was explained that the study poses no apparent mental risks, if sensitive topics surfaced during the interview, I arranged on-site psychological and counseling support services for those in distress. To ensure privacy and confidentiality, all interviews were conducted in a private, closed-door office via Zoom at a mutually agreed upon day and time. To protect the participants confidentiality, each chose a pseudonym that they were referred to as throughout the duration of the process. Further, elevated levels to protect confidentiality included storing all materials from the interviews in a locked cabinet in my office, and password protect all recorded material. Additionally, all data was password protected in my personal computer. After a period of three years, all data collected materials will be destroyed.

Summary

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of former promise program students that transferred to a four-year university in California in pursuit of their bachelor's degree. I utilized a phenomenological research design to interview 20 former promise program students to achieve thematic saturation who attended a CCC to discover the specific factors that promoted or impeded their timely transfer to a four-year university. The data collection methods consisting of individual interviews, a focus group, and letter writing provided me with an opportunity to better understand the challenges students enrolled in a free tuition program experience when attempting to accomplish their educational goals within a two-year timeframe. Interview transcripts were provided to each participant to cross-check for the accuracy of their

responses, and member checking and peer debriefers were employed to enhance trustworthiness and credibility. This study followed Moustakas's (1994) phenomenological process to develop a nuanced data analysis plan to answer the research questions under investigation. Ethical considerations of working with human subjects is paramount and were executed in this study to establish trust in the presented research.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

This chapter presents the findings. This transcendental phenomenological study explored the experiences of former CCC promise program students who successfully transferred to an in-state four-year university. I employed purposeful sampling to recruit participants for this research study. The final sample group consisted of 20 former promise program students who previously attended Mountain MVCC (pseudonym), LCC (pseudonym), HCC (pseudonym), or OVCC (pseudonym) and subsequently transferred to a university. Data were collected from the participants in the form of individual interviews, a focus group, and a letter writing activity. The interviews and focus group for this study were conducted using the online Zoom platform and were audio-recorded with the permission from the participant. Recordings were auto transcribed and member-checked with participants to ensure response accuracy and to safeguard the validity of the research. To commence with thematic development, I analyzed the individual interviews, focus group, and letter writings by reading through each segment of data multiple times. Through an iterative process, I condensed these segments of data into categories which were then used to write textural and structural descriptions of what the participants experienced as it related to the phenomenon under investigation. Finally, a composite description representing the collective group was analyzed to develop themes and to answer the study's research questions.

Chapter Four is organized with a description of the study's participants, findings from the data analysis in the form of narrative themes, and a conclusion. The themes derived from the data collection methods provided insight to the phenomenon experienced by former CCC students in the promise program.

Participants

The impetus for choosing participants for a phenomenological study is because they have directly experienced the phenomenon of interest as opposed to secondhand experience (Moustakas, 1994). To gather such data, undertaking in-depth interviews to make sense of experiences both individually and as a shared meaning is paramount (Patton, 2015). For the purposes of this study, the phenomenon under inquiry was that participants were formally enrolled in a CCC promise program and had since transferred to an in-state university. To ensure maximum variation, this study consisted of 20 former promise program students representing different ages, genders, and ethnic backgrounds, who were previously enrolled at one of four CCCs. For confidentiality purposes, pseudonyms were assigned to each participant to protect their identities. Table 5 presents the participants name, gender, the CCC they formally attended, the number of years they were enrolled at their CCC before transferring, and their college major.

Jane

Never considering herself as college level material, Jane enrolled at MVCC in hopes of discovering her pathway. Shortly after her first semester of attendance, she decided to pursue a major in criminal justice. However, after taking several criminal justice courses, she quickly changed her mind and switched to business administration. Jane spent a total of 2.5 years at MVCC and transferred to CSU, Fullerton with a 3.70 GPA. She has career aspirations of working in law enforcement.

Mary

Due to her country's political turmoil, Mary's parents immigrated from Iran to the United States when she was a child. After her father's job relocated him several times, her family finally settled in Orange County where she attended secondary school. Mary enrolled at MVCC as a

political science major and later transferred to UC, Los Angeles with a 3.78 GPA. Her lifelong

dream is to eventually attend law school and become an attorney.

Table 5

Participant Information

Participant	Gender	Ethnicity	CCC	Years in CCC	Major
Jane	Female	Middle Eastern	MVCC	2.5	Business Admin.
Mary	Female	Middle Eastern	MVCC	3	Pol. Sci.
Erica	Female	White	MVCC	2.5	Kinesiology
Eduardo	Male	Hispanic	MVCC	2	Kinesiology
Richard	Male	White	MVCC	2	Business Econ.
Emma	Female	Asian	MVCC	1.5	Cognitive Sci.
Natasha	Female	Asian	MVCC	2.5	Art: Illustration
Riley	Female	White	MVCC	2	Psychology
Ben	Male	Middle Eastern	MVCC	2	Human Biology
Kaye	Female	Asian	MVCC	2	Psychology
Sam	Female	Asian	MVCC	2	Psychology
Eddie	Male	White	MVCC	4	Business Admin.
Diane	Female	Hispanic	MVCC	2	Sociology
Nadia	Female	White	LVCC	5	Anthropology
Naazim	Male	Middle Eastern	HCC	2	Psychology
Jenny	Female	Asian	MVCC	2	Neuroscience
Meredith	Female	Hispanic	OVCC	3	Elementary Ed.
Kelly	Female	Hispanic	OVCC	2	Criminal Justice
Victoria	Female	Hispanic	OVCC	2	Sociology
Dana	Female	Hispanic	OVCC	2	Elementary Ed.

Erica

Erica originally enrolled at MVCC anticipating she would major in and become an interior designer. However, after completing several interior design courses, Erica quickly realized that her passion involved helping people achieve their personal fitness goals. As a result, Erica changed her major to kinesiology and transferred to CSU, Fullerton with a 3.95 GPA. She one day aspires to be a personal trainer.

Eduardo

After spending the first 13 years of his in life living in the Bronx, New York, Eduardo moved to Orange County with his family for better economic opportunities. From the onset, however, Eduardo knew his personal and professional calling was to be a physical therapist. He enrolled at MVCC as a kinesiology major and never wavered from his goal. He transferred to CSU, Long Beach with a 3.50 GPA.

Richard

Born and raised in Orange County, California, Richard has always dreamed big. His lifelong career aspiration is to graduate from college and work in the Silicon Valley for a big corporation such as Tesla or Amazon within the finance sector. He attended MVCC for two years before transferring to UC, Irvine with a 3.85 GPA in business economics.

Emma

Emma's family moved several times throughout her childhood. Shortly after moving to Massachusetts, her family quickly relocated to South Korea where she spent most of her adolescent years. However, due to bleak economic opportunities, they relocated back to the U.S., eventually settling down in Orange County, California. As a first-generation college student, Emma excelled in her collegiate studies by earning a 3.81 GPA and transferred to UC, Irvine as a

cognitive science major. After graduating with her bachelor's degree, Emma plans to enroll in medical school.

Natasha

Natasha had a challenging secondary school experience. The subject of constant peer harassment and bullying because of her cultural background, Natasha had difficulty establishing friendships. Despite this, she excelled in her high school academics before transitioning to higher education. After receiving her family's wishes, she enrolled at MVCC as a biology (pre-medical concentration) major but soon realized that this was not her passion. Eventually, she decided to pursue an art/illustration pathway and transferred to CSU, Long Beach with a 3.75 GPA.

Riley

Like other participants in this study, Riley moved consistently during her childhood. Born in California, her family immediately moved to Connecticut for a few years and then relocated to Phoenix, Arizona. After living in Arizona for five years, her family moved to Thailand where she commenced her middle school education before they moved back to California. These constant changes took a negative toll on Riley's emotional and academic progress. However, once she enrolled at MVCC, she excelled. As a first-generation college student, Riley transferred to UC, Irvine as a psychology major with a 3.64 GPA. She anticipates enrolling in graduate school to become a therapist after earning her four-year degree.

Ben

Born in the United States, Ben's family relocated several times due to his family's economic situation. He lived in Iran for four years, Dubai for four years, and then in Virginia for several years, before eventually moving to California. Perhaps due to these constant life transitions, Ben had academic challenges in high school and enrolling at MVCC was his only

higher education option. Despite this, Ben was a standout scholar in community college. After receiving several admissions offers, he decided to transfer to UC, Berkley as a human biology major to pursue his dreams of attending medical school. Ben's transfer GPA was a 3.72.

Kaye

Kaye's family moved every three years throughout her childhood and adolescent years. After her parents divorced, she eventually relocated with her mother to Orange County where she has resided since. After graduating from high school, Kaye enrolled at MVCC and eventually transferred to UC, Los Angeles after two years with a 4.00 GPA. As a psychology major, she has aspirations of attending law school to become a family lawyer.

Sam

After living in Los Angeles County for most of her adolescent life, Sam's family relocated to Orange County in hopes of enrolling her into better schools. Although the transition was challenging, Sam excelled in high school before eventually starting at MVCC. After spending 2.5 years at MVCC, Sam transferred to CSU, Fullerton as a psychology major with a 3.89 GPA. After graduation, Sam intends to enroll into graduate school to pursue a career as a therapist.

Eddie

Born and raised in Orange County, Eddie enrolled at MVCC immediately after high school anticipating he would transfer as quickly as possible. However, due to his family's struggling real estate business, he dropped out of MVCC to help manage the small company. After a year, Eddie reenrolled at MVCC to pursue his passion of one day owning a small business of his own. He transferred to University of Southern California with a 4.00 GPA and is majoring in business administration.

Diane

Diane's family relocated several times throughout her adolescence. Born and raised in Florida, her family moved to several states including Massachusetts and Connecticut before eventually settling down in California. Raised in a single parent household, Diane's lifelong passion is to become a therapist. She transferred to UC, Los Angeles with a 4.00 GPA and is majoring in sociology.

Nadia

Contrary to the other participants in the study, Nadia was homeschooled her entire life. Raised in a family with several siblings who enrolled directly into a four-year university, Nadia had other plans to commence her higher education studies. With aspirations of working in the music management industry, Nadia enrolled at LVCC and later transferred to UC, Los Angeles as an anthropology major with a 3.70 GPA.

Naazim

After growing up in Egypt for the better part of his adolescent years, Naazim's family moved to Orange County, California in search of better economic opportunities. Perhaps due to his ethnic and cultural background, Naazim had a difficult time adjusting in secondary school. After graduating from high school, he immediately enrolled at HCC where he spent two years before transferring to UC, Santa Cruz with a 3.10 GPA. He is majoring in psychology and has future aspirations of working as a therapist.

Jenny

Jenny was born and raised in Orange County, California and has always dreamed big. As an aspiring doctor, she one day hopes to be a neurosurgeon within the local community. She

enrolled at MVCC and transferred at the top of her class with a 4.00 GPA to Claremont McKenna College as a neuroscience major.

Meredith

Growing up in Los Angeles County, Meredith's family struggled financially throughout her upbringing. She enrolled at OVCC to pursue a better life for herself and the family she hopes to have one day. She spent three years in community college before transferring to CSU, Long Beach with a 2.85 GPA. After graduating from college, she anticipates enrolling into a teacher credential program to become an elementary school teacher.

Kelly

Unlike most other participants, Kelly was accepted into multiple four-year universities during her senior year of high school. However, as an only child who had to care for her ailing mother, and because of financial constraints, she decided to enroll in OVCC because of the opportunity to attend tuition free. She transferred to CSU, Fullerton as a criminal justice major with a 3.67 overall GPA. She hopes to attend law school one day to become a family lawyer.

Victoria

Born and raised in Mexico, Victoria's family moved to Los Angeles County in search of better economic opportunities where she has resided since. With career aspirations of either becoming a school counselor or social worker, Victoria spent two years at OVCC before transferring as a sociology major to CSU, Long Beach with a 3.40 GPA.

Dana

Dana enrolled at OVCC to pursue her lifelong goal of becoming an elementary school teacher. After transferring to CSU, Long Beach as an elementary school major, she then decided that the educational field was no longer her passion. Although she intends to earn her bachelor's

degree in this subject, she plans on enrolling into a graduate program in public administration to pursue a career in the government sector.

Results

This section details the key findings of the data analysis. The results are classified into the underlying themes followed by several sub-themes. Data were collected through 60-minute individual interviews, a 60-minute focus group, and a letter writing activity. The individual interviews and focus group followed a semi-structured question protocol but deviated when needed to allow for a more organic style of conversation. This open-ended interviewing style approach encouraged participants to freely discuss their individual viewpoints regarding their experiences in their respective promise program and the intentional actions they adopted that either promoted or hindered their timely transfer to a four-year university. Further, by triangulating data with the letter writing activity, emerging overarching themes and sub-themes were identified. The four themes that emerged from the data are: *shaping academic self-perceptions*, *community college sentiments*, *community of support*, and *racing against time*.

Shaping Academic Self-Perceptions

Active and interactive social environments can either facilitate or impede an individual's growth mindset (Deci & Ryan, 2002; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Establishing innate competence encourages people to pursue challenges for their capacities and to continually attempt to augment their skills through activities resulting in elevated levels of academic achievement in students (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Overwhelmingly, participants in this study described a systematic secondary school culture that shaped their academic self-perceptions while simultaneously developing their personal identities. An example of this was mentioned by Emma who stated:

I know some people who took my phone and showed my [high school] grades through the grades app and made fun of me. I just felt like I kept comparing myself to people around me because they were all pretty smart and stuff. Teachers would be very discouraging They would say if you don't study now you'll just end up at MVCC or be homeless for the rest of your life. They would yell at me if I wasn't really understanding something. They would be like, "why do you look so dumb right now?"

Diane, who attended the same high school as Emma, validated this statement by mentioning:

[They preach that] you need the highest SAT scores. You need the highest GPA. Some [students] would tell me that they got a 1550 on their SAT and they had to take it over again; it wasn't good enough. That's what the energy is like. They [high school] have high SAT scores and high suicide rates; that's what they're known for and which no one wants to talk about. That's how much pressure there is. It was all good until a kid in my class committed suicide because of the pressure at Preparatory High School [pseudonym]. And that wasn't the only one. In my time in high school, there were another two suicides [after that]. I had sat next to him all year and like obviously, you're going to feel guilty even though it's not your fault. It was extremely hard and I was so distraught. We had wellness counselors who are supposed to be there to talk to you. I waited two hours. The lady came out afterwards and said sorry, please just go ahead and send me an email.

While reflecting on her experiences in high school, Diane further elaborated by saying:

My whole experience in high school was trash. It's so much pressure. The teachers would look at you like you're a fucking idiot and tell you you're not going to go anywhere; you're going to be homeless. That's how their mentality is.

Brad added: "The school I went to is very competitive. Students are going to Harvard and Stanford. They create the impression that if you go to a community college, you're like a failure" Finally, Erica mentioned, "The high school teachers expected that of students, to have high grades. They demanded that."

The rigorous culture in high school shaped the participants' self-perceptions of not only themselves as scholars, but also provided a catalyst for their desire to attend institutions of higher education. While each participant had differing opinions on whether their high school experience was positive or negative, each lauded their former school for establishing their work ethic, grit, and desire to succeed and persist in higher education post-graduation. Although the students had yet to transition into their community colleges, these intangible characteristics were routinely utilized throughout secondary school and proved to be fundamental to their overall success.

An example of the positive attributes and self-perceptions that the participants' developed in high school concerns the encouragement they received from their teachers. Educated in a secondary school system that shaped students' self-perceptions and internal motivation, all participants in this study indicated that educators inspired them to pursue other academic opportunities outside of their traditional high school studies. Research suggests that high school students that are participating in dual enrollment opportunities have positive academic outcomes in both high school and college, and is linked to successful high school completion, college readiness, and associated with higher levels of college enrollment, achievements, credit accumulation, and elevated overall GPAs in higher education (Fink et al., 2017; Rodriguez & Gao, 2021). Commencing higher education with previously earned credits from secondary school can decrease the time it takes to transfer to a four-year university, which can also decrease the total tuition cost to obtain a baccalaureate degree.

Dual enrollment, which is generally defined as college courses that high school students can take and complete to earn both secondary and post-secondary credit, is one of three options students can pursue to expedite their college careers (Rodriguez & Gao, 2021). High school students are also provided with the opportunity to earn college credit by taking and passing Advanced Placement (AP) courses, a series of college-level curricula ranging in academic subjects such as art, English, history, math, and foreign languages. Additionally, although only 115-programs exist in California, students can earn college units by passing International Baccalaureate (IB) exams.

While research has shown that earning college credit in high school is advantageous for students seeking to accelerate their collegiate careers, the importance of this also emerged as a sub-theme for promise program students. All participants attended rigorous secondary schools that not only provided the opportunity to earn college credit but also received direction from teachers who continually preached the importance of attending college. Emma said:

> Yeah, so I went to Preparatory High School [pseudonym], which is known for being very intense academically. There's a lot of people who take like 20 AP classes during their [schooling], and a lot of people have admissions counselors for their colleges. So, yeah, I took AP classes and honors classes, but I was like a "B" student and didn't have good grades at all.

While most participants attended different institutions, not Preparatory High School, all validated Emma's sentiments. Sophia added, "I was doing all of the honors classes, and was ahead in math. Then we had the IB program at my school and I was doing that." Mary, who attended a local Orange County high school, said, "During my sophomore year. I was introduced to taking dual enrollment classes at the community college level through one of my friends. I did

this and transitioned into AP Human Geography the following year." Further, and although Victoria attended high school in an adjoining county, she took and passed several AP courses in high school and enrolled in a local community college as a dual enrollment student to complete a college level English composition course. The extra-curricular course opportunities students were provided while attending high school proved to be vital for their success when they eventually transitioned into community college considering they persisted and transferred out to their four-year universities in a reasonable timeframe.

Community College Sentiments

The second theme of this study involves community college sentiments. Following high school graduation, participants in this study initially had mixed reactions concerning enrolling in and attending their respective community colleges. All participants had applied to four-year universities during their senior year and fully anticipated commencing their higher education studies within a university setting. However, because of varying circumstances including admission rejections, all had to enroll in community college with the hope of transferring later in the future. This delayed opportunity collectively produced mixed sentiments from the participants about community college who began self-doubting whether they would ever have the opportunity to transfer to the university of their choice. For participants, this uncertainty began in high school just prior to starting community college. Emma said:

> I was pretty discouraged. In high school, there's those days where you wear college shirts of where you are going to go. Or graduation parties for students. But I felt like I couldn't go because I felt like I was going to feel even more discouraged.

Meredith shared a similar experience that she had at her high school. She provided this excerpt:

My high school did a pizza party for those that got accepted to a four-year. They held it in the cafeteria and decorated it for them. For those that joined community college, you had to show a letter and they just gave us a slice of pizza through the cafeteria window. It made me feel like, are we not good enough? [Your] just going to OVCC was kind of like their mentality.

Contrary to Emma and Meredith, Diane was accepted into several four-year universities during her senior year including CSU, Long Beach, UC, Irvine, and UC, San Diego. However, attending UC, Los Angeles was always her goal. Unfortunately, she was denied admission consideration during her senior year which initially provided angst. Searching for answers, she turned to MVCC in hopes of transferring to the college of her choice in the future. However, her conscience decision to attend a community college created mixed emotions. She said the following:

It was a really heard decision because it has always been embedded into my brain that if you go to MVCC you are a failure. Everything that you have done in the past does not matter because look, you ended up in the same place as that kid who skipped class or showed up stoned every day. That is the message that high school gives you. If you go to community college, you are going to be left behind and you are not going to make it. Everything you did was for nothing because they have a 100% acceptance rate.

Adding to her apprehension about attending MVCC were the conversations she had with her peers. Diane mentioned that she felt left out of conversations from her peer groups that enrolled straight into four-year colleges after seeing their social media posts. She routinely fabricated where she was attending because she felt ashamed.

Research involving negative student sentiments from students attending community college has been previously cataloged (Hartman, 2023; Meisel et al., 2022; Shaw et al., 2019). This inherent stigma surrounding community college appeared in several participant interviews who voiced their early concerns about attending. Samantha, whose inter social circle all went to four-year universities after high school, had difficulty convincing herself that community college was in her best interest. She said:

In my mind I was like, no, I have to got to a four-year because that is what people do. I was pretty hesitant at first because no one was really doing it [attending community college] or if they were, they did not want to talk about it because they were embarrassed. At first, I did not really tell people so I could avoid feeling embarrassed. I feel like people do not respect it [community college] because they think it is easier or is similar to high school, or because it is not as rigorous. They just do not think it is as impressive as these big-name schools. When you say, "oh, I go to this community college in my little hometown," people are like "I have never heard of that."

Ben also shared these negative perceptions of community college. He said, "My friends would go to like UCLA or private colleges. However, me going to a community college, there's a stigma about like if you went, you're not the brightest person." While it was Ben's friends who disparaged his decision to attend MVCC, other participants mentioned that it was their immediate family that provided little support. Dana mentioned:

I wanted the experience of getting praised for going to college. But, some of my family members were like, why are you going to a community college and not a university like Irvine. Family would actually discourage me about attending.

Similarly, Natasha felt pressure from her family to attend a four-year university directly out of high school. While she did get into several four-year colleges during her senior year such as UC, San Diego and Riverside, her anxiety about relocating prompted her to enroll at MVCC. She shared the following:

> I was hesitant at first because my parents were very insistent about [me] having to go to a four-year university. They said there was no other way because they felt I was to academically [over] qualified to even go to a community college. However, I just felt that the desire to just stay home and stay local drove my decision to attend MVCC.

Self-Confidence

While some shared apprehension about enrolling into their community college, participants eventually embraced the idea and indicated that they turned to their local two-year college to search for meaning in their lives and to jump start their higher education careers. Participants described the CCC system as a second chance to pursue their career goals and an opportunity to develop their self-confidence simultaneously. An example of this was shared by Ben who had this to say:

> The main reason I even went to community college is because I lacked so much motivation in high school. It took a lot for me to even speak with a [high school] counselor; that was the biggest challenge I faced. Its more of a confidence issue that leads to a lack of motivation. Once I enrolled in community college, I just started having more confidence realizing that I could pursue whatever career path that I wanted to pursue.

Meredith shared a related experience once she enrolled at OVCC. She said:

> I was not the best academically with grades [in high school]. I was not your 3.0, 3.5 and above student. [I turned to] OVCC to really gain confidence because being inside that

classroom [OVCC], I realized that I would not let my grades define me. I went to community college instead of a four-year university to boost my confidence.

After deciding to enroll into their respective community colleges, both Ben and Meredith excelled academically. While they both indicated struggling as scholars in secondary school, this changed after each course they passed in college. In doing so, their confidence and internal perceptions of themselves improved, which ultimately aided in their successful persistence each term. Natasha, who, unlike Ben and Meredith, was academically competitive in high school for four-year university admissions standards, turned to MVCC for different reasons. She said:

Sophomore year of high school I was bullied, and I really reached a huge breaking point. Basically, I had a huge emotional breakdown. I chose to leave my group of friends and it was strange because in high school, you are judged a lot based on your social circle. To not have a social circle and to be by yourself was very debilitating because people make assumptions about you. People will prematurely judge you which impacts your ability to make new friends. Because of this, I had issues interacting with people socially and felt that because the universities here in California are so massive, I just did not feel I was ready to enter that environment. So, I think going to community college was a way to kind of ease into it more slowly.

Jenny concurred with Natasha, saying, "With community college students, we are not very confident in ourselves. That is what draws us to the community college system."

Regardless of varying circumstances, several participants viewed community college as the only viable option to acquire the academic and social skills needed to succeed in academia. For many participants, the lack of guidance or support from friends and family created distorted perceptions involving their self-image. However, once they enrolled in community college and

began their higher education careers, these negative beliefs eventually subsided which ultimately aided in their ability to increase personal confidence and established their purpose within the world. This shift in confidence due to various on campus exposures proved to be central to the students' ability to rapidly persist through the community college system and subsequent transfer a four-year university (Bickerstaff et al., 2017).

Personal Relief

Although participants aspired to attend a four-year university directly out of high school, once the reality of attending community college came to fruition, most concurred that they experienced feeling a sense of personal relief. Primarily due to the financial costs associated with universities, the students began to embrace the idea of attending community college to commence their baccalaureate degree pursuits free of charge. Diane, who attended MVCC and was steadfast on transferring to University of California, Los Angeles, had this to say:

> My dad said, "everyone has student loans, it is a part of life so do not count on me to help you pay for college." From there, I found out about MVCC and the promise program that literally pays for the first two years for free. That means I can get a masters and pay the same price as someone just getting a bachelors. I was like the first two years are free and they have this program which will transfer you and give me a chance to get into the school that I originally did not get into.

Diane's foresight was shared by others. Erica, an aspiring medical school student explained her reasoning for enrolling into MVCC. She said:

> I think because I am very huge on like money and financial stuff. I know medical school is a lot, like $100,000 that I would be in debt. Why do I have to go straight to a four-year

and suffer even more? I was very happy about the promise program. I did not have to pay or like my parents did not have to pay for my college.

Diane and Erica's forethought of attending graduate school in the future and the cost associated with higher education provided anxiety for their families. This apprehension was shared by others. Natasha recalled earlier conversations she had with her father about the cost of college. She offered this insight:

I did not qualify for financial aid outside of the promise program. I remember my dad and I would sit down and have serious discussions about it [cost of tuition]. He would say "would you rather be working over the summer or would you rather be attending MVCC and doing classes so that you can get out of here in two years?"

Similar reasons encouraged Kelly to enroll at OVCC. Although she was accepted into several four-year universities during her senior year of high school, her decision to live at home and attend community college free of cost for two years was driven primarily by her concerns regarding the financial ramifications of taking out student loans. She added:

I was accepted into several universities. I did everything in high school. I graduated with honors. I was in wrestling, cheer, swim and in ATV production. I was the news anchor and very involved in school. I also worked for the cafeteria throughout high school. The main reason why I went to OVCC was because my mom was diagnosed with cancer. My plan was to go far away to San Francisco but because of finances, I decided to stay locally and do the two years for free. I wanted to save her money.

Although a difficult one, Kelly's calculated decision to decline university admission offers and attend community college was primarily centered around finances. While she felt pressure from others encouraging her to enroll directly into a university, her conscience choice to

attend community college alleviated the stress her family was experiencing concerning tuition. Like Kelly, Naazim was raised in a middle-class household and did not qualify for financial aid outside of the promise program. His decision to attend HCC for two years was financially driven. He said:

It was a no brainer for me. Two years of free college? I don't have to go and waste money somewhere else. That allowed me to stay at home and work and help my family with whatever they needed. At the time, I had wished that I was at a four-year and that I moved away from home. But at the same time if I did that, it would have put me in a worse circumstance then I was. At a university, expenses are like triple if not quadruple that of community college. So, being able to save your finances by going through the promise program was important for me.

Community of Support

The theme *community of support* emerged in this study. This thematic classification is significant because participants had mixed reactions before transitioning into higher education because of complicated secondary experiences including four-year admission rejections and societal stigmas associated with attending community colleges. Feelings of anxiety were quickly eradicated once the students connected with campus programs and support services. Establishing professional relationships with empathetic faculty and staff that enabled the students to feel supported throughout their academic journey were transformational. These regular and substantive interactions with college personnel led to enhanced involvement in various on-campus activities which contributed to students' academic and social success (Astin, 1999).

For example, all participants lauded the support they received from faculty related to their personal and academic goals and acknowledged that, without this encouragement, they may have

not succeeded in reaching their transfer goals. Eddie, who started at MVCC with the goal of

transferring to CSU, Fullerton, recalled the impact his former counselor had. Through various

conversations and personal encouragement with his counselor convincing him to apply to

University of Southern California, Eddie changed his mind. He reflected on his experience:

> Being a part of the promise program, there was definitely a lot of support which took the
>
> anxiety out of everything. I really relied on my counselor and having that support;
>
> someone paving the way and showing you which way you could go. That helped
>
> tremendously. There is so much information out there in terms of what you should do and
>
> what classes to take. I mean, you're lost because there is so many classes and so many
>
> steps you have to take to even register for and get the right classes. You do not want take
>
> the wrong classes because it will not allow you to transfer later on and you will have to
>
> take an extra semester. So, to have the help of a counselor to tell you what you need to
>
> take and show you the requirements was definitely a huge help. They really encourage
>
> me to transfer to whatever school I wanted to go to.

Eddie also commended his professors for their support. He said, "They are always encouraging

you to look at specific schools and departments. I think that is the overall morale at MVCC.

> Natasha, who also attended MVCC, said:
>
> It was nerve racking at first because I did not know what I wanted to do and to tell this
>
> person about all of my insecurities about my education and aspirations, someone who is a
>
> complete stranger was nerve racking. However, speaking with a counselor was super eye
>
> opening. It was instrumental in assisting me in switching my major. The mandatory
>
> promise program counselor meetings were so beneficial to me. It was validating to meet
>
> with a counselor to just have a person double check and say, "Hey, you are on the right

track and doing a great job." The faculty members on campus are trusted. The people that

are working there are literally trusted people whose job is to help you.

The subordinate theme of the impact of faculty was shared by all participants in this

study. Regardless of the community college they attended, all participants praised their former

institutions for the individual support they provided. Dana, who attended OVCC, recalled the

support she received throughout her academic tenure. She added:

The staff really did care and not like a feeling that they were just there to work. They are

there to see students thrive. I had a mentor that wrote me and recommended me for a

scholarship which I ended up getting. It was not about the money it was more about

someone believing in me. Academically, I started just taking off from there.

Finally, Meredith offered this insight:

It was a litter bit easier for me to lose motivation at OVCC. But I had educators

supporting me the whole entire time saying like, "do not give up. Whatever you need just

let us know." And I am very thankful to have those people who have been in my shoes

and know what to expect.

For the participants in this study, commencing their higher education careers within the

CCC system was initially an onerous experience. Feeling dejected from not being admitted into a

four-year university and battling confidence issues related to the stigmas of attending a

community college, most of the students turned to various campus support systems to ease their

transition into higher education. Receiving encouragement and timely support services from

caring faculty proved to be beneficial for the participants to fully embrace their institutions,

resulting in positive college experiences. Through interactions with faculty and staff stressing the

importance of pursuing their individual goals, this community of support assisted students by

helping them realize their goals while unlocking hidden scholastic potential they never realized

they possessed.

Racing Against Time

The overarching theme of Racing Against Time materialized within participants because

they felt an internal pressure to transfer within two years because of the entitlement limitations of

the promise program. The students in this study voiced their frustrations with the inherent stress

they endured while attending their community colleges due to the limited funding they received

when attempting to accomplish their transfer goals at an accelerated rate. For many, attempting

to transfer within their allotted two years of funding complicated their collegiate experiences and

presented unanticipated challenges that they had to personally navigate. Natasha, who credits her

multiple AP courses for aiding in her ability to transfer within two years, encapsulated the

essence of this theme by stating, "I finished by the skin of my teeth. I was working at an

accelerated pace and taking a full course load. I was really sprinting for the finish line because I

had to get it done and transfer." For Natasha, the innate pressure of needing to transfer took a toll

on her emotional well-being. She described the anxiety she and her family felt regarding the

financial ramifications of having to stay a third year may cause. Unfortunately, her situation was

not unique. Jenny offered insightful comments when she said the following:

> You are constantly rushing. You have two years of funding and do not have anymore
>
> after that. It does not give you much time to explore or fit in extracurriculars like you
>
> want. So, there were times where I wanted to put time into extracurriculars but had to
>
> drop a class or two along the way. It made me worry if I might have to stay another
>
> semester and I knew if I had to, I probably would not be able to afford it. It is a lot of

pressure to take a on a workload and then, having the pressure of not being able to afford

a third year. You kind of push yourself to an extent that is not mentally healthy.

Jenny mentioned that she "dodged a third year of being at her community college" because of the

AP courses she brought in from high school and by taking courses in the summer. However,

since her promise program only provides tuition support for students enrolled in at least full-time

status, and considering most students can only manage part-time enrollment in the summer

because of the term's condensed nature, Jenny had to pay out of pocket for her college fees. She

provided further comments:

> I took a lot of prerequisite courses in the summer terms but if I was not enrolled in 12
>
> units so I had to pay for those classes. Chemistry classes and lab fees racked up a huge
>
> bill. This class alone was like $400. I was thinking, "oh man, I wish I had the promise
>
> program to support me right now."

Like Jenny, Diane reflected on the anxiety she experienced as a student in the promise

program who was attempting to accomplish her goals in her two years of fixed funding. She

added:

> It is anxiety inducing because you are not allowed to mess up. You cannot fail this class
>
> because if you have to take it again, there is no space in your schedule. Sometimes I had
>
> to call off of work because I simply had too much school stuff to do. It is a lot of work
>
> and a lot of anxiety because you are always getting that reminder of you have to remain
>
> in 12 units and you only have two years. It is kind of like you are on your own. The
>
> program does not allow for things that may happen in your life.

Although Diane eventually transferred to her target university, she described feeling

angst throughout her two years in community college. She mentioned having to sacrifice other

personal interests she was hoping to pursue because of the rigors of her studies. She continued by stating:

> I feel that if you are a promise program student, and since they require all of those units, you do not really have time for any extra curricular activities. It is really hard to get involved in the school because you have all of these classes you are taking. My schooling and my quality of work went down so I had to work less hours. I had to approach my neighbor and tell her that I could not take care of her child anymore because I was in so many classes. I got to school at 8am and would not leave until 10pm; it was exhausting. In the promise program, you are going to either get lazy or cut corners. I would have loved to learn more in each class but they [instructors] are expecting me to read 2 chapters in a couple days; it is not going to happen. I am going to have to look up summaries because it is too overwhelming. You cannot do both school and all of these other things that you have going on.

Outlier Data and Findings

Although not the focal point of this study, the COVID-19 pandemic appeared as an outlier finding because of the disruption it caused to the participants secondary school experiences. This shared experience forced the students to shift to online learning which ultimately complicated their transition into higher education. Unfortunately, many participants felt they missed out on an equitable college experience in comparison to their peers who are still attending community college. For many, making a conscience decision to enroll into their local community college made practical and financial sense. Jane, who was accepted into several universities during her senior year, said:

Why I am going to pay $27,000 to learn from home when I can do the same thing at my

community college for free? When COVID hit, it is not like you are going to go to the

dorms, so there was really not point in going to a university.

Kaye concurred with Jane's sentiments:

Initially I was sad because I would see my friends going to four-year universities and

they seemed to be having the time of their lives; they said they were going to parties and

everything. But we know actually not really because everyone was virtual. So, I feel like

initially, I made the right choice to attend community college because COVID hit and

everyone had a virtual education. I did not see the benefit of going to the university and

paying more money compared to MVCC. So, I feel like I made the right decision.

Finally, Nadia, who attended LCC, shared, "A lot of my friends and siblings went straight to a

four-year. However, with COVID, there was no point to go to a university because everything

was online."

Research Question Responses

This section offers answers to the research questions under investigation. The answers

provided are in narrative form taken directly from the data collected in this study. The answers

represent the group's collective experiences and involves the four themes derived from the data.

Central Research Question

What are the lived experiences of promise program students previously enrolled at a CCC

who have transferred to a four-year university?

The theme *community college sentiments* and sub-themes *self-confidence* and *personal

relief* answer the central research question. The participants in this study expressed gratitude for

the opportunity to commence their higher education careers within the CCC system specifically

situated in a promise program. Being provided funding for two years to pursue their educational

endeavors alleviated the financial pressures many were encountering by easing the burden of

having to find alternative sources to pay for their education. While each promise program is

uniquely designed, the students collectively commended their promise programs for the

resources it provided in support of their educational goals. Brad succulently described his

experience in the promise program by saying:

> Fortunately, as a promise program student I was given priority registration. Having a
>
> dedicated and amazing counselor along with priority registration allowed me to take the
>
> next step in my educational career without ever looking back. Things such as enrollment
>
> fees were covered by the promise program which meant I could work less and spend
>
> more time studying the important content in my classes. During my second year, I was
>
> speaking to my counselor almost weekly because I had learned something new about the
>
> program that I wished I had investigated during my first year of college. I had learned
>
> how valuable the support of the promise program provides to the student. The promise
>
> program had always been beneficial for me but is become exponentially more beneficial
>
> once I started looking into the program and taking advantage of all the benefits. The
>
> program provides students with many tools that allows them to succeed.

Sub-Question One

What experiences promoted a timely transfer for students previously enrolled at a CCC

who have transferred to a four-year university?

The theme *community of support* was used to answer sub-question one. All participants

recognized the importance of leveraging the campus resources to their personal advantage in

support of their academic success. For many, being proactive agents by actively seeking out

assistance from the community of support provided on their respective campuses from college personnel and programs proved to be integral in promoting a timely transfer to the university system. These intentional behaviors increased the students' personal level of self-confidence in themselves as they began embracing their community college campuses in conjunction with realizing that their transfer goals were within reach. While reflecting on her experiences that promoted her timely transfer, Erica offered this insight:

> I sought assistance from my counselor who provided guidance in choosing courses aligned with my transfer requirements to ensure I stayed on track. Passing courses successfully was crucial to my timely transfer but it required dedication and perseverance. There were moments when the coursework was overwhelming, but I learned the importance of seeking help from my instructors. Regularly connecting with them during office hours allowed me to clarify concepts, gain valuable insights, and develop a deeper understanding of the material. Also, actively engaging and participating in on-campus activities play an important part in my overall college experience and helped me achieve my transfer goals. Involvement in student organizations and clubs not only allowed me to make connections and develop leadership skills, but it also introduced me to people who had already successfully transferred. Their insights and advice were extremely helpful in navigating the transfer process, and they served as a source of inspiration and motivation.

Sub-Question Two

What experiences hindered a timely transfer for students previously enrolled at a CCC who have transferred to a four-year university?

The theme *racing against time* was used to answer sub-question two. While the majority of participants in this study transferred within a reasonable timeframe, all expressed concerns regarding the pressures associated with the time limitations afforded through the promise program. The students mentioned battling innate distress of having to accomplish their transfer aspirations at an accelerated pace and felt they were racing against time before their two-year entitlement expired. This placed an unhealthy burden on the participants who routinely commented that they felt they were placed to higher academic standards in comparison to non-promise program students. For example, Victoria said:

> The biggest challenge is not knowing what to major in because a lot of us come in undecided. I feel that I should have been given the opportunity to explore to find out what I wanted to do. Instead, majors are pushed on us because we have to transfer.

The tension Victoria felt was not unique to her situation. Unanticipated events often arose within the group including being undecided on a college major or career, withdrawing from courses, personal health complications, and needing to work to support their family. These factors contributed to transfer setbacks for some students that they never predicted. For these participants, they had to renegotiate their transfer timeline while managing the added stressor of finding funding for their courses. Meredith described her experiences by stating the following:

> I was offered acceptance into California State University, Long Beach. Then, I got a letter from Long Beach saying, "Oh, you did not pass your math class so we have to take back your acceptance and you will have to reapply again in the future." I took that very hard because I worked really hard to pass those classes and I was ready to transfer and preparing for their fall orientation. It made it less exciting for me to transfer because I had

to take a gap semester. I felt like the biggest loser for having to take a semester off and I was so embarrassed.

Summary

Chapter Four introduced the participants of this study and the findings of the research. Utilizing Moustakas' (1994) transcendental phenomenological approach, the four themes identified from the analysis of the data collected are shaping academic self-perceptions, community college sentiments, community of support, and racing against time. Participant statements were provided in support of the overarching themes and subordinate themes to illuminate their experiences within a CCC promise program and to address the research questions under investigation. Through intentional actions, the participants leveraged campus supports systems which led to their transfer success. While some had to renegotiate their transfer timelines because of personal setbacks, collectively all the students in this study reached their four-year destinations through resilience, grit, and personal sacrifice.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to study the experiences of former CCC promise program students who have successfully transferred to an in-state four-year university. Chapter Five commences with a discussion of the study's key findings. Further, interpretation of the findings will be presented, implications for policy and practice are highlighted, and theoretical and methodological implications are discussed. Finally, the chapter concludes with recommendations for future research.

Discussion

This section discusses the central findings of the research study. The interpretation of the thematic findings of this study are explored. Additionally, implications for policy and practice involving promise program students will be discussed. Subsequently, the themes and subordinate themes will be analyzed in conjunction with the study's theoretical underpinnings. Finally, the limitations and delimitations will be explored, and recommendations for future research will be addressed.

Summary of Thematic Findings

The findings of this research study attempt to expand upon the scarcity of literature concerning the experiences of students enrolled in promise programs. This section opens with a summary of the thematic findings that were discovered, and the various interpretations of these findings. Derived from the data, presumptions involving the findings of this study while considering the theoretical framework and current literature are presented. These interpretations include providing voices for the participants, a concise understanding of the questions under inquiry, attempts to add to the literature, and provides a call for action (Creswell, 2013).

Interpretation of Findings

This research was guided by the theoretical framework proposed by Astin (1999) concerning the student involvement model and the proposition that student learning and development are correlated. Through the data analysis process, there were four themes and a few sub-themes that emerged. These themes included *shaping academic self-perceptions*, *community college sentiments*, *community of support*, and racing against time. These themes, whether interpreted as positive or negative, were paramount to the participants experiences in higher education. While collectively, the participants denounced their secondary schooling experiences, the role it played in shaping their academic self-perceptions was apparent. The direct and indirect experiences they encountered in high school ultimately solidified their internal confidence to pursue higher education which eventually aided in their ability to rapidly persist through the CCC system. Comparatively, these experiences also simultaneously affected their impressions of attending community college. Although initially apprehensive, the students began to embrace the idea that the CCC system was a vehicle to provide access to their educational and career pursuits leveraged through promise program funding. As they transitioned through the system, the support the participants received from dedicated faculty and staff committed to their success was evident and inspired the students to achieve their goals. While this campus encouragement was essential to their transfer accomplishments, the participants battled innate stress because of the two-year time limitations afforded through their promise programs. Taken conjointly, these experiences either promoted or hindered a timely transfer for the students. The interpretations of the themes and sub-themes are provided below.

Battling Societal Stigma

Despite decades of transformative work in shaping and altering the trajectory of the lives of millions of Americans, community colleges remain underappreciated and misunderstood within the public (Robinson, 2022). Although it is challenging to pinpoint the genesis of these negative perceptions and sentiments, their historically abysmal success and transfer rates (Davidson et al., 2020; Martinez & Elue, 2020; Perez et al., 2021) may contribute to the stigma surrounding community colleges (Shaw et al., 2019). The themes and sub-themes gathered in this study made it apparent that students continue to face humiliation from society and battle embarrassment for their decision to attend community college. Most participants commented that disparaging comments toward community college began in high school amongst their peers and instructors and were reinforced within their family circles. It is evident that the participants in this study internalized the stereotypes associated with being a community college student, and initially questioned whether they were making a mistake. For instance, while reflecting on her decision to attended OCC, Kelly recalled difficult conversations she had with her parents. She said, "My family said you are making a mistake. Why are you not going straight to a university, you are smart. When you have people telling you that, it makes you start doubting yourself. People just frown upon community college." Battling this stigma complicated the participants transition into higher education as many did not embrace their community colleges from the onset. Therefore, a casual correlation may exist between students' acceptance of community colleges, psychosocial factors (motivation, self-perceptions, anxiety), and their overall retention, persistence, and success (Fong et al., 2017).

Importance of Campus Support

Empirical evidence supports that increased campus involvement for students translates to positive academic outcomes (Dominguez-Rebollar & Acevedo-Polakovich, 2021; Edenfield & McBrayer, 2021; Martinez, 2020). Students are more likely to persist and achieve their transfer objectives in higher educational settings that are committed to their success and stress the importance of engaging with institutional agents that can ultimately impact their level of satisfaction and engagement (Edenfield & McBrayer, 2021). Overwhelmingly, the participants associated their collegiate success to the relationships they cultivated within the campus community. This finding affirms the research conducted by Edenfield and McBrayer that suggests the importance campus leaders provide in developing opportunities for students to interact with faculty, staff, and their peers as integral components to their success. Intentionally promoting these relationships throughout the various stages of students' college careers will create opportunities, programs, and practices that will alleviate the stress of their transition to aid in their transfer educational endeavors. For example, Eddie encapsulated the impact his campus community had on his education by stating the following:

> When it comes to programs, being a part of promise and not having the anxiety of paying was definitely a lot of support. But also, having a counselor that I relied on and having that support, of someone paving the way and showing what you could possibly reach was essential. It shows that we [students] need more counselors that are accessible and personalized to us. And then my peers. I made some pretty cool friends that shared the same way of thinking as me. Thinking that we are going to work hard to transfer and apply to these same schools together. Also, having really helpful professors. They did

whatever they could to write a letter of recommendation or stayed after class to help me with something.

Although the vast amount of literature pertaining to student persistence and success related to high impact retention practices centers around four-year level efforts (Delmas & Childs, 2021; Kalkbrenner et al., 2021; Wang & Orr, 2022) and the internal attributes of students themselves (Allaire, 2022; Almeida et al., 2021; Jeffords et al., 2020; Micomonaco & Espinoza, 2022), this finding has broader implications regarding student success within the community college setting. Thus, it is interpreted that regardless of the educational system, actively engaging with campus programs, initiatives, and personnel is fundamental in the positive development of students in higher education. Intentionally seeking out and receiving support services has been linked to positive student outcomes and higher success rates (Lundberg et al., 2018; Pechac & Slantcheva-Durst, 2021; Rodriguez-Ott, 2020).

Addressing Academic Pressure

Throughout the study, a focal point expressed by the participants involved the stress they developed in community college because of the two-year entitlement limitations afforded through the promise program. The students felt they were racing against time to transfer at an accelerated rate before their tuition free funding exhausted. These academic pressures created unanticipated feelings of stress and anxiety which complicated their collegiate experiences. This finding was captured by Jenny who said the following:

> The fact that we only get two years of funding made me feel stressed because I had to get in done and figure it out in such a short amount of time. I felt a pressure to save as much money as I could and figure it all out in two years rather than spending money and taking the three-year route. The promise program is rushing us through this heavy workload, and

it gets scary. We [promise program students] seldom get drawn toward leadership

positions because we feel the pressure to get everything done in two years and get

everything done well.

Whether this academic tension to rapidly persist through community college stems from

external forces, the academic pressure students place on themselves, or a combination thereof,

the psychological distress experienced from students is troubling. Although examining mental

health is not the intention of this study, it presented as a prevailing concern among participants.

This finding is not surprising considering recent studies highlighted the decline of college

student physical and mental health, especially since the COVID-19 pandemic (Broton et al.,

2022; Cadigan et al., 2022; Ramirez et al., 2023). This may be interpreted as students continuing

to face artificial barriers such as societal stigma and programmatic structures not conducive their

success having an increased risk of mental health complications in higher education.

Implications for Policy and Practice

With the concerted government effort to provide free tuition to students attending two-

year colleges throughout the country (Odle & Monday, 2021; Perna & Leigh, 2018), and

considering the exponential costs associated with higher education (Goldrick-Rab & Steinbaum,

2020; Hanson, 2022), students may be incentivized to commence their pursuit of four-year

degrees within a community college promise program setting. Since the CCC systems educates

the largest student population in the nation, understanding the unique needs of baccalaureate

seeking students has important implications for stakeholders. The literature and findings of this

study may aide in providing practitioners a holistic understanding of the challenges associated

with community college promise program students, while providing direction to promote a

timely transfer to a university. The implications will provide campus leaders and federal and

local policymakers information to develop equitable policy and practice that will promote inclusion and access for community college promise students.

Implications for Policy

Based on the findings of this study, notable implications for policy and amendments to the current law may be considered. Designed to address affordability and access and to ameliorate inequities historically experienced by the system's most vulnerable groups, Assembly Bill 19 (AB-19; California Promise Program) provides fee waivers and grants associated with educational costs to CCC students who meet specific requirements under a promise program (Rauner & Lundquist, 2019; Rios-Aguilar & Lyke, 2020). However, California legislation provides considerable discretion to college districts in how these funds are dispersed resulting in each campus implementing AB-19 differently (Rios-Aguilar & Lyke, 2020). Furthermore, each promise program is uniquely designed and provides financial assistance based on a variety factors including the student's local proximity to the college, recency of high school graduation, and overall financial need (Rauner & Smith, 2020; Smith & Rauner, 2020). Due to the ambiguity of the law, and considering the limited data available to assess promise program effectiveness in closing the achievement gap, reviewing current policy is essential. As such, all 20 participants in this study expressed the need for revisions to AB-19. Ben shared his sentiments:

> The biggest setback of the promise program is not providing a third year of funding. I know a lot of people at MVCC who because of their majors, it is impossible to transfer and its super difficult unless you have a bunch of AP exams. I know one person who is super smart but she has to take two more calculus classes, physics classes, and organic chemistry classes. She is not in the position where she can fully afford these things to

stay another year but she has to. I think for students like that, or even students who are struggling in different ways, a third year of funding would be really beneficial.

Although Ben successfully transferred within two years, he recognized that his experience is unique in relation to his peers. As research has suggested, only 2.5% of CCC students accomplish their transfer objectives in two years (Johnson & Mejia, 2020; Perez et al., 2022). This fact presents a paradox between the intentions of the law and the realities of higher education. Revising the eligibility criteria for promise program funding may be essential in establishing equitable policy and practice within CCC system. In particular, eliminating the two-year time restrictions of promise programs should be examined. Instead, state legislators may consider aligning promise program funding to federal regulations involving financial aid recipients. For example, students receiving federal and state aid at the community college level are required to complete their program of study in a period no longer than 150% of the length of their program as measured in credit hours (Federal Student Aid, 2021). For transfer seeking students, this would equate to 90 units.

Rather than placing an arbitrary year limitation on promise program funding, instead providing students tuition assistance for up to 90 units may address the challenges transfer seeking students face today in accomplishing their goals within a reasonable timeframe. Further, eliminating the first-time, full-time student status requirement may help reduce inequities (Rauner & Lundquist, 2019). Evidence suggests that of the over two million students enrolled in CCCs, 62% are attending part-time (CCCCO, 2021). This high proportion of vulnerable students will not be eligible to benefit from California's promise programs and will be completely shut out (Rios-Aguilar & Lyke, 2020). Finally, as shown in research conducted by Brymner (2020) and Rios-Aguilar and Lyke, over 50% of low-income students total family income is needed to

fully cover the total cost of college attendance. This includes college textbooks, transportation, health care coverage, childcare, and food.

The challenges of covering non-tuition expenses can affect promise program students' ability to persist and earn a degree (Jones et al., 2020). Making college "free" by providing additional resources for non-tuition expenses, especially for students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds is vital. As AB-19 continues to expand throughout the state, politicians and educational practitioners should investigate more equitable allocation of promise program funding to better serve students especially from disproportionally impacted groups (Rios-Aguilar & Lyke, 2020).

Implications for Practice

Community college promise program students will benefit from a positive academic experience when they proactively seek out assistance from faculty counselors trained in the complexities of the transfer process. All participants in this study lauded their promise program counselors for their professionalism, knowledge, and encouragement, and mentioned they may not have been able to transfer in a timely process without their counselor's guidance and expertise. Diane captured this by stating the following:

> I found one counselor through my friend. I was complaining to her about how difficult things were and she said she had the exact same experience. But said she found this counselor and he is glorious. She said he answered every single question, he responds immediately, he sets up his own appointments, and will help you through it all. She gave me his email and I once to connected with him I never went back to anyone else. It was just me and him and he helped me through everything.

For Diane, connecting regularly with her counselor alleviated the stress she was enduring regarding the questions she had involving transferring to a four-year college. This implication for students is supported in literature that stresses the importance of the student to counselors/advisor relationship within higher education (Berhane et al., 2023; McKinney et al., 2022; Xiong & Wood, 2020). While is it evident that academic advising with promise program students is crucial in facilitating a timely transfer, it may also be effective for community college students regardless of settings and students. These findings may apply to all community college students seeking transfer to a four-year university.

Further, researchers have documented the varying designs and delivery of services of promise programs throughout the nation (Billings et al., 2021; Perna & Leigh, 2018; Rauner & Smith, 2020). Generally, promise programs include scholarships that cover tuition and other mandatory college fees and, in some instances, also cover other expenses such as textbooks (Miller-Adams & Iliti, 2022). In addition to providing tuition assistance, some promise programs offer student support services to address nonfinancial barriers aimed at assisting students in navigating the complexities of higher education. While difficult to ascertain a model in which serves students best, findings of this study may provide implications to promise program administrators seeking to design their respective program.

All the participants in this study, regardless of if they were enrolled in a first or last dollar promise program, emphasized the importance of the support they received from dedicated promise program staff. These educational professionals included promise assigned counselors, financial aid staff, program staff, and program directors. As participants connected with empathetic promise program faculty and staff throughout their academic tenure to address their

questions and concerns, feelings of anxiety were often subdued which allowed the students to fully concentrate on their academic journeys.

Empirical and Theoretical Implications

This study was guided by Astin's (1993, 1999) student involvement model of input, output and environment to explore students' experiences in a CCC promise program setting. For Astin, understanding both the output and environment are crucial when designing programs that benefit students to provide a positive educational experience. Astin defined student achievement as the extent of psychosocial and physical energy a student invents to their academic experience. According to Astin, motivated students allocate a significant amount of time to activities outside of class which include studying, personal involvement in on-campus activities, and regularly connect with their college peers and campus personnel. The higher the amount of time students dedicate to these initiatives oftentimes correlates with a greater likelihood of learning, development, and collegiate success. Contrarily, students who refrain from these opportunities may not be fully invested in their higher education careers and thus, are less likely to be successful.

The study confirms that Astin's (1993, 1999) student involvement model is an appropriate framework to consider when examining the experiences of community college promise program students seeking transfer to a four-year university. As previously documented, although each promise program is independently and uniquely designed, the findings of this research suggest that by providing students with the opportunity to connect with dedicated program faculty and staff, the likelihood of their timely transfer increases. This implication may encourage community college campus officials to investigate implementing actionable strategies within their promise programs that best serve their student body. In addition to administering

promise funding aid, providing nonfinancial resources to students such as academic advising, career counseling, personal counseling, peer mentoring, tutoring, campus community building activities, and college success workshops may be essential in promoting positive postsecondary outcomes (Miller-Adams & Iriti, 2022). Campus leaders that provide and encourage students to be actively involved in their academics and provide extra-curricular activities will ultimately help in facilitating achievement (Astin 1993, 1999). Indirectly, providing these opportunities may increase promise program students' internal characteristics such as self-regulation and self-motivation leading them to become more goal oriented in college.

The empirical knowledge acquired from this research stresses the importance of students regularly connecting with campus personnel while simultaneously engaging in activities outside classroom (Kelsay & Tosch, 2019; Parnes et al., 2020; Wilson, 2019). Students who intentionally seek out assistance from their professors, counselors, and support staff and leverage out of class opportunities may be more likely to persist and reach their transfer objectives. In turn, students who do not seek out these opportunities may be at-risk of being retained and could potentially jeopardize their chances of transferring to a four-year college. According to participants in this study, it is evident that academic counseling and instructional faculty support provides a pivotal role in helping promise program students solidify their self-esteem and aids in navigating the bureaucracies associated with transferring to in-state universities (Berhane et al., 2023; Fay et al., 2022; McKinney et al., 2022). In doing so, transfer students develop social and cultural capital while simultaneously increasing their self-confidence in their ability to succeed in higher education. Based on the findings of this research, it is conspicuous that students who routinely connect with campus support services are more likely to transfer within a reasonable timeframe. This student to faculty and staff connection is imperative to achievement and decreases the

possibility of attrition. As such, the intentional actions promise program student to pursue in seeking out campus assistance adds to the nascent body of qualitative scholarship in the field.

Limitations and Delimitations

Limitations

There are a few methodological limitations worth noting in this study. First, this study was limited to four CCCs situated in Orange and Los Angeles Counties. Although a sample size of 20 participants highlighted important themes and experiences of former promise program students, the generalization of results to other programs throughout the country may not be appropriate or representative of the entire student population. Therefore, the findings and recommendations derived from this research may not applicable or generalized beyond the research sites or participants. Second, there may currently be other qualitative research projects under investigation involving transfer bound promise program who may share diverging perspectives compared to the participants in this study. Third, only half of the participants elected to participate in the journal writing activity. Although this did not appear to affect addressing the research questions under investigation, the limited data collected from the journal writings may be viewed as a limitation to the study. Finally, this study used pre-screening metrics to identify promise program students who successfully transferred to a four-year university. Consequently, transfer bound promise students who have yet to reach their educational objectives were excluded from involvement in this study.

Delimitations

There are several delimitations of the study that should be highlighted. This study was specific in conducting research at purposively selected CCC within a designated radius who had established and reputable promise programs. Intentionality was given to these programs

regarding their design (first dollar versus last dollar), number of promise program students served, the support they provide, and their documented transfer statistics and reputation within the CCC system. Further, the participants from this study did not represent all the promise program students at the four research sites. Finally, promise program students who successfully transferred to out of state colleges were not included in this study.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study focused on the experiences of promise program students who successfully transferred to a four-year university in California. Based on the findings, limitations, and the delimitations placed on the study, multiple recommendations and directions for future research should be considered. Current promise scholarship has focused exclusively on the variability in program design (Miller-Adams, 2015; Perna & Leigh, 2018), its impact on college access (Gándara & Li, 2020; Poutré & Voight, 2018), and its effects on GPAs and college units attempted (Carruthers & Fox, 2016; Taylor & Lepper, 2018). Literature regarding the experiences of students in these placed-based scholarship programs is sparse (Davidson et al., 2020; Littlepage et al., 2018). Therefore, it is recommended for future research to increase qualitative studies within the field to acquire a better understanding of the needs of students enrolled in these programs. Researchers may consider conducting case studies with promise program students involving interviews, observations, and document analysis to capture an in-depth understanding of their experiences within a given program (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Further, it is recommended that CCCs systematically revisit their design, implementation, and eligibility criteria to assess whether their respective promise programs are reducing inequities (Rauner & Lundquist, 2019; Rios-Aguilar & Lyke, 2020). As previously documented, AB-19 provides promise funding for a maximum of two years to first-time, full-time students.

Evidence presented in this research suggests that the system's most vulnerable students, in particular adult reentry students or those needing to part-time, will be excluded from the benefits of the program. Eliminating the first-time, full-time requirement will provide a more equitable allocation of funding for all students especially those from disproportionally impacted groups.

Additionally, it is recommended that state legislators consider eliminating the two-year time restriction on promise program students. Research suggests that only 2.5% of community college students reach their transfer goals within two years (Johnson & Mejia, 2020; Reddy & Ryan, 2021). This alarming statistic encompasses the realities of today's baccalaureate aspiring student and for those enrolled in a promise program, a grim reminder that they are only funded for a finite amount of time. Several studies have documented the unit accumulation of students within the CCC seeking transfer to in-state universities (Reddy & Flores Morales, 2022; Reddy & Ryan, 2021). Although several reforms have been enacted to address this concern (Baker et al., 2021; Felix, 2020; Reddy & Ryan, 2021), students are still transferring with an excessive amount of units (Reddy & Flores Morales, 2022; Reddy & Ryan, 2021). To reduce the added stress caused by this, it is recommended that rather than putting a year limitation on promise program students, instead replace this requirement with a unit restriction (90 units maximum of funding). This amendment to the current law will better align with the challenges transfer seeking students face in attempting to accomplish their goals within a reasonable period.

Finally, while Astin's (1993, 1999) student involvement model was used to examine the experiences of promise program students, different theoretical frameworks should be investigated to better understand experiences in higher education. Examining Andersons et al.'s (2012) adult transition framework, originally developed by Schlossberg's (1981, 1984) transition theory, as well as Tinto's (1975) student integration model involving attrition, can be used to

examine contemporary promise program students. Future research should explore the effects of various transitions adults face and how this influences their ability to persist and their overall success in higher education. For example, if a promise student encounters an unanticipated event in their life, how might it affect their ability to cope and their involvement in college (Anderson et al., 2012; Schlossberg, 1981, 1984)? If a promise program student is unable to transfer within their allotted two years of funding, will they drop out of college completely (Tinto, 1975)?

Conclusion

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to understand the experiences of former CCC promise program students who have successfully transferred to an in-state four-year university. The findings indicate that promise program students are a unique subpopulation internally motivated to achieve at an accelerated rate in higher education. Despite complicated secondary school experiences, promise program students enter community college determined and confident in their abilities to succeed. Although many endured internal struggles associated with the stressors associated with the time limitations of program funding, promise students leveraged their community of support at their community colleges to assist with personal growth, development, and their transfer success.

With the proliferate rise of scholarship-based programs throughout the nation, student enrollment into these programs is anticipated to continue. As educational leaders continue to develop their boutique programs and ponder the most effective use of allocated resources to their student population, scant knowledge exists involving their overall holistic success. Understanding the unique needs of baccalaureate seeking promise students is pivotal when considering the implementation and design of these programs. As students indicated in this study, while they were thankful for the opportunity to attend college for free and lauded the

support they received from campus personnel in helping them reach their transfer goals, they were under stressful conditions which complicated their collegiate experiences. Without revised legislation and modifications made to promise funding consummative with today's realities of bachelor's degree attainment, this population may commence their pursuit of higher education with funding that fails to serve their needs, or programs that do not understand their challenges. As Riley mentioned:

> The promise program is not inclusive to all people. People have families and need to work and cannot attend school full-time. I know people that have to support themselves and their family and it is really hard for them to maintain good academic standing. That does not mean that they are less motivated; they still want to get their degree and do so free of charge, but they do not have the capacity to do it at the same rate as everyone else. Because of this, they were dropped from the promise program. You have to go full speed at all times which is exhausting. If you do not finish in those two years you will not have any more funding. I had to push through all two years and could not slip up. There is no room for mistakes. It is just too much pressure for myself and the people around me to maintain full-time status with everything going on.

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Appendix A

IRB Approval

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY.
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

May 17, 2023

Eric Garcia
Kristy Motte

Re: IRB Exemption - IRB-FY22-23-1411 PROMISES MADE, PROMISES KEPT? A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY EXPLORING THE EXPERIENCES OF CALIFORNIA COMMUNITY COLLEGE PROMISE PROGRAM STUDENTS AND THEIR PURSUIT OF A BACHELOR'S DEGREE.

Dear Eric Garcia, Kristy Motte,

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.

Appendix B

Site Permission

Action of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) Letter: Research Involving Human Participants

Protocol Number:	**23002**
Principal Investigator:	**Eric Garcia**
Review Type:	**Acceptance of ███████ ──── ─ ▌ IRB**
Project Title:	**Promises made, Promises kept? A phenomenological study exploring the experiences of California community college promise program students**
Approval Date:	**May 25, 2023**

The above referenced research proposal has been **approved** by accepting protocol IRB-SB. Number HS – 21-114 from █████████████ IRB. However, ████████████████ IRB needs to be informed of any updates, addendums, or changes (see below) sent to or approved by ████████████ or Liberty University IRB. The approval is based on information provided solely during the application review process.

It is the responsibility of the Principal Investigators to report the completion of the protocol to the IRB within 30 days. It is the responsibility of the Principal Investigators to facilitate ongoing dialogue with the IRB throughout the research process. Please contact the IRB offices for consultation as soon as possible for the following situations:

1) Unforeseen circumstances
Unforeseen circumstances that required additional intervention due to potential risk/harm must be reported to the IRB promptly, based on the nature of the event, but always within 10 business days. Unforeseen circumstances include but are not limited to:
   a. Unexpected psychological, physical or other harm to one or more study participants
   b. Loss or theft of computer, hard-drive, thumb-drive etc. which contained information on study participants
   c. Breach of confidentiality of one or more study participant

2) Deviations in practice
Any changes to the research process involving participants must be approved by the IRB prior to their implementation, except when necessary to eliminate immediate risk/harm to the participant. Any such exceptions must be reported to the IRB within 10 business days.

3) Amendments
Proposed changes to approved research must be reviewed and approved prospectively by the IRB. No changes may be initiated without prior approval by the IRB.

Please contact the ███ IRB Chair, ███████████ for any questions and visit the Health and Human Services website for additional responsibilities (https://www.hhs.gov/ohrp/regulations-and-policy/guidance/faq/investigator-responsibilities).

Appendix C

Participant Recruitment Email

Dear [Recipient Name]:

As a doctoral student in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a Ph.D. in Educational Leadership. The purpose of my research is to describe the experiences of former promise program students that have transferred to an in-state California university, and I am writing to invite eligible participants to join my study. Participants must be 18 years of age or older, have been a former California community college promise program student, and have transferred to a four-year university in California. Participants, if willing, will be asked to participate in one in-person or online interview, participate in one focus group, and completed a short writing prompt consisting of one open ended question. It should take approximately 60 minutes to complete the interview, 60 minutes to complete the focus group, and 30 minutes to complete the writing prompt. Names and other identifying information will be requested as part of this study, but the information will remain confidential.

A consent document is included as an attachment to this email. The consent document contains additional information about my research. If you choose to participate, you will need to sign the consent document and return it to me at the time of the interview, focus group, or letter writing. Participants will receive a $25 VISA gift card via email at the conclusion of each interview, focus group, or letter writing activity.

Sincerely,

Eric Garcia
Liberty University Ph.D. of Education Candidate

Appendix D

Participant Consent Form

Title of the Project: *Promises Made, Promises Kept?* A Phenomenological Study Exploring the Experiences of California Community College Promise Program Students and their Pursuit of a Bachelor's Degree.
Principal Investigator: Eric Garcia, Ph.D. Candidate, Liberty University

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. To participate, you must be a former California community college student who was enrolled in a promise program, has transferred to an in-state four-year university, and be at least 18 years of age or older. 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 understand the experiences of former California community college promise program students who successfully transferred in an in-state four-year year university. At this stage of research, a promise program student is generally defined as an individual enrolled in a community college who is receiving tuition and other financial support for two academic years.

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. Be willing to be interviewed. Interviews will be approximately one hour. Interviews will be conducted in person at a mutually agreed upon time and date in a discreet location or will be conducted through Zoom. Interviews will be audio-recorded.
2. Be willing to write a letter to a new student who is enrolled in the promise program discussing the challenges of transferring to a four-year college within two-years. You will be asked to provide examples regarding personal experiences that either helped or delayed a timely transfer.
3. Be willing to participate in a focus group. The group will be interviewed for approximately one hour. Six participants will be provided the opportunity to participate in the focus group. The focus group will be conducted through Zoom and will be audio-recorded.
4. Be willing to review your interview transcript for accuracy.

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 the information being used as a reference for policy development and practice that focus on understanding the challenges transfer seeking promise program students encounter and how to serve them better. Higher education institutions can use this study as a

guide to develop best practices when working with promise program students to ensure they are meeting their academic and transfer goals.

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. Data collected from you may be shared for us in future research studies or with other researchers. If data collected from you is shared, any information that could identify you, if applicable, will be removed before data is shared.

- Participant responses will be kept confidential through the use of pseudonyms.
- Data will be stored on a password-locked computer and may be used in future presentations. After three years, all electronic records will be delated.
- Interviews and focus groups will be recorded and transcribed. Recordings will be stored on a password-locked computer for three years and then erased. Only the researcher will have access to these recordings.
- 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.

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

Participants will receive a $25 VISA gift card for each data collection procedure that they participate in, which includes the interview, the letter writing activity, and the focus group. The gift cards will be emailed to participants after each procedure they participate in.

Is study participation voluntary?

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations at 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/phone number 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 Eric Garcia. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact him. You may contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Dr. Motte.

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 audio-record me as part of my participation in this study.

_____
Printed Subject Name

_____
Signature & Date

Appendix E

Interview Protocol

Interviewer: Eric Garcia

Date/Time:_____

Former community college: Mountain View Community College, Lakeview Community

College H–ommunity College, Ocean Valley Community College (Pseudonyms) (Circle)

Number of years enrolled at community college:_____

Participant (Pseudonym):_____

Transfer College:_____

Major at four-year college:_____

Research Questions:

1. What are the lived experiences of promise program students previously enrolled at a

California community college who have transferred to a 4-year university?

2. What experiences promoted a timely transfer for students previously enrolled at a California

community college who have transferred to a 4-year university?

3. What experiences hindered a timely transfer for students previously enrolled at a California

community college who have transferred to a 4-year university?

Interview Questions

Hello, my name is Eric Garcia and I am a Ph.D. student in the Educational Studies program at Liberty University. The purpose of this interview is to contribute to my dissertation research titled: Promise Made, Promises Kept? A Phenomenological Study Exploring the Experiences of California Community College Promise Program Students and their Pursuit of a Bachelor's Degree. I am interested in exploring the experiences of students formally in a California community college promise program who transferred to an in-state four-year university. This interview will last approximately 60 minutes. If during the interview you feel uncomfortable, would like to refrain from answering any questions, or would like to take a break, please let me know. Our discussion today will be audio-recorded and kept confidential. Will this be okay? May I proceed with the interview? We will now begin the interview:

1. Tell me a little about yourself. Probes: Where did you grow up, discuss your family, friends.

2. Tell me about your experiences in high school.

3. Please describe your transition from high school to MVCC/LCC/HCC/OVCC. Probes: What were your initial plan after high school graduation?

4. Why do you enroll at MVCC/LCC/HCC/OVCC? Probes: Describe your other options. What were your initial feelings about attending MVCC/LCC/HCC/OVCC?

5. Please describe your transition to MVCC/LCC/HCC/OVCC. How did you feel? Probes: Please describe your family relationships, challenges experienced, problems experienced.

6. What made you feel supported at MVCC/LCC/HCC/OVCC? Probe: Peers, programs, counselors, staff?

7. Who did you talk to on campus if you had academic questions (selecting courses, transfer requirements)? In what ways did this person assist/not assist you at MVCC/LCC/HCC/OVCC? Probes: Tell me about one such experience.

8. Who did you talk to on campus for help regarding personal problems? In what ways did this person help/not help you? Probes: Tell me about one such experiences.

9. What programs or services at MVCC/LCC/HCC/OVCC for promise program students have been helpful?

10. What programs or services at MVCC/LCC/HCC/OVCC for promise program students have not been helpful?

11. How prepared did you feel to transfer within two-years to a California university? Please describe your transfer experience. Probe: Describe specific ways MVCC/LCC/HCC/OVCC assisted.

12. In what ways did you not feel prepared to transfer within two-years to a California university? Why? Probe: Describe specific ways MVCC/LCC/HCC/OVCC did not assist.

13. In what ways has your promise program experience at MVCC/LCC/HCC/OVCC had a positive impact on your life? Probe: Describe specific experiences or people that impacted you.

14. In what ways has your promise program experience at MVCC/LCC/HCC/OVCC had a negative impact on your life? Probe: Describe specific experiences or people that contributed to this.

15. What were the most significant challenges you faced as a promise program student pursuing a two-year transfer to a four-year university?

16. What advice would you give a new MVCC/LCC/HCC/OVCC student enrolled in the promise program who is pursuing a two-year transfer to a university?

17. Reflecting back, what would you change regarding your overall experience in community college? Please explain.

18. What else about promise program students pursuing a two-year transfer to a four-year college do you feel I should know about?

Appendix F

Demographic Questionnaire

Title of Study: Promise Made, Promises Kept? A Phenomenological Study Exploring the Experiences of California Community College Promise Program Students and their Pursuit of a Bachelor's Degree.

1. What is your gender?
a. Female
b. Male
c. Other
d. Decline to state

2. What category includes your age?
a. 18–22
b. 23–27
c. 28–32
d. 33 or older
e. decline to state

3. What ethnicity/race do you identify? Circle all that apply:
a. Asian
b. Black
c. Hispanic
d. Filipino
e. Middle Eastern
f. Native American/American Indian
g. Pacific Islander
h. Two or more
i. White
j. Decline to state

4. How long did you attend your community college?
a. less than 1 year
b. 1 year
c. 2 years
d. 3 years
e. 4 years
f. 5 years or more

5. What are you majoring in a your 4-year college?

6. What 4-year college did you transfer to?

Appendix G

Preliminary Grouping Example

Participant: Natasha

Preliminary Grouping	Significant Statements
Individual Interview Questions (#1–3)	My high school experiences were complicated and unstable. It actually left me with a lot of mental and emotional trauma. My friends bullied me for having certain interests that they did not have. Certain aspects about my family like culturally, because I had a White friend group and I am Asian. So, a lot of bullying came from that as well. During sophomore year, the bullying reached a huge breaking point. I basically had a huge emotional breakdown and I chose to leave my friend group. In high school you are judged a lot based on your social circle, and to not even have a social circle and to just be by yourself was very debilitating. People will make assumptions about you and judge your prematurely and it impacts your ability to make friends.
Individual Interview Questions (#4–5)	I had issues with interacting with people socially. Big university campuses like especially the four-year ones here in California can have so many people and just be so massive. I really did not feel ready to enter that environment because of the bad friendships I had experienced. I think going to a community college was a way to ease into it more slowly. I did not get into the UCs like UCI. I was hesitant at first because my parents were very insistent that I had to go to a four-year university. There is no other way you are to academically gifted to even go to a community college. I felt that I was qualified but I did not get in. So, the desire to stay back at community college to eventually go to UCI and stay local was what I wanted.

Individual Interview Questions (#6–10)	Since I struggled a lot with trauma from extended years of bullying by people I called my friends, I developed a mistrust of people and I struggled to make friends. So, I found it easier to talk to people considered authority figures. People who were in charge of academic things at MVCC.
	I felt it easier to talk to those people because they had interest in me and vested interest in my future.
	I trusted them. And it paid off a lot; they made me feel supported.
	Honestly, it was the counselors. I talked with them a lot when I made the decision to come to MVCC.
	Speaking with counselors was actually really eye opening. It was instrumental in helping me in switching my major.
	The promise program required us to correspond with counselors. I felt those mandatory meetings were very beneficial to me even if there were times that I felt I did not need to go in.
	It was validating to meet with a counselor to just have someone double check on everything and to say, hey, you are on the right track and doing a good job.
	The promise program had a positive impact because my family did not have to worry about whether or not my tuition, textbooks, and other costs would be paid for.
	During the pandemic, with everything so uncertain about people's financial situations, I appreciated having the promise program.
	My family did not have to worry about whether or not the education would be paid for and that was a huge blessing.
Individual Interview Questions (#11–15)	I felt prepared to transfer within two years. However, I had a lot of advantages. I had a good financial situation and a great support system.
	I went to a high school that offered so many AP classes; they were considered academically rigorous. I took a lot of AP exams and passed each one. I was able to put those credits towards fulfilling general education requirements at MVCC.
	All of those AP credits available to me, in addition to taking summer classes is a major reason why I was able to finish in two years.

	I finished by the skin of my teeth. I was working at an accelerated pace and even with that, had AP exams to boost my credits. Even during my final semester, I was taking a full course load. I was really sprinting for the finish line because I was like, I need to get this done so I can transfer.
Individual Interview Questions (#16–18)	Trust your counselors; you need them. You need to form connections with counselors. Talk to them as much as you can. Even if you do not agree with what they are saying, then you have the freedom to talk to someone else. I know so many promise program students who would put off meeting with counselors, especially those in there first year. At first I was in fear about telling a counselor about my insecurities about my education and my aspirations. It is nerve-racking to tell this to somebody who is basically a complete stranger to you. Their job it is literally help you; they are trusted faculty members.

Appendix H

Individual Textural Description Example

Participant: Diane

Theme	Significant Statements
Theme One: Negative thoughts about attending community college	It is embedded into my brain that if you go to MVCC, you are a failure. Everything you have ever done in the past does not matter because look, you ended up in the same places as that kid who showed up stoned to every class or skipped every day. Attending MVCC was like everything that I have done is a waste.
Theme Two: Saving money	I looked at the prices and said, you know what? Why I am going to go (4-year college) when I can attend community college for free? That is when I found out about the promise program. They have a program that literally makes the first two years free. That means I can get a masters degree and pay the same price as someone just getting a bachelors. Okay, there is no pressure because I get to live at home. I don't have to spend money yet.
Theme Three: Rejection from four-year colleges	So I applied to a good amount of colleges like CSUs, and UCs. I got into UCI but didn't get into UCLA or Berkeley.
Theme Four: Personal embarrassment	I saw everyone posting about the colleges they were attending and saw them living their lives. Damn, I feel like I was missing out. That is when I got rid of social media.
Theme Five: Riggers of high school	You need the highest SAT scores. That is what they (high school) are known for. High SAT scores and high suicide rates. The whole experience of high school was trash. It is so much pressure. It is like if you're getting an "A" you're normal, if you're getting a "B" you're like a fucking idiot and going to be homeless.

	Oh, I got a 1550 on my SAT and have to take it again; it is not good enough. That is what the energy was like.
Theme Six: High school work ethic	There were a few high school teachers that changed me, like my English teacher. She was such a good teacher I felt literally obligated to do the work
Theme Seven: Developing personal self-perceptions	I got bullied. I was the new kid and everyone had clicks. The guys after PE would try grabbing me to come in there dressing room because they were like, you're a dude, right?
Theme Eight: Community college help from others	Im a really big fan of a lot of teacher interaction. I really like working with my teacher because the one on one communication helps me. I just found one counselor who was glorious. He answered every question, he sets up his own Zoom appointments, and helped me through everything. Once I emailed him I never went back to anyone else.
Theme Nine: Community college campus involvement	I did the speech and debate club regarding my extracurriculars. And then I did the Readers Theater, and then I had to go to Washington DC for 10 days.
Theme Ten: Community college promise program experiences	Because of the time you are afforded, you are going to get lazy and cut corners. I had to look up summaries; that is why AI is such a big thing because its too overwhelming. You cannot do all this (extracurriculars) and expect to transfer within two years. Two years of funding is very aggressive for everything that is going on.
Theme Eleven: Pressures of transferring	I think the first semester I capped out on units which was extremely overwhelming. I was doing school year-round basically to transfer. So I didn't have time to chill. I really had to buckle down and not take classes for fun. Every class I took was intentional. Every class I took was checking off some type of requirement.

Appendix I

Letting Writing Activity

Dear participant:

To better understand the challenges promise program students experience when trying to accomplish their transfer goals, please write a one-page letter to an incoming promise program student discussing the challenges of transferring to a four-year college within two-years, regardless of how long it took you to transfer.

While reflecting on the challenges you encountered, please provide personal examples that either promoted or delayed your timely transfer. These may include successfully passing your courses, having a dedicated advisor/counselor, connecting regularly with your instructors, participating in on-campus activities, and/or being committed to your studies. Or, they can also include health complications, financial aid challenges, needing to repeat coursework, changing your major, misguidance for counselors, etc. Please be as through as possible during this activity.

Thank you for your continued participation,

Eric Garcia
Liberty University Ph.D. of Education Candidate

Appendix J

Bracketing Example

Participant: Ben

A. Yeah. So I I did have a pretty interesting upbringing, I guess. yeah. So as a kid, I was moving around a lot. So I initially moved to Iran for about 4 years, and then Virginia, and then finally to California I was born in mainland. I moved around a lot for my dad's business, you know. That so, yeah, so I've met people from all over speaking different languages. So yeah, I mean, I definitely feel like, I finally found a home.

A. Yeah. So I I did go to high school In California. I wasn't really too focused academically. Part of it is because I did kind of feel a little lost in what I wanted to do. I lacked the proper confidence with, you know, pursuing my goals and my dreams. I just kind of wanted to figure out everything later down the road.

A. [The school I went to is very competitive for high school, so there are a lot of valedictorians. You know they're all going to like Harvard. And you know, Stanford and all this crazy stuff.] [And obviously, the idea of community college in that high school was pretty negative. It was almost like, Oh, if you go to community college. You're like a failure, you know?]

A. Well, at first I had negative feelings about it. A lot of my friends are going to MVCC, too, but obviously and so [I guess I didn't feel too amazing about it.]

A. But. I did feel supported in community college which really helped me out, and even to the transition to community college was so easy, or at [least the counselors made it so easy that, you know, there's really no struggle.]

A. And it was, it was pretty nice. So, and I heard about MVCC, because when it's super local, it's like 10 min away from my house, you know. I guess, for community it has a pretty big name that the fact that it's the number one transfer rate you see.

A. Yeah. So I almost failed in high school like as a student because I just I wasn't focused enough. I was just messing around my friends. I didn't have a proper like have proper focus in my academics.

A. And I guess a lot of people would see that. And even so, my teachers, which no, looking back, the way they act towards community college like that.

A. [And it's almost I guess, to kind of look down on people who do go that pathway just because they believe in the prestige of, you know, right out of high school attending a 4 year and all that stuff, you know.]

A. But you know, I I also realized that maybe a lot of the people who were attending community college simply just couldn't afford to go to a 4 year right away.

Appendix K

Preliminary Grouping Example

Preliminary Grouping	Significant Statements
Focus Group Questions (#1–6)	You have this pressure that you have to finish in two years. If I switch my major, I will not be able submit my transfer applications and will be stuck.
	I would not have enough time to stay for another semester. It was pretty scary. I wanted to put my responsibility into extracurriculars but my grades would suffer.
	Those two years its just like a lot to take on workload wide and then like the pressure of not being able to afford a third year.
	You push yourself to an extent that is not mentally healthy anymore. The two-year cap does not really do us much service.
	I felt a sort of pressure to save as much money as possible and to figure it all out in two years rather than spending money and taking the third-year route.
	The fact that we only get two years made me feel like, oh, I need to get everything done and figure it out as fast as possible.
	I think the biggest setback of the promise program is not having a third year. I know a lot of promise students at MVCC who because of their majors, it is impossible to transfer in two years unless you have a bunch of AP exams.
	I feel a third year would be beneficial. At OVCC I studies a couple of different things. I studied criminal justice, political science, and psychology. The third year would have done a lot for me.
	The only way I dodged a having to stay another year is because I completed courses in the summer terms. However, the promise program did not pay for it because I was not enrolled in 12 units. I had to pay for those classes and racked up a huge bill. I think my chemistry book alone was like $400.
	They need to change the law and restructure everything. The promise program is rushing us through this heavy workload. It gets scary with the GPA. I had to suffer through this because I wanted to go the cheapest route as possible.

	It is heartbreaking to us students who have this impression that community college is only two years. A lot of STEM majors cannot do this in two years.
	Promise program students seldom get involved on campus because we feel a pressure to get everything done in two years and get everything done well.