GETTING LOST ALONG THE WAY:

A TRANSFER STUDENT CASE STUDY

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Abstract

Even though the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (Shapiro, D., Dundar, A., Huie, F., Wakhungu, P.K., Bhimdiwall, A., Nathan, A., & Younsik, H., 2018) estimates that more than one third of students will transfer during their undergraduate experience, every transfer student's story is unique. Framed by identity theory and Lizzio's Fives Senses of Student Success Model, this study used a phenomenological approach to examine the lived experience of one transfer student. Thematic analysis revealed significant challenges toward graduation, despite the student having none of the characteristics often identified as barriers for transfer student completion. This study contributes to the literature by providing insights from an individual case and tests assumptions about what fosters or hinders student success.

Keywords: transfer student, phenomenology, advising, identity theory, student success

Introduction

Preparing for my initial meeting with Sarah,[1] I noted four transcripts in her advising folder but did not consider the significance. During that first meeting, we discussed her goals, including her target date for graduation. Yet, over time, Sarah became a bit of a

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[1] A pseudonym used to protect confidentiality. Throughout the interview transcript, names of people and places were replaced with pseudonyms. Sarah is the advisee of the first author. The second authors participated in the data analysis of the interview.

mystery. Although a very bright and capable young woman, Sarah missed graduation several times.

On the surface, it looked like some sort of self sabotage.

In higher education, much of what is measured for student success is based on a first-year, new-student cohort. However, not only do higher education researchers estimate that more than one third of students will transfer during their college experience, about 25% of this group will transfer more than once (Shapiro, D., Dundar, A., Huie, F., Wakhungu, P.K., Yuan, X., Nathan, A., & Bhimdiwali, A., 2017). Transfer students, along with their experiences and challenges, represent an important topic for higher education as the transfer student is no longer atypical (Marling, 2011). The American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers characterized the transfer student as the "forgotten student" in America (Jacobs, 2004).

Literature Review

Transfer students often face special obstacles, such as additional family responsibilities, limited financial resources, unclear transfer policies, and having to adapt to new academic cultures. More research has focused on vertical transfer trends (the transition from two-year to four-year institutions), contributing to gaps in the data regarding transfer experience and socialization from four-year to four-year schools (Bragg, 2015; Chin-Newman & Shaw, 2013; Goncalves & Trunk, 2014; Melguizo, Kienzl, & Alfonzo, 2011; Valente , Battle, & Clay, 2017). In their 2007 interview study of vertical (two to four year institutions) and lateral (four-year to four year institutions) transfer students, Kirk-Kuwaye and Kirk-Kuwaye (2007) found that lateral transfer students did not do as well as vertical transfer students on all measures on the National Survey of Student Engagement. A general lack of support for lateral transfers may mean that students go without the resources they needed to achieve their goals. Students who start out at a four-year school may not realize they will leave before graduating. As a result, they are also less prepared for the transition when it happens compared with many students attending two-year colleges who plan to transfer from the start.

A Problem with Vocabulary

A potential weakness with transfer student research is a lack of clarity with terminology. As mentioned earlier, more than a third of students are expected to transfer

during their college careers, but trend statistics may include a range of transfer behavior such as: 1) early college, 2) summer transfer work, 3) attending two colleges at the same time, 4) two-to-four-year, 5) four-year to four-year, and 6) four-year to two-year transfers. Clearly, not all forms of transfer create the same challenges (Shapiro, Dundar, Huie, Wakhungu, Bhimdiwall, Nathan, & Younsik, 2018).

Kuh (2008) criticized colleges for possessing a great deal of internal data but not using to understand their own institutions. A lack of motivation to use available data or work toward clear policies or agreements add to the transfer students' problems of lost credit credits, added completion time, and increased costs. Citing data from the National Center for Education Statistics Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study, Keierleber (2014) noted that 14% of transfer students in the study basically had to "start over" after transferring because the receiving institution received less than 10% of their credits.

Other Factors

In addition to the barriers to completion, researchers have investigated other challenges. Johnson (2005) described the phenomenon of "transfer shock" that happens when a student's GPA dips after transferring. Chin-Newman and Shaw (2013) studied students' struggles in adjusting to their new institutions. Ishitani and Flood's (2018) study found that students' sense of connection with the institution impacted retention. They found that about a third of students transferring from four-year institutions did so because they are looking for a school where they felt they belonged. Nunez and Yoshimi (2017) phenomenological study of transfer students found that one of the challenges transfer students faced was feeling marginalization and a need for validation. Based on their research with STEM students, Wetzel and Debure (2018) cited the importance of the first-year seminar and specialized mentoring as being the key for their successful transfer student program. Fee, Prolman, and Thomas (2009) conducted a case study on student success found that for transfer students, small classes and meaningful connections with professors were the most important factors.

Five Senses of Student Success

Lizzio's (2006) five senses of student success outline the components needed for student success, including a sense of: 1) capability, 2) connectedness, 3) purpose, 4)

resourcefulness, and 5) academic culture. As part of the model, he defines these
components:

1) Capability involves an aspect of the student being "learning ready" (p. 1) or having
   some preparation about the roles and tasks of university life. Students' expectations
   about college life and a foundation of academic skills play a role in this.

2) Connectedness involves the quality of relationships with peers, the staff, and the
   sense of connection with the university.

3) Purpose involves having a clear sense of being in one's discipline and being able to
   set goals. Having a purpose means that students understand what they're pursuing
   and why.

4) Resourcefulness is a characteristic that Lizzio describes as the ability to manage the
   stresses and strains of the overall university experience, including getting the
   information and help they need, being able to speak up when there's a problem, and
   to balance the various areas of their lives.

5) Academic culture, according to Lizzio, is when students have "the value of learning
   how things are done and what's important or valued in the new culture." (2006, p.
   1).

Identity Theory

Identity theory explores the role interaction plays in forming and confirming one's
sense of self. The concept of student identity often includes a focus on 1) being
academically responsible, 2) intellectually curious, 3) sociable, and 4) personally assertive
(Burke & Stets, 2009).

Whannell and Whannell (2015) argue that understanding the psychology of the
individual is an important part of predicting retention and success that go beyond the
external obstacles that are often identified. Drawing on identity theory, they proposed a
model of university identify formation that explores the reciprocal relationship between
university student identity, university student role, and emotional commitment. They
summarize the relationship of these variables:

Ongoing successful academic engagement particularly with assessment and
academic staff, progressively strengthens the university student identity. A
strengthening of the university identity, in turn, is seen as an increase in positive

academic behaviors. When negative experience occurs, such a poor assessment mark or negative staff interaction, the commitment to the university student identity is reduced. Prior negative experience can further create a negative self-fulfilling prophecy (Whannell & Whannell, 2015, p. 46).

They underscore the importance of students having an early positive experience with the university to establish an identity with the university. This is particularly important for transfer students who may not receive much attention (Li, 2010).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to understand and interpret the experiences of a transfer student who struggled with college completion despite having the "right preparation" and none of the typical risk factors. Using a qualitative approach, the researchers sought to interpret experience from the student's perspective. One way to improve transfer student experience is to look at it from the students' perspectives.

Case Study Method: A Phenomenological Approach

The research team adopted Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as the method for analyzing the interview data. The method as developed by Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2012) offers a qualitative, deep description "from the point-of-view of the experiencer" (p. 14). This methodological approach assumes people are naturally engaged in sense making and try to interpret what's happening around them. IPA is built on the principles of phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography. The element of idiography, referring to in-depth analysis of single cases, is a particular feature of this study.

Student Background

Sarah grew up knowing she would attend college. Both parents earned graduate degrees, set up an educational fund early on, and enrolled her in a college-prep high school. According to Sarah, this college-prep high school required a test to get in and "basically ensured your successful entrance into college." It was a taken-for-granted expectation in her family, both for her and her brother. As mentioned previously, the first author was surprised by the disconnect between Sarah's capability and her lack of progress toward graduation. When Sarah was approached about participating in the study to share her transfer experiences, she readily agreed. The history of a positive advisor/advisee

relationship provided a good foundation of trust and rapport needed for conducting an in-depth and personal interview, as emphasized by Smith at al. (2012).

Method

Influenced by Lizzio's (2006) student success model, an interview guide (Appendix A) was developed with questions like "Think about your experiences as a student throughout your educational journey. What would you identify as key turning points for you?" "In what ways has college been what you expected?"

The study was approved by the campus Institutional Review Board and the two-hour, interview was conducted during Sarah's final semester of college. With her permission, the interview was audio recorded. The interview was transcribed, and names of people and places were replaced with pseudonyms.

To begin working together, the research team met, reviewed the IPA guidelines, and created a process for analysis. After the training, each of the researchers worked independently with the interview transcript for about three weeks before coming together for a joint work session. Even though IPA can be implemented flexibly, the team adopted several recommended steps for analyzing data as outlined by Smith and colleagues (2012). The process included: 1) reading and re-reading to become familiar with the narrative, 2) initial note taking, and 3) descriptive comments that allow the researchers to interact with the narrative, making tentative interpretations.

The researchers made three levels of exploratory notes throughout the transcript, including: 1) descriptive, 2) linguistic, and 3) conceptual analysis. Table 1 provides a brief excerpt from the interview transcript as illustration. *Descriptive comments* identify key words, phrases, or comments from the interview. In the sample, each of the team members had marked these phrases: "I was always told I was a good writer" and "My mom always wanted me to be a writer." *Linguistic comments* highlight notable language references. For example, Sarah used the word "gift" to describe her writing ability. *Conceptual comments* begin to focus on interpretation and meaning, often in the form of a question. For example, each of the coders interpreted her writing versus mathematics ability as an important indicator of how Sarah viewed herself (as well as how others saw her). In their individual notetaking, each of the researchers had noticed the distinction between writing and mathematics was—in many ways—self fulfilling. The realization that she was a good writer

came through repeated interactions and feedback with others. Her writing ability had given her confidence and shaped her identity about who she was in the world. Observations from the researchers, such as "Did she ever consider she could be good at *both*?" is an example of the researchers beginning to interact with and offer tentative interpretations of the narrative. This is a central feature of IPA analysis.

Table 1 shows Sarah's response to the opening question in which she was asked to identify turning points throughout her educational journey. While the researchers did the initial analysis independently, to illustrate, the comments from team members are synthesized here.

Table 1: Excerpt from the Transcript

Original Transcript	*Exploratory Comments*
[00:01:26] Growing up I was always told I was a good writer. My mom always wanted me to be a writer so she can keep reading my writing and I had teachers she wanted me to keep writing too. And. So that really boosted my confidence that I could do that. You know during school. Or spent the earlier years of school like high school and stuff it really feels like math is so much more important than writing. It's not until you get to college and professional world that you realize how important writing really is. Like—oh my gosh—you use that [everyday], don't you? I hardly ever use math compared to writing. <u>Writing is everything</u>. So, I'm definitely at college when we realize oh I have this <u>gift.</u> I should use this gift, you know. So. I think that was another reason that I never really thought of myself because I was associated with the writing. Math with all people would be like <u>You're not as good at math, you're better at writing</u>. So, I <u>didn't think I was cut out for science or math</u> until my senior year of high school when I did AP Environmental Science.	Throughout life was told she was a good writer Writer by nature or suggestion? To what degree is her identity internal vs. externally shaped? Worthwhile talent? Emphasis on math seemed to make her question things What is this doing to her identity? "not a science person" Self fulfilling? Writing produced confidence in herself. Writing is a gift. Writing is everything

Having worked independently with the transcript, the researchers came together for a joint work session and discussed overall observations. Next, the team worked on the third step of identifying emergent themes, which were displayed, organized, and examined. During the fourth step, the team clustered the subthemes and created labels to identify what Smith et al. refer to as "super ordinate themes" (2012, p. 97.)

Themes

Based on the data, four super ordinate themes emerged: 1) The Tyranny of the Shoulds, Coulds, and Woulds, 2) The Case of Being an Outsider, 3) College Prep but Not College Prepared, and 4) A Need for Support. See Table 2 for a list of these themes.

Table 2: Superordinate Themes and Subthemes

1. The Tyranny of the Shoulds, Woulds, and Coulds	Reality vs. assumptions Others' influence about what's good Pursuing reputation rather than "good fit" Not listening to the inner voice Self doubt and second guessing External influences on decision making Feedback on strengths and weaknesses Plagued by paths not pursued
2. On Being an Outsider The difficulty of making friends in a new culture Feeling disconnected On the outside of things Feeling invisible Never really accepted Treated as "abnormal" Not big on tradition Not belonging	The difficulty of making friends in a new culture Feeling disconnected On the outside of things Feeling invisible Never really accepted Treated as "abnormal" Not big on tradition Not belonging
3. College Prep but Not College Prepared Unprepared for the difficulties ahead Early mistakes College was not what was expected The (broken) promise of success	Unprepared for the difficulties ahead Early mistakes College was not what was expected The (broken) promise of success
4. A Need for Support Encouragement offered validation Lack of support led to lack of involvement Reassurance of being okay Found faculty intimidating Didn't know where to turn for help Longing to be more than a number	Encouragement offered validation Lack of support led to lack of involvement Reassurance of being okay Found faculty intimidating Didn't know where to turn for help Longing to be more than a number

The Tyranny of the Shoulds, Coulds, and Woulds

One of the themes was the degree to which the student's decision making was influenced by external forces. Even though she described herself as an independent person, she seemed sidetracked by what others said and thought. For example, despite an interest in mathematics and science, Sarah recounted how, from early childhood, she had received praise for her writing ability. Her parents referred to her as "the writer in the family, while her brother was the "one good in mathematics." She described her engineer father getting frustrated when he tried to help her with mathematics homework. She couldn't work through problems the same way he did and that created tension between them.

When Sarah started college, she chose a school known for the science program she wanted to pursue. Later, when she transferred to where her boyfriend was attending college, she changed her major based on what the school was known for rather than the interests she had previously identified:

> Well, I ended up going to Mid Atlantic University where science wasn't big. I really think I chose my path a lot because of the schools I went to. Look at what they were good at. And I saw that the sciences were not that big at Mid Atlantic, but politics and mass communication were.

External influences shaped her decisions at Current College as well. She described: "I ended up here because of communication, I heard that is was good." She added she didn't think science was well known at Current College, so she didn't pursue it. Even though Sarah eventually recognized Current College was the best place for her, others' feedback still created occasional dissonance about the decision:

> One person who heard I came from Mid Atlantic University, said. "What are you doing here? Why would you come here from Mid Atlantic?" And that definitely made me feel like the value of Current College or my education here was undermined. But, I've since bounced back from that. Like I said, I'm okay with Current College's reputation around here. That's fine. People said the same thing about School of the North.

She experienced this again when she ran into a former high school classmate. The classmate heard Sarah was still in school and automatically assumed graduate school. Sarah said:

I look at my peers. I am very aware of what all my College Prep Academy peers are

doing. Because they are so competitive. Even the alumni, they send out alumni

newsletters detailing what everyone has done. And, so I'm still in college, and I'm

seeing so and so is on their fifth job at whatever crazy company and like receiving

awards.

I was a bridesmaid at my best friend's wedding. I saw one of our peers there from

College Prep and she asked me how I was doing. I said I still haven't graduated yet.

Believe it or not, she went "graduate school, right?"

[I said] Undergraduate.

The Case of Being an Outsider

Sarah's college journey also created a new experience for her, that of feeling like an

outsider. It began during her time at School in the North, known for the science program

she wanted to pursue. She described feeling judged for being from the South because of her

accent. She also learned that while the college she attended was large (one of her goals),

her department was small and rather close knit. Her perception was that many of the

students in the program were from nearby states where there was an established

recruiting pipeline. Many of her classmates seemed to know each other already. She stated:

I was asked if I was from Texas because of my accent. They are not used to different

dialects; if you are Southern you must be from Texas. I have an accent, so I was a

little bit of an outsider. It sucked that some people in my halls knew each other

already, and it was harder to get in. I don't know. I don't know how to make friends

in the North. It's just a different culture.

Once at Mid Atlantic, she experienced a different culture but still an outsider.

Everyone was into protest and it felt intense at times. And I felt invisible sometimes

because of that. Even when I tried my best to bring something to the table or

whatever, it always felt like "Yeah, yeah, we've said that" or "Yeah, that's pretty

broad." It was just never really accepted.

Once she arrived at Current College after taking a year off, she felt out of place because of

no longer being a traditional-aged student. When peers asked about her class standing, she

felt compelled to explain her situation. She said:

Now, I'm 27 and hanging out with 18-year olds. Some of them are my best friends. I

don't see a problem with that. There really isn't a problem with that.

Whenever a student asks me what year I am I have to go, "I'm a senior, but I'm like a

super, super senior. I'm a transfer." I have to explain the whole thing. I feel okay

about it, I guess.

When asked whether she planned to participate in commencement, Sarah hesitated.

Because of delaying graduation several times, she didn't identify with any class year. The

opportunity to celebrate a hard-won degree with her family present was overshadowed by

feelings of not belonging to the group who would be there. When asked if she connected

with other nontraditional students, she rejected the idea of them as "a group." Even though

students may be described and viewed with labels like transfer, commuter, nontraditional,

first generation, they may not be how they define themselves. Attempts to provide

programming for these groups may fall flat because they themselves don't necessarily

classify themselves that way.[2] Finally, the sense of having become an outsider persisted

even when seeing former high school friends. She felt the sting of comparison and a sense

of not measuring up. There was dissonance from no longer feeling like the bright star she

felt like through most of her educational experience.

College Prep But Not College Prepared

Perhaps the most surprising theme was the ways in which Sarah's college-prep

experience had not been the clear advantage it was supposed to be. She described:

Part of the whole thing is you pay all this money to send your kids here. You're going

to get into colleges. We have like a hundred percent rate for getting everyone is

colleges, so the advice there was pretty good, and they have good connections to

schools. As I said, I wanted to go into environmental science, because of the course I

took. She [guidance counselor] looked at my grades and had me do, she had all of us

do, a safe school that we knew we could get into. Another that we felt was within

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[2] We're on a campus where traditions are very strong, such as class rings, odd graduation years vs. even graduation years, Big Sis/Little Sis. While these traditions build unity and a sense of connection to the institution, the students who don't participate can feel left out. As a result, students who don't feel connected may choose to not participate in celebrations like graduations.

our reach but may not be a guarantee. And then one or two that was beyond our

reach that might be a stretch, but we might be able to pull off.

The first place she landed was one of the "stretch" schools, but the first semester turned out

to be a disaster. The team was stunned by the following story:

One of the reasons I was so unsuccessful my first semester is because I didn't know

that syllabi were important. I didn't know what they were. No one had explained

them to me. So, my professors would give it to me. And the reason why I thought

that they were so useless is because of College Prep Academy. They always, you

know, they were trying to get us used to college, so they would give us a "syllabus"

at the beginning of the semester and all. It didn't have dates or anything. It was a

one-page paper with a paragraph that said "You will learn this." That's pointless.

Yeah, I know what I'm going to learn. You already told me.

Why am I going to keep this "no information"? I threw away all of the syllabi. In high

school, no one told me you really should [keep them.] There will be important

information.

That information never got to me. And then for the first semester of throwing them

away and then getting so confused. I'd walk in and there'd be a quiz. I'd look at the

person beside me and be like, "How did you know this quiz was coming?" They'd go

"The syllabus," and I'd go "Syllabus? How is that?" What it took me a few months to

realize—this is my lifeline. It's such as silly thing. Honestly, you don't know how

everyone else knew that. Like you know, who tells you that?

So, it's just something funny.

Yet, that mistake had tremendous impact academically. Sarah's experience illustrates

Whannel and Whannell's (2015) notion that the early experiences with the institution are

critical and often self fulfilling.

A Need for Support

A final theme that emerged from the data was the importance of support. Although

bright and reasonably confident of her abilities, the positive or negative encounters she had

with professors were impactful and lasting. Sarah had previously described her college

prep high school experience as very competitive where students learned "not to expect a

lot of encouragement." Even so, as a student navigating college life and trying to learn the culture at a new school, encouragement by those around her made a difference.

One incident at the first college she attended was particularly painful and told through tears:

Because of all the snow and stuff, I kept being late to class and I was miserable. So, I missed a few classes, and I guess he got the wrong idea of me. But he acted like he hated me. And my final presentation for that class, I was even paired with a girl who was his favorite. And he talked to me like "Don't let her down. Don't bring her down." And I worked hard on it because I didn't want to bring her down. It was a good presentation. And then he said, "All right class, this is exactly what not to do on your presentations. This is terrible. The worst thing ever." I felt like I could never do Spanish ever again.

 It was just the words.

But Sarah acknowledged that even a small amount of encouragement made a difference:

Professors that encouraged me to a degree, even someone who's just not frustrated by me, even that is validation. And it's not as obvious until you get a professor that tears you down.

She described several encounters with professors who had shown her acceptance and support. Those conversations had strong impact and the recollections of those conversations were as vivid as the negative ones. She even found comfort from a *Huffington Post* article about people who don't graduate on time or people who take other paths. She found acceptance in the main point of the article, which discussed the transfer patterns of millennials:

They're not worse off than anyone else. It's just a different path and that we're just not the same people compared with a generation ago. Like that was so fulfilling to hear. Feedback from other people to help reinforce that you're not worse off than anyone else.

Discussion

On the surface, Sarah's struggles seemed surprising. She doesn't have the characteristics that often put a transfer student "at risk" such as first generation, minority status, or financial vulnerability. In contrast, she graduated from a college prep high school

where getting into college was virtually guaranteed. Her high school took tremendous pride in the placements of its graduates.

And, based on some measures used in higher education, Sarah will be counted as successful (she is finally on a clear path to completion), yet she struggles to see it that way. The missed graduations, the failed courses, the change in plans and transfer from school to school were not in the original plan or part of her student identity. It's not the journey she envisioned for herself as a student getting ready to embark on a college career. Like her high school classmates, she had the world by the tail and was ready to conquer it. But, as she compared herself to others, she fell short. Others finished "on time" as she was left behind.

When Sarah's story is viewed through the lens of Lizzio's model of success, she experienced struggles in all of the areas. For example, despite her elite, college-prep high school experience that prided itself on preparing students for college, she misunderstood what was expected of her in her college classes and threw out the syllabi that she later realized were her "lifelines." Her high school also prided itself in its college placement to elite schools but never discussed or emphasized the value of "good fit." Instead, schools were rated in terms of "safe" or "stretch" academically as other factors were downplayed or ignored.[3] Near the end of the interview, Sarah revealed something she had learned through her journey. Flourishing at a smaller school made her realize she would thrive in a smaller work environment as well.

The struggle with making connections with other students was another challenge Sarah faced. As soon as she started her college career, she described feeling like an outsider. When she later connected back with old high school buddies, time had passed, and she no longer felt like she could keep up or fit in with her former peer group.

Sarah also struggled with maintaining purpose throughout her journey. For the most part, she seemed resolved about her decision not to major in environmental science. However, near the end of the interview, she brought up the schools she had not visited

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[3] Education researchers have described the impact attending an elite school can have on the identity and self esteem of even very bright students, referred to as "Little Fish in a Big Pond" effect. Malcom Gladwell (2013) popularized the idea in his book, *David and Goliath*, where he talks about the various ways advantages turn out to be disadvantages.

prior to college and what might have happened had she chosen them. She mentioned that she had recently heard the term "environmental communication" and wished she knew it was a "thing" she could have pursued.[4]

So, while Sarah lacked the typical at-risk characteristics, her journey did reflect other research findings such as the impact of negative experiences early on, the lack of a mentor, and the often difficult transition to a new campus.

Application for Advising

Through my relationship with Sarah, it occurred to me that I have never viewed my transfer students in fundamentally different ways. Learning more about Sarah's story has made me reflect on questions I should ask many of my transfer students.

In that initial meeting, we focused primarily on what hours she was bringing in (which had counted and which did not), the courses she needed at Current College, and a tentative timeline for graduation. Looking back, it was a conversation that was linear and task oriented. Had I simply asked her to tell me her story, I would have gained important insight, along with some reflection about where she had been. I wish I had asked:

- So far in your educational career, what has worked well and what hasn't?
- At Current College, what do you hope will be different?
- How can I be most helpful to you?

On further reflection, it might also be helpful to view all students as potentially at risk. Sarah didn't fit into the typical risk categories, yet she still fell through the cracks in significant ways. While she made sense of her winding journey by saying it gave her the opportunity to travel and experience things she wouldn't have otherwise, other students in a similar set of circumstances might have dropped out because of the time and money involved. They would have been burdened with debt but no degree. U.S. Department of Education data on transfer student trends noted that 34% of four-year to four-year transfer students did not complete their degrees (Keierleber, 2014).

Finally, Sarah's story is a reminder that even students who should know how things work may not. We may underestimate their levels of anxiety or misunderstand their

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[4] After the interview, Sarah and I discussed ways she could combine her communication degree with a passion for environmental science as there were many ways to combine these interests. Her writing would be an important skill that could open doors for her in science-related fields.

concerns. Asking "What worries you about school?" might open the door for unexpected yet rewarding conversations.

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Unstructured Interview Guide

- Think about your experiences as a student throughout your educational journey. What would you identify as key turning points for you?
- How did you choose "Current College"?
- What were your perceptions about "Current College" before you came?
- Have those perceptions changed? How so?
- You attended several other schools before transferring here, tell me about that.
- Describe your experiences in the day-to-day as a student here. What's a typical day like?
- What's been the most challenging with your experience at "Current College"?
- What's been the most rewarding with your experience at "Current College"?
- In what ways has college been what you expected it to be?
- In what ways has attending college not met your expectations?
- At what point in your life did you decide that you were going to college?
- As a student, how would you have described yourself at earlier ages? (elementary, middle, and high school.) Did your favorite subjects or the subjects you were "good at" change over time?
- If you were interviewing with a potential employer, how would you describe yourself as a student? As a graduate? As a candidate for the job?
- What kinds of encouragement did you receive from others along the way?
- How have you gone about meeting and getting to know other students?
- How have you been able to connect with your professors and staff at "Current College"?
- What activities have you been involved in? Which have been the most satisfying?
- As you graduate, what are you most proud of?
- What would you have done differently?
- How has being a transfer student served you well?
- What challenges or hindrances related to being a transfer student have you experienced?
- When you think of someone being a successful student, what comes to mind?
- When you think of someone having success as a college graduate, what do you think of?
- In terms of meeting your goals, what's helped you the most?
- Do you feel like you had enough resources on campus to help you be successful? Are there things you wish we had but don't?
- When you've faced a setback or problem, what did you do to seek help?
- What resources did you use and that were the most helpful?
- What are your plans after graduation?
- What do you see yourself doing in five years? 10 years?
- When you think about your vision for yourself, what do you see?
- What else would you like to add?