A Phenomenological Study of Factors that Influence the Attainment of a Bachelor's Degree By Minorty Transfer Students Using Schlossberg's Transition Theory

Jan Hill[1] & Felix Okojie[2]

Abstract

An efficient pathway that influences baccalaureate attainment can yield postsecondary success for racially ethnic minority students who begin their academic journey at a two-year institution. This paper examined the perceptions and experiences of racially ethnic minority graduating college seniors who successfully transitioned from a two-year community college to a four-year institution. Research examined specific practices and programs that best align with the needs of minority transfer students and how these services coupled with personal persistence factors enhance the probability of bachelor's degree attainment among this population of students. Study findings showed that factors including financial consideration, need for academic development and maturation, personal attributes and experiences influenced racially ethnic transfer students' degree attainment. These findings have implication for structuring programs, policies, and practices that enhance persistence and bachelor's degree attainment among racially ethnic minority transfer students.

Keywords: Community Colleges, Student Transition, Persistence, Minorities, Degree Attainment

Introduction

Community colleges provide students the opportunity to earn various postsecondary credentials including two-year degrees, industry-recognized certificates, and continuing education credits. Approximately 45 % of all college students are enrolled in one of America's more than 1,100 community colleges (AACU, 2014). The community college system is now the largest education segment in the United States, serving as the gateway to postsecondary education for students from groups largely underrepresented at traditional higher education institutions (AACU, 2012). Studies show that 37% of all community college attendees are students of color, and 42% of them are the first in their families to attend higher education (Rodriguez-Kiino, 2013). Although community colleges serve a diverse set of needs, their success is often measured by their ability to facilitate students' transfer to a four-year institution (Long & Kurlaendor, 2009; Neault & Piland, 2014).

Literature has highlighted the difficult and often unsuccessful journey all students regardless of ethnicity undertake when they choose the community college as their pathway to the baccalaureate (Moore & Shulock, 2009). Only 20% of community college attendees complete programs, and 60% of students with bachelor's degree intentions do not advance to baccalaureate programs (AACC, 2012). The problem is exacerbated for racially ethnic minorities. According to a study conducted by the United States Department of Education (2012), African American students who begin their postsecondary education at a 4-year institution have 90% higher odds of completing a degree program than African American students who start at less than a 4-year institution.

Despite staggering community college success rates America's former President, Barack Obama promoted community colleges as the pathway for workforce development and economic recovery (Whitehouse, 2009). To ensure a healthy U.S. economy, community colleges were asked to strengthen their programs and increase the number of students who graduate and transfer to the four-year institution. Due to the current emphasis placed on community colleges and the goal of increasing postsecondary graduation rates, many states are launching initiatives that focus on increasing the number of college graduates in America. For example, the State of Tennessee established the Tennessee Promise, which offers free tuition and fees to graduating high school seniors. One of the goals of Tennessee Promise is to increase Tennessee's graduation rate from 35% to 55% by year 2025 (Tennessee Independent Colleges and Universities Association, 2014).

[1] Baptist Health Science University, Memphis, TN 38104
[2] Executive Ph.D. Program in Urban Higher Education, Jackson State University, Jackson, MS 39217

Due to such programs and increased focus on ensuring an educated citizenry, enrollment and interest in our nation's community colleges are expected to increase, specifically among underrepresented students. It is projected that by year 2021, enrollment in postsecondary education will increase by 42% for Hispanic and 25% for African American students (NCES, 2013). This implies that community colleges will serve as a vital pathway to the baccalaureate for racially ethnic minority students. To ensure equity in the persistence patterns among racially ethnic minority community college students and racially ethnic minority students who begin their academic career at four-year institutions it becomes imperative to examine factors that enhance racially ethnic minority transfer students' success throughout their journey to the baccalaureate.

Purpose of the Study

This qualitative study sought to examine the perceptions and lived experiences of racially ethnic minority seniors graduating from a four-year institution after transitioning from a two-year community college. There is substantial evidence to support the need to develop efficient pathways that increase bachelor's degree attainment among racially ethnic minority transfer students. According to Melguizo, Kienzl and Alfonso (2011), only 60% of students who transferred to four-year institutions earned bachelor's degrees in comparison to 73% of the students who started at a four-year institution. Baum (2013) noted that only 20% of community college attendees actually complete programs and only 15% earn a bachelor's degree within six years (Baum, 2013). Handel (2013) described the importance of a bachelor's degree for transfer students in finding that 83% of first-time enrollees in the community college system expressed their intent to transition to a four-year institution to attain a bachelor's degree. Since America's community colleges enroll approximately 66% of Hispanic students and 58% of African American students with 80% of students entering postsecondary education with bachelor's degree aspirations (AACC, 2014), it is important to engage in research that improve understandings related to racially ethnic minority transfer student success. Moreover, there is a dearth of higher education literature that seeks to increase understandings of successful strategies racially ethnic minority transfer students utilize when choosing the community college as their pathway to bachelor's degree attainment. This study focused on success rather than failure in identifying, describing, and interpreting how this population of students achieved postsecondary success. By identifying and describing factors that influenced success among these students, more campuses across the nation can build strategies and programs that improve transition for ethnic minority transfer students who seek the baccalaureate. This research was guided by the following four questions: 1). How do racially ethnic minority transfer students describe the experiences or circumstances that contributed to the decision to enroll in a two-year institution prior to transferring to a four-year institution? 2). How do racially ethnic minority transfer students perceive their persistence and transfer experiences as factors that ensure bachelor's degree attainment? 3). What are the academic, student support services, and social integration experiences that enhance and sustain the transition of racially ethnic minority community college students into the four-year college environment? 4). How can institutions structure programs, policies, and student support services to bridge the achievement gap among racially ethnic minority transfer students?

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical foundation for this study was Schlossberg's Transition Theory. The transition model of Schlossberg, Waters, and Goodman (1995) supports the facilitation of coping, as well as strategies that can be used to assist individuals experiencing change and transition. Schlossberg's Transition Theory provides an apt theoretical model to frame the various layers of experiences and factors that enhance the goal of baccalaureate attainment among racially ethnic minority transfer students. The researchers relied on the interaction of (a) the students' perception of the transition, (b) characteristics of the pre and post transition environments, and (c) the characteristics of the student experiencing the transition. Utilizing this theory, the researchers examined how racially ethnic minority seniors graduating from a four-year institution successfully navigated the transfer process and persisted to bachelor's degree completion. Schlossberg's Transition Theory includes an examination of what constitutes a transition, different forms of transitions, the transition process, and factors that influence transitions (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton & Renn, 2010) which have been found to significantly predict student retention at two-year and four-year institutions.

Review of Literature

Closing the achievement gap among minority transfer students is critical to the national progress of achieving educational equity among racial groups in the United States (Crisp & Nunez, 2014). The role of the community college is shifting from open access (college going) to a conduit for bachelor's degree attainment (academic completion and student success) which Neverez and Wood (2010) noted is a core mission component of the community college.

Furthermore, there is significant amount of research that correlates lack of (a) concise articulation agreements, (b) student support services, and (c) models of persistence that support the racially ethnic minority transfer student's goal of bachelor's degree attainment. The expanding gap among the success of native four-year students and the transfer student is critical.

Several theorists have researched factors that predict student departure. Vincent Tinto's (1975) Student Integration Model suggests that students who socially integrate into the campus community increase their commitment to the institution and are more likely to graduate. This theory has helped researchers, policy-makers, and educators to better understand why students depart their institutions prematurely and what factors enhance student persistence. Although Tinto's (1975,1993) theory has helped advance knowledge regarding the persistence process for college students, it did not provide relevance for the two-year college nor accommodate the diversities presented by minority students (Bean 1980; Astin 1993; Terenzini and Pascarella 1991).

Alexander Astin's (1984) student involvement theory refers to the quantity and quality of the physical and psychological energy that students invest in the college experience. Astin contended that a highly involved student is one who devotes considerable energy to studying, spends much time on campus, participates actively in student organizations, and interacts frequently with faculty members and other students. Astin (1975) conducted a longitudinal study of college dropouts which asserted that community colleges are places where the involvement of both faculty and students seem minimal; an assertion which associates negatively with campus involvement. According to Astin (1975), most (if not all) community college students are commuters, and a large proportion attend college on a part-time basis, while a large portion of the faculty members are part-time as well. His study assumed that there is a lack of capital between the community college, faculty, and students which attributes to lack of student involvement, persistence, and retention. However, recent literature revealed faculty members are guilty of assuming the needs of transfer students and routinely combine the needs of the commuter student with the needs of the transfer student (Tobolowsky, Cox, & McClellan, 2014) which naturally fails to give merit to the needs of the transfer student.

In understanding the factors that predict community college students' predisposition to transfer, Nora and Rendon (1990) sampled 74% Hispanic students and 26% White students to learn that students with greater levels of academic and social integration were significantly more likely to have transfer goals than their peers. This study failed to provide insight on factors that facilitate predisposition to transfer among Black students as they were not represented in the sample population.

Padilla's (1999) model of student success postulates that minorities who apply pre-transfer knowledge and acquired knowledge "and take the appropriate actions based on this expertise" have success in navigating higher education. Padilla (1999) described this concept as the "black box." When the inputs (time, sacrifice, resources to obtain a degree) and the outputs (credentials, academic success, social standing) are fairly clear but the in-between processes are a little understood or not at all, then the in-between process can be considered as the 'black box.' How minority transfer students develop strategies and react to the in-between process or the 'black box' will likely depend on the type, context, and the impact of the transition (Goodman, Schlossberg, & Anderson, 2006). Schlossberg (1984) believed adapting to the 'in-between' process is dependent upon three factors: (a) anticipated transitions (transitions that are predicted); (b) unanticipated transitions (transitions which are not predicted or scheduled); and (c) nonevents (transitions that are expected to occur but do not).

The process of successful transfer from a two-year institution to a four-year institution involves developing effective institutional practices on the part of the sending and receiving institution. If transfer is to gain prominence as a pathway to the bachelor's degree, there is need for research that describes the optimal institutional conditions and structures that support student progress (Handel, 2011; Handel &Herrera, 2006; Jain, Herrera, Bernal, & Solorzano, 2011). Researchers asserted that institutional factors such as striving behavior (Tobolowsky & Cox, 2014); early commitment to a major (Jenkins & Cho, 2012); academic advising and counseling (Roberts & Styron, 2010); and articulation agreements (Montague, 2012) were factors associated with establishing an infrastructure that enhanced transfer from the community college to the four-year institution.

Perhaps one of the greatest challenges transfer students encounter is gaining acceptance of transfer credits. The value of articulation agreements in determining the acceptance of course credits which leads to successful transfer has been examined in research conducted by Montague (2014), Kisker (2007), Townsend, (2008), Monaghan and Attewell (2015), Bers and Schuetz (2014), and Neault and Piland (2014). Moreover, the number of states that have adopted articulation agreements have grown from 31 to 36 over the past decade (College Board, 2012). The establishment of statewide articulation agreements has been a common response to improving transfer rates.

Effective articulation agreements position students for seamless transfers from one educational institution to another, while minimizing the number of credits that students lose in the process (Montague, 2012). Whether articulation agreements arise through formal and legal based agreements, state system agreements, or voluntary agreements between individual institutions, they share a common goal: to increase systematic efficiency and effectiveness in moving students through the educational process of attaining a degree (Montague, 2012). Ultimately, the four-year college generally plays a significant role in the development of curricula which will ensure the transferability of credits into the baccalaureate program (Montague, 2012). In stemming this challenge, researchers suggest that two-year colleges and four-year colleges should partner to develop a joint or co-admission process to facilitate early admissions. Also suggested is a need to focus on efforts to develop programmatic articulation agreements so while at the two-year school community college, students will know which general education courses are appropriate for their intended major at the four-year institution (Kisker, 2007; Townsend, 2008).

Schlossberg's (1984) Transition Theory stressed the importance of understanding the type of transition, the situation in which the transition is experienced, and the effect the transition has on those involved. How racially ethnic minority transfer students work through a transition and how these students cope with challenges in pursuit of the bachelor's degree are imperative to understand. In relation to Schlossberg, Goodman et al. (2006) referred to this phase of transitioning as the strategies phase. During this phase students usually employ four modes of coping: (a) information seeking, (b) direct action, (c) inhibition of action, and (d) intrapsychic behavior.

Although transfer students have previous college going experience, they express lack of knowledge about how their new school works which can contribute to "transfer shock" (Hills, 1965). Building on the work of Schlossberg et al. (1995), Goodman et al. (2006) attributed this to an "event" or "non-event" that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles. Townsend (2008) advised institutions to offer a transfer orientation to include components of the freshman orientation, equipped with peers responsible for informing new transfer students about the campus and how to adjust academically and socially. Wood (2012) agreed that orientation programs are a critical component that facilitates student persistence. In a study identifying factors affecting Black male students' persistence in community colleges, data were collected from 2,235 respondents. Utilizing logistic regression, African American collegians were compared to non-Black counterparts. Black males in comparison to other college males were more likely to depart due to personal reasons. Wood (2012) noted that community colleges should offer mandatory in-person orientation sessions that discuss time commitments needed for academic success which would allow Black students an opportunity to prepare and determine how to best balance their personal responsibilities and their collegiate obligations.

Vincent Tinto theorized that academic and social integration were the two primary factors that determined whether a student chose to persist or depart from an institution. To better understand the impact of early social integration experiences among the transfer student population, D'Amico, Dika, Elling, Algozzine, and Ginn (2014) studied over 1,100 transfer students. The racial makeup of the study's sample population included 66% White students and only 16% African American students. This quantitative studied revealed that early academic integration significantly improved persistence while early social integration and socio-academic variables were not a significant indicator of persistence. In conducting research at a Southeastern community college where approximately 80% of the student body was White, Martin, Galentino, and Townsend (2014) found that students who successfully graduated were "almost universally uninvolved in extracurricular activities on campus" (p. 236). Findings revealed that these students also did not use academic support services as a means of empowerment and motivation. However, a qualitative study that Simmons (2013) conducted contradicted the findings from the aforementioned study. Simmons (2013) examined student support organizations as a means of persistence for Black males. The results revealed that Black male involvement in student organizations was important. Simmons found that as long as the students remained committed to campus organizations and programs (e.g. leadership development activities, summer bridge programs), there was a likelihood for persistence. The researchers also found that the African American student respondents used identity as a motivational strategy in pursuit of the bachelor's degree. The student respondents reported participating in conferences that highlighted the realities of African American men in life and in education was significant in their decision to persist in the pursuit of degree attainment. Connecting with positive role models and peers with similar aspirations served as a motivator in the persistence and social integration experiences of these African American students. The student respondents also expressed a strong commitment *not* to disappoint family members in support of higher education attainment. Thus, the student's desire to make family members proud served as a persistence factor. According to the researchers, the student's personal background, social relations, and the components of their higher education institution were significant factors for persistence.

The four themes most salient in the respondents' experiences were (a) college preparedness, (b) high aspirations and goals, (c) social connections and relationships, and (d) growth through student organizational commitment. Interesting, the student respondent's aspirations were higher than attaining a bachelor's degree, noting that both types of respondents entered college with the intent on earning graduate degrees.

Method

A qualitative research design was selected for this study. The goal of this study was to understand how racially ethnic minority students successfully transition from a two-year institution to attain a bachelor's degree; therefore, the research methodology encompassed a qualitative phenomenological approach to inquiry. Phenomenological studies do not explain or analyze the phenomenon, but rather, describe and interpret the experience as explained by the research subjects. In addition, a qualitative approach to inquiry provides greater depth in interpreting student respondents' experience of the phenomenon, unlike quantitative research, that is useful when reporting facts and numerical analysis independent of intentions or circumstances that surround the experience. The main strength of qualitative research is its ability to create knowledge about new phenomenon and complex interrelations that have not yet been researched thoroughly or at all (Seipel & Rieker, 2003).

The phenomenological approach to inquiry relies on the lived experiences of subjects to construct a textural description of the experiences (what participants experienced), a structural description of their experiences (how they experienced it in terms of the conditions, situations, or context), and a combination of the textural and structural descriptions to convey an overall essence of the experience (Creswell, 2013). Creswell (2013) believed, "It would be important to understand these common experiences in order to develop practices or polices, or to develop a deeper understanding about the features of the phenomenon" (p. 81). Understanding how certain factors equate into capital and then convert into successful strategies that influence persistence among minority transfer students obtaining a bachelor's degree justifies the importance of using a qualitative phenomenological approach to inquiry. Through the voices of students, this study captured the perception of racially ethnic minority students in describing their experiences; previous research has noted experience plays a key role in transfer student success (Berger & Malaney, 2003; Tobolowsky & Cox, 2012).

Site and Sample Selection

Participants were selected from two four-year Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) in the Southern region of the United States. The population from which participants were selected consisted of senior-level undergraduate racially ethnic minority students enrolled in one public land grant institution and one private institution. Purposive sampling was used based on the rationale that students who experienced the phenomenon and successfully transitioned from a two-year institution and matriculated into their senior year at a four-year institution would offer greater insight into factors that influenced degree attainment among this population. The sampling criteria required that participants were classified (a) as a racially ethnic minority student (b) as a transfer student from a two-year institution, and (c) as a senior at the current institution enrolled.

The sample size for this study consisted of 20 racially ethnic minority students; 10 racially ethnic minority students from each university. According to Creswell (2012), variability or differences within the sample population can offer a better understanding when explaining or describing a complex process. Therefore, the sample was diverse representing a mixture of students who represented variability in gender, ethnic backgrounds, age, and socioeconomic status. Participants ranged in age from 22 - 34 years; eight of them were males and 12 females. The ethnicity of the sample consisted of 18 Black students, one Hispanic, and one student with an "other" designation. Thirteen participants were first generation students.

Data Collection

Qualitative data collection entails focusing on individual meaning, rendering the complexity of a situation, and understanding a social or human phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). Through collecting data from multiple data sources, the researchers sought to describe the factors that influenced and sustained the transition of minority community college students into the four-year institution. The researchers collected data from 20 minority transfer students classified as seniors who experienced the phenomenon. Bogdan and Bilken (2007) suggested the use of multiple types of information during data collection to develop a full understanding of the data. This process is referred to as data triangulation and also refers to including multiple subjects, multiple researchers, and different data collecting techniques (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). In order to achieve data triangulation, the researchers used background surveys, semi-structured interviews, and focus groups.

The data collection process was divided into two phases. In the first phase of data collection the researchers conducted face-to-face interviews with a total of 20 racially ethnic minority transfer students who were enrolled in their final semester of their senior year at a four-year institution. Marshall and Rossman (2011) described phenomenological interviewing as a specific type of in-depth interviewing grounded in philosophical tradition of phenomenology, which is the study of lived experiences and the ways we understand those experiences to develop a worldview. The one-time face-to-face interview ranged from 60-90 minutes. Depending on how the participants answered the initial interview questions, probes were used to encourage further elaboration (Merriam, 2009). A second telephone follow-up interview was requested if needed to verify accuracy of responses.

In the second phase of data collection, the researchers conducted a total of two focus groups, one focus group with student respondents at each of the two research sites. Information collected from student respondents during the first phase of the data collection process guided questions for the second phase of the data collection process. The focus group was designed to introduce a group dynamic to the discussion. According to Creswell (2012) when students have the ability to interact with one another, the sharing of ideas can generate new thinking about a topic which will result in a much more in-depth discussion. The purpose of this phase was also to have the group discuss, confirm, and elaborate on the responses to the research questions asked during the initial interview phase. All interviews were audiotaped with a digital recorder, with permission from the respondents. Audiotaping the interview was used as a means to keep track of the data and provide the flexibility to review responses if discrepancies are apparent through data analysis. In an effort to document body language and non-verbal cues, the researchers authored supplementary notes during each interview.

Data Analysis

In describing and interpreting specific factors, across the entire pipeline of the racially ethnic minority transfer students' experience, qualitative data collection served as a tool to provide a thick, rich description of the experience. Initial analysis began with the researchers transcribing each interview for all 20 research subjects. After each interview, the researchers reflected on the notes and merged the notes to a respondent memo file, which accompanied the transcribed interview during data analysis (Corbin & Strauss, 2007). Transcriptions for both focus group meetings were also completed. Audio recordings, transcribed interviews, personal notes, and related documents were safely stored on a finger-print protected PC and categorized by a unique identifier.

Transcriptions were coded for the purpose of better understanding the text data (interview transcripts, observation reflections, written notes) and for forming initial meaningful categories that would lead to forming broad themes, choosing specific data to use, and eliminating data not directly related to themes (Creswell, 2012). Developing themes is a method to analyze qualitative data to form major ideas in the database (Creswell, 2012). By collecting multiple sources of data from interview transcripts, focus groups, and written notes, the process of triangulation was used to examine all information documenting evidence to support a theme (Creswell, 2012). The data were coded by employing open coding, axial coding, and selective coding techniques to explore central themes (Merriam, 2009).

During open coding, data were broken down analytically in order to examine preconceived ideas and to allow new ideas to emerge (Chamaz, 1983; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Data were identified and grouped by concepts that represented similar perceptions. Second, axial coding categories were used during the open coding phase to make connections with other categories and subcategories (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Finally, selective coding was employed to establish an analytic storyline.

Trustworthiness

In order to eliminate the possibility of a third party identifying a participant, each participant was assigned a unique identifier. The participants' names for this study were encrypted with a unique identifier at the initial interview and referred to by the unique identifier at any follow-up interview sessions. The researchers used variations of the participant's first name, last name, and research site to create the unique identifier. Security standards were strictly enforced while collecting, storing, and transporting sensitive case information. In an effort to avoid unauthorized access to data, the researchers transported all data in a locked password protected carrying case.

The researchers used a small digital voice recorder to ensure accuracy and trustworthiness of data collected. Each interview was saved in a digital folder on the recorder, and later downloaded to a computer and transferred to an audio CD. This process provided duplicate sources of original material.

Limitations

This study was limited solely to the perceptions of racially ethnic minority transfer students. Insight from students from other cultural backgrounds, faculty, and student affairs administrators could potentially reveal a more thorough understanding of practices, programs, and experiences that relate to the transfer process. A further limitation is the focus solely on racially ethnic minority students' perceptions of transitional experiences. The research sites were limited to two institutions in the Southern region of the United States.

Lastly, since the proposed research was limited to seniors enrolled in their final year at a four-year institution, the subjects may have had difficulty recalling details regarding earlier learning experiences. In an effort to mitigate this weakness the researchers provided the student respondents with the interview questions prior to the interview to allow an opportunity for recollection.

Qualitative Findings / Discussion

Findings from this study make an important contribution to the literature regarding the success of racially ethnic minority students who choose the two-year institution as a path to bachelor's degree attainment. Major thematic findings are presented and detailed by research questions and constructs of the theoretical framework: situation, self, support, and strategy themes. Terms supporting themes are described as categories of thematic expressions. These categories were then integrated or reduced as major themes to answer the research questions. Themes were then explained according to the relationship of defining words to the theoretical construct.

Research Question 1

This question asked: How do racially ethnic minority transfer students describe the experiences or circumstances that contributed to the decision to enroll in a two-year institution prior to transferring to a four-year institution? Data for the question were associated with the *situation* construct from the theoretical framework. Frequently used words and expressions in participants' responses were captured in two themes serving to describe experiences or circumstances contributing to their decision to enroll in a two-year institution prior to transferring to a four-year institution. The themes were the following:

Theme 1: Community college provides an affordable pathway to a bachelor's degree; through division of time, students receive a quicker gratification than the four- year institution. **Theme 2:** Community college prepares students academically and socially.

The discussion of their perspectives in relation to the theoretical construct provides a clear understanding of these themes.

Situation Construct

How a student perceives the trigger for the transition, the timing, the duration of the transition, and previous experience with a similar transition are factors that are considered during the situation phase of the transition. Three thematic categories emerged as a result of background and demographic questions in the first-part of the interview phase supportive of Research Question 1. Data analysis of the 20 participants resulted in three relevant concepts: (a) finances, (b) division of time at both institutions, and (c) need for academic development and maturation. From these concepts, two themes emerged from the data reflective of the perceptions of the student sample.

The most cited responses in describing the decision to choose the two-year institution, whether a pathway to bachelor's degree attainment or developmental space were *finances* (16 of 20 participants); *short time commitment at both institutions* (8 of 20 participants); *need for academic development* (7 of 20 participants); and the *need to mature more* (2 of 20 participants). Of the 20 participants represented in this study 13 respondents entered the two-year institution with a plan to transfer to the four-year institution to achieve a bachelor's degree. Schlossberg (1988) described this transition as an anticipated transition; a transition that is predicted and expected. Seven student respondents viewed their decision to enroll in the two-year institution as an opportunity to develop academic and maturation skills needed to begin the next phase of life. Of these seven students, six entered the two-year institution without plans to transfer to the four-year institution, which is considered an unanticipated transition. One student respondent experienced a nonevent; his intentions were to get drafted to the major baseball league. When that didn't occur, he decided to transition to the four-year university to continue playing organized sports. These frequently cited four decisions are explained through voices of participants.

Theme 1: **Community college provides an affordable pathway to a bachelor's degree.** Finances influenced the majority of the student respondents' decision to enroll in the two-year institution, regardless of bachelor's degree intent upon initial enrollment. Participants compared tuition fees at four-year institutions and community colleges and discussed how lower tuition fees influenced their college choice. Even students who perceived their parent's financial background as middle-class and higher, still chose the community college due to finances. Rachel's mother was employed at the community college that she attended. Rachel never considered beginning her academic career at a four-year institution. Rachel explained, My mom has a bachelor's and a master's. She is a coach. Coming out of high school, I studied because I always made good grades. I could have went anywhere but I wanted to play basketball for my mom and plus tuition was discounted.

Martha echoed the same sentiment. Martha beamed with pride when speaking of her family's deep roots in higher education. Martha offered, "My father is a college professor, my mother works in the healthcare field, and all of my grandparents are college educated." Similar to Rachel, Martha admitted to having good grades and other options, but saw the financial benefit as a factor that influenced college choice decisions. Martha said,

I enrolled because my dad is a professor; so I was able to get a discount at that school, so I took on that opportunity. The plan was always to go to a university, so I knew I would transfer to the four-year institution.

Two respondents admitted that the two-year institution was not their first choice, but was their only choice due to finances. Leviticus and Jacob both are international students who enrolled in the two-year institution with bachelor's degree aspirations. The trigger for these international students was a deep-rooted desire to receive an education in the United States combined with the realization of high tuition fees in America's public and private higher education institutions. Leviticus enrolled in the two-year institution due to the inability to afford the four-year institution. Leviticus offered,

I am not sure if you are aware, but international students cannot receive any financial or government aid for school, only a scholarship. I realized that I was not going to be able to afford it (tuition); like it was $5,000 at that time and I didn't have it. So, I contacted a friend in Oklahoma, and he told me about a school that had the cheapest tuition in America, so I contacted them and a friend called the admissions lady to tell her that I was like a musician and said I should send her my videos. She was interested and they told me if I came that I could definitely get a scholarship. It was hard because we had just moved to the States and my girlfriend, she was in graduate school in another state, so I had to enroll in school at the most affordable place.

Respondents choosing the community college as a preparatory space to further develop academically also saw the benefit of finances. Bathsheba, one of the four students entering the community college without bachelor's degree intentions, based her decision entirely on finances. She tied her financially-based decision to being unsure of what she wanted to do with her life and felt the community college could simultaneously provide career guidance and cost-savings.

Division of time commitment was another construct supporting the theme. Transfer students 'move in' to a learning environment twice; once at the two-year institution and again at the four-year institution. The duration of the transition is typically two years at the sending institution and between two to three years at the receiving institution. Of the 20 student respondents, eight respondents cited a short time commitment at both institutions as an important factor that influenced persistence to bachelor's degree attainment. Of the eight students who cited this response, all reported an anticipated transition and reported the community college as their first choice regardless of other postsecondary options. These students felt that they were at an advantage over native students at the four-year institution due to an expected 2 to 3-year time commitment to degree attainment once they transitioned to the four-year institution. Martha expressed her belief: "I feel like for transfers, we are eager; it's like a new school, a new beginning. But the natives are like gosh, I've been here for so long; so they are ready to leave and [be] over it."

Overall, the respondents believed that the short time commitment at both institutions reduced feelings of burn-out commonly associated with attrition at four-year institutions. Rachel stated, "I have short patience; so, I felt like going somewhere and knocking it out in two years and then leaving and going to a new environment; and doing two more years helped me since it was short term." While the short time commitment seemed to be a positive factor that influenced persistence for the aforementioned students, this seemed to be a non-factor for the remaining student respondents.

Theme 2: Academic and social development. The need to enroll in the community college versus the four-year institution to further mature and or develop academically was a factor for seven of the 20 student respondents. Participants in this study discussed how community college provided them with "proper steps" before enrolling into "adulthood."

Participants discussed social anxiety and fear of perceived academic challenges at the four-year institution. Two of the student respondents expressed that they didn't feel mature enough for the four-year environment and felt the community college would better prepare them for the four-year institution. Those students made statements such as "it wasn't my time to go off to college" or "I am an only child-I wasn't quite ready." John discussed his feelings of not being prepared to enroll in the four-year institution,

I think the thing about that was that I was nervous coming straight from high school and thinking about going to a four-year university versus a two-year. I was thinking that maybe I needed to take the proper steps. So, by going to the two-year it may not be as hard as starting off at the four-year. So, it was mostly nervousness.

The majority of students who enrolled in community college to better prepare academically compared the community college to the four-year institution. Students faced with the reality of being academically unqualified for admissions requirements at a four-year institution measured their perception of the community college against perceived self-efficacy. These students persisted by developing a belief that the four-year institution is a place where they belonged and not the community college. These students felt that the community college was beneath their academic ability. They viewed attending a two-year institution as a punishment for not being a serious scholar during their high school years. Esther explained her experience after being denied admission into a four-year institution.

I did not want to attend a community college; I wanted to go to the four-year institution like my friends did and really step into adulthood. I did not meet those qualifications of having high scores or grades so that disqualified me of going to my first choice which was a four-year school. The community college was a last resort. My only goal was to raise my GPA so that I could get into a four-year college and get more grants and scholarship money. I even had to take remedial courses, so I devised a plan to take all of my classes in a reasonable time so I could graduate in a two-year time frame.

In relationship to timing, these students viewed their timing with attending a two-year institution as a liability in comparison to high school friends who were attending a four-year institution. These students viewed the community college as inferior to the four-year institution but proficient enough to prepare them for the next phase of their academic career. However, these students also believed the community college was the only option that would lead to bachelor's degree attainment and chose to use this experience as a motivator to persist to degree attainment, making this an asset as well.

Student respondents who did not enroll in higher education directly after high school believed that enrolling in community college was the best use of time and viewed the transition as an asset. In fact, respondents seemed to perceive their timing with enrolling into the community college as long overdue. These students believed that the community college was capable of developing their academic ability and viewed the transition as a beginning to the next phase of life, whether transferring to a four-year institution or entering the workforce. Table 1 contains themes and supporting concepts for the categories presented in RQ1.

Table 1
RQ 1: Themes and Supporting Concepts

Themes	Open Categories	Axial Concepts
Community college provides an affordable pathway to a bachelor's degree; through division of time, students receive a quicker gratification than the four-year institution	Couldn't afford tuition at four-year college Short patience	Finances Limited time commitment
Community college prepares students academically and socially for their careers or the four-year institution	Raise GPA Not ready for adulthood	Develop academically Develop socially

The open coding categories shown in Table 1 resulted from participants' expressions of factors influencing their decision to enroll in a two-year institution before enrolling in a four-year institution. The category related to affordability of the four-year institution was supported by cost-saving expressions such as "didn't want to waste money" and "wise consumer decision."

The category, not ready for adulthood, was explained in terms of "don't know what to expect," nervous," and "not ready to leave home." The need to raise GPA was supported through comments indicating participants did not qualify for admissions to the four-year institution, while the category of short patience was engendered by references to the two-year institution in such expressions as "less distractions," and "limited time to get distracted."

Research Question 2

Two themes emerged in response to the question, How do racially ethnic minority transfer students perceive their persistence and transfer experiences as factors that ensure bachelor's degree attainment? The themes were

Theme 1: Imbedded values influence persistence and commitment to bachelor's degree attainment.
Theme 2: Exposure to workshops, events, seminars, and skills assessments create career awareness and give students the opportunity to network and evolve as a student.
These themes were related to the theoretical construct, self.

Self Construct

The role of 'self' in Schlossberg's Transition Theory is centered on individual outlook which is comprised of personal and demographic characteristics, psychological resources (Schlossberg, 1989), and values orientation (Schlossberg, 1981). In this study, the researchers sought to interpret individual persistence factors by how racially ethnic minority transfer students perceived their personal attributes and experiences, demographic characteristics, and psychological resources, over the entire pipeline of the transition, as factors that ensured bachelor's degree attainment. Data analysis of the 20 participants resulted in four relevant concepts: (a) earning a better lifestyle, (b) building or continuing a family legacy, (c) networking, and (d) self-awareness. These concepts supported two themes that emerged from the data that reflect the perceptions of the sample. Table 2 summarizes the data analysis iterations resulting in these two themes.

Table 2
RQ 2: Themes and Supporting Concepts

Themes	Open Categories	Axial Concepts
Imbedded values influence persistence and commitment to bachelor's degree attainment	Better opportunities Prestige Better job Follow in parent's footsteps Set an example for family	Obtaining a better lifestyle Building or continuing a family legacy
Exposure to workshops, events, and skills assessments create career awareness and give students the opportunity to network and evolve as a student	Exposure to different career paths Attend social academic events with peers Attend conferences	Networking Self-awareness

The open coding category of better opportunities cited in Table 2 incorporated examples of values participants associated with material gains from attaining a bachelor's degree. Expressions included in this category were *cars, expensive things, prestige, and a better job.* Participants viewed *setting an example for family members and having opportunities to attend conferences* among factors associated with attaining the bachelor's degree.

Theme 1. Imbedded values. In this study, transfer student respondents revealed that imbedded values have a profound impact on persistence. This thematic finding was pervasive throughout all participants. Throughout this study, students consistently referred to spoken or unspoken expectations from family members and friends regarding the importance and impact of higher education on their lives. Students spoke of historical variables such as slavery and its impact on degree attainment; financial considerations such as earning potential and career opportunities; and cultural factors relating to setting an example for siblings and family members or continuing a family legacy.

Participants were explicit in describing the belief that a bachelor's degree would somehow impact their lives for the better. For Leviticus, sacrifice and encouragement from family motivated him to remain focused and committed to his goals. He explained,

I grew up in a broken country as I said and it wasn't until I went to, well all of my brothers could not go to school, because my Mom wanted me to go and my brothers wanted me to go, so I realized school was important. Two of my brothers could not go to school, we could not afford it. I knew they were sacrificing for me. I knew how important an American degree was.

Some participants were motivated by the accomplishments of family members and believed that through lineage, they shared the same self-determination and would ultimately achieve similar accomplishments. John shared, "My mom has a medical degree so the principles of education have always been communicated and valued in my household. I am a part of a group of elite African Americans."

Perceived family values seemed to build self-efficacy skills and resilience, when the student respondents were faced with set-backs such as losing course credits in the transfer process or not meeting admission requirements. Students drew from values instilled by their networks of influence as a strategy for persisting. Leah said,

My mom stopped going to college because she got pregnant with me; she drilled in my head that seeking a degree would open doors to a better life and better job opportunities. Every time I got a report card she was on my case to make sure I did my homework. I remember as a young girl, every time I wanted to do something, I would have to write it down, I would have to pretty much present a case, a PowerPoint essay, all of that. I had to let her know why I wanted to go, why it was important to me, who was going to be there, that kind of thing. So, I guess it made me great at writing, so I just stuck with it. You know, she was very present and I needed that and I am grateful that I had it, but she definitely pushed me. When I got feed up (at the community college) because they didn't prepare me, they gave me the run-around. They had me taking classes that I didn't need, wasting financial aid that I didn't need to waste, but it made me even more determined.

The theme imbedded values produced two concepts: earning a better lifestyle (8 of 20 respondents), and building or continuing a family legacy (12 of 20 respondents) which uncovers value orientation. As previously mentioned, values orientation is a factor in understanding "self" and critical in determining an individual's capacity to adjust to change and essentially conquer the transition (Schlossberg, 1981).

Regarding earning a better lifestyle, demographic factors such as socioeconomic status greatly influenced the extent in which earning power influenced persistence among student respondents. The most cited response by students with perceived financial struggles and a low socioeconomic status was "a better lifestyle" and "owning expensive things" as factors that enhanced persistence to degree attainment. When describing how personal experiences contributed to persistence these students never departed from viewing a bachelor's degree as a means to achieve a better lifestyle. Of the 20 respondents, eight students focused on the perceived earning power and prestige that they felt a bachelor's degree would afford them. Student respondents believed that a bachelor's degree would unlock doors to opportunity that would create a better lifestyle than they were currently living. Joseph elaborated:

You can tell a person who has a degree and who doesn't. The way you talk, the car you drive, and how you look. A person with a degree does not have to accept any job; the job has to pay you a certain amount of money. But when you don't have a degree you have to accept what they give you.

Leah was unapologetically motivated by a better lifestyle than the one she was currently living and expressed a desire for the finer things that she perceived a bachelor's degree would provide. Leah discussed her motivation for persistence: "I like expensive things, I want to have what I don't have now, so I wanted a better lifestyle. I felt that I wouldn't get that if I didn't go to college."

Building a family legacy or continuing family traditions was important to persistence among 12 of the 20 respondents. The most distinctive difference among the two groups of students (earning a better lifestyle and building a family legacy) was the trigger for the transition. Students experiencing an unanticipated transition or a nonevent seemed to be motivated by a better lifestyle. However, students who anticipated the transition, regardless of first generation or legacy status, were motivated to persist based on the impact it would have on their family. Participants who were motivated by building or continuing a family legacy discussed their demographic characteristics and connected those factors as motivators to persist. Eve, a first-generation STEM student, discussed the impact of her father's untimely death which made her mom responsible for the household. She noted,

My mom wanted to finish school but she couldn't. She encouraged me to attend the community college and to keep my grades up. I don't want my family to struggle, I want them to go to school too and see the world. Like, you don't need to go to college to know that there's a big world out there, but I want to encourage them (my family) by becoming educated.

Hidden in this statement is the notion that through setting an example by achieving a bachelor's degree, family members will be inspired and come to realize that that higher education is a possibility.

Many students in this study expressed similar statements regarding the role of family legacy in influencing persistence which were similar to Schlossberg's (1981) notion that demographics and family characteristics are psychological resources that students use to 'move through' a transition. Many students in this study structured their career trajectory based on prior academic accomplishments of family members. In this study, legacy college students explicitly measured their ability to persist against accomplishments of family members. Even legacy students who did not enroll in higher education directly after high school believed that family legacy somehow made them capable and entitled to a bachelor's degree. Although John's mother graduated from Stanford, he did not earn a GED until the age of 23. He admitted that he always valued education even while working at fast food restaurants and knew one day he would go back to school, achieve his degree and make his mother proud.

Legacy students entering higher education directly after high school had an equally organic connection with following family traditions in seeking postsecondary degrees. Hagar, a legacy student and a chemistry major who balances school and an unplanned motherhood, never considered *not* earning a bachelor's degree. When asked about her parent's role in encouraging persistence, she noted, "I had no other choice. My mom has a master's and my dad has a bachelor's; he runs a successful business. My grandparents are educated and they (my family) just drilled that in our heads." Even through life's challenges; unanticipated pregnancies, delayed entry in higher education, and the death of a parent, racially ethnic minority transfer students persisted to bachelor's degree attainment through an imbedded value system.

Theme 2: Networking/career/self-awareness as transfer experiences. As previously noted, not all of the respondents entered community college with bachelor's degree aspirations, but yet they became encouraged or motivated to persist to degree attainment. Of the 20 respondents eight cited transfer experiences such as workshops, seminars, conferences, and learning projects during the pre-transfer environment as key factors that influenced persistence and transfer to the four-year institution. For many racially ethnic minority transfer students the community college is initially a developmental space that gets them acclimated to learning again. This creates a unique opportunity for two-year institutions to create an institutional environment that bolsters academic success and career growth. Racially ethnic minority transfer students oftentimes rely on institutional programs to expose them to the next phase of life, whether that may be transfer to the four-year or entry into the workforce. When asking a student if he declared a major at the two-year institution he offered, "My only intention (enrolling in the two-year) was to do something just anything; I didn't care what. I just wanted anything better than what I was doing." It was through exposure to workshops, seminars, conferences, and completing skills assessment tests that minority transfer students were able to align their career interest with ability and job opportunities.

One of the most compelling observations about this finding was the impact of skills assessment tests on minority transfer students' ability to determine a degree program. In this study, 17 of 20 participants changed their degree major at least once throughout the transfer pipeline. Of 17 students, eight entered the community college system with a declared major; however, four cited the use of skills assessments in determining their new major. Eight students cited completing a skills assessment test either in high school, during pre-transfer, or during the first year at the four-year institution. Martha initially selected biology as a major at the two-year institution. After transferring to the four-year institution, her advisor administered a skills assessment test. She learned that she would be better suited for a career in healthcare administration and thus switched her major. According to Martha,

I did an assessment and it shows what you were good at. So, my assessment showed I was good in leadership and healthcare. My advisor registered me for classes and told me that I needed to take this class before this class. She kinda gave me like a path. Like before you decide to leave your two-year, make sure you know what you want to do. I wish I would have taken that test then. Two years is enough time to think and decide what you want to do.

After completing a skills assessment test and determining an academic path, following that path was the pervasive outcome among all of the students citing this experience.

First-generation college students without access to mentors and role models or students who were unsure what career path to undertake, described exposure to workshops, conferences, seminars, and skills assessments as critical to persistence and transfer to the four-year institution. Role models, family members, mentors, and institutional resources that help students navigate higher education and provide opportunities that contribute to the professional development of students are considered social capital (Yosso, 2005). In this study, students remained committed to their academic goals and developed plans for their future through social capital building opportunities provided at both the two-year institution and the four-year institution. Respondents noted the importance of receiving institutional resources through word of mouth from peers, email blasts from the institutions, and referrals from faculty or instructors. One student from New York, described the impact of networking with peers on her decision to transfer to the four-year institution. She remarked,

I joined the Black Student Union, where we participated in conferences where we spoke and presented. I met all different kinds of people; so many people were going through the same thing, so I knew I wasn't doing it (school) by myself, so I had a lot of people I can relate to. Listening to those students talk about getting a specialist degree made me change my mind. I realized I was settling (with my major) and I could be more fulfilled if I invested a few more years into what I really wanted to do.

Successful integration and persistence among the student respondents were highly dependent upon exposure to workshops, events, seminars, and skills assessments that create career awareness and give minority transfer students the opportunity to evolve as a student, as well as integrate into their academic and social environment.

Research Question 3

Support was the theoretical construct for the following research question: What are the academic, student support services, and social integration experiences that enhance and sustain the transition of racially ethnic minority community college students into the four-year college environment? Participants' responses resulted in four themes that served to answer Research Question 3. These themes emerged from concepts identified during axial coding. Relevant concepts supporting themes were (a) learn how to learn, (b) transparency, (c) nurturing, (d) informal advising, and (e) engage with the natives. The resulting themes are the following: **Theme 1:** Metacognition is critical**; Theme 2:** Create transparent processes; **Theme 3:** Collaborative student-centered advising; and **Theme 4:** Incorporate peers in transfer and socio-academic activities.
Illustrated in Table 3 are concepts resulting from coding and their connection to the themes.

Table 3
RQ 3: Themes and Supporting Concepts

Themes	Open Categories	Axial Concepts
Metacognition is critical	How many hours to invest in studying How to take notes	Learning how to learn
Create transparent processes	Articulation programs Clear timeline to graduation	Transparency
Collaborative student-centered advising	Informal communication Open door policy Relatable Caring support Diverse perspectives	Nurturing Informal advising
Incorporate peers in transfer and socio-academic activities	Peer mentoring Peer-led orientation	Engage with the natives

Expressions that describe the open categories include how to take notes and instructions for how to learn the need for clear timelines for graduation, career trajectory, missed deadlines, and dropped from classes. Descriptions supporting informal communication were caring support, mattering, relatable, and diverse mentoring. The concept of peer mentoring was supported by the terms peer-led orientation, peer groups, and peer activities.

Support Construct

Factors that influence racially ethnic minority transfer student persistence depends on the level of support students receive to help overcome obstacles and challenges. Support refers to the amount, type, and function of support the person needs and receives during the transition. Supports should be measured by identifying supports that are stable across time, supports that are role dependent, and supports that change over time (Evans et al., 2010; Kahn, 1975; Schlossberg et al., 1995). According to Evans et al. (2010), the support phase in the Schlossberg transitional model can include intimate relationships, family units, networks of friends, institutions, and communities. Since this study sought to provide insight into the entire pipeline of the transfer experience, support was analyzed within the context of the sending/pre-transition environment (two-year institution) and the receiving/transition (four-year institution). In relationship to type, function, and amount; support within the theme of institutional practices to include academic advising, student services, and social integration was discussed. Research Question 3 sought to uncover this phenomenon.

Theme 1: Metacognition is critical. The majority of the student respondents felt their two-year institution did not prepare them for the rigors of the four-year institution. Minority transfer students believed the community college prepared students to take exams and not to think critically, which was a necessary skill for success at the four-year institution. Meanwhile, students also discussed the importance of learning this skill early, more specifically "during high school, but definitely by the first-year of community college if they wanted to be successful and graduate. Leviticus explained,

So traditional students, they're just doing the same routine; they are use to the same environment. So, when they go to their third year, it is easier and not as rigid. Transfer students could at least be aware the work is going to be different and rigorous.

We need seminars to teach students how to study and take notes. Also, an outline of how many hours do transfer students need to invest in studying and how to prepare for exams. Like if that class was in place students would know, like, if they have so many pages to read they could have a strategy to know how to study. Like a class or a mandatory seminar that students take to teach us, like how traditional students study, how they prepare for their exams, like how many hours do they invest, like what resources do they use.

Expectations for study time were often underestimated by racially ethnic minority transfer students and as a result, their grades suffered. In most instances, students were proactive and relied on their own knowledge as an only source of support in understanding how to prepare for the rigors of bachelor's degree attainment. Esther said,

Coming from high school I used index cards to study, repetition worked for me. At the community college classes are a lot smaller and the teachers tell you what to study. I knew I needed to start studying when I couldn't answer questions. I used a lot of trial and error. I would copy notes that I took in class, study groups, flash cards all of that helped.

Joseph admitted to feeling inferior due to limited experience with developing cognitive skills. He offered,

I had been out of school for so long; I didn't know how to think. I thought that the native students, the way that they learn, you know, that they knew everything! They were so smart and this and that. I had to learn that I can learn just like they can learn. In most instances, understanding how to develop cognitive skills in order to meet academic demands was critical, needed, but not learned at the two-year institution. Imbedded in these sentiments is the notion that developing cognitive thinking skills, early in a racially ethnic minority transfer student's academic career, prepares students for the academic rigor of the four-year institution which is oftentimes more intense and demanding than the two-year institution. Infusing skills during the pre-transfer environment that create an understanding of what minority transfer students are to expect and how to prepare academically at the four-year institution was a reoccurring theme among the student respondents.

Theme 2: Create transparent processes. In order to transition successfully, every respondent spoke about the importance of receiving accurate information from their sending and receiving institution. During the pre-transfer phase students talked about inaccurate advisement, lack of clarity regarding course selection and lack of personal attention during meetings with advisors.

Students attributed these negative experiences to poor outcomes such as taking unnecessary classes, delaying time to degree, and wasting valuable financial aid. Some students felt that advisors at the two-year institutions could have been more hands-on, available, and knowledgeable about course selections that lead to a degree. Joseph shared, "I didn't get much advising at the two-year than I did at the four-year. That's why I was taking a lot of unnecessary classes. I wasted all that time and couldn't get classes transferred for my degree."

Students who had positive experiences during pre-transfer cited transparent processes such as the use of articulation agreements as critical to degree attainment. Esther faced the challenge of taking remedial classes at the two-year institution but believes this factor shortened her time to degree and contributed to degree attainment. She explained,

Tennessee has the Tennessee Transfer Pathways Program that helps students and that is something that my advisor told me about. If it wasn't for that program my classes wouldn't have transferred so I wouldn't have been able to become a junior. That was most important but that was at the two-year institution. My advisor worked with me because you know it is hard for your classes to transfer, so my advisor helped me with that. They made sure that I came to my meetings on a semester basis to track me to make sure I was on path to getting that degree. She also checked to make sure I applied in time to transfer to the four-year institution.

Rachel also attended community college in Tennessee and selected a major before enrolling in the two-year institution. Through academic advisement from her instructor, Rachel was informed of the Tennessee Pathways Program and credits this factor as the reason all of her credits transferred. She adds, "they [the four-year institution] accepted all of my credits. I completed in four years."

Not all of the student respondents attended a two-year institution in Tennessee. This study represents minority transfer students attending community colleges in eight different states. Several students in states other than Tennessee noted positive experiences with advisors at the sending institution who were knowledgeable and proactive about developing a transfer agreement with the receiving institution. Once Bathsheba, a student from New York, decided to transfer to an institution in Tennessee, her advisor contacted the school to ensure that courses would align with Site B's program requirements. This student offered that her transition to the new institution was seamless. The advisor gave her a detailed path, which created an effective transition.

Data analysis revealed that students who did not utilize articulation agreements or a transparent pathway had a longer time to degree, a difficult time getting course credits accepted, and noted an unpleasant experience with advisors at the two-year institution. Leah also attended community college in Tennessee, but had no knowledge of the Tennessee Pathways Program and did not develop a relationship with her advisors or instructors at the two-year institution. She explained,

I went to Southwest and I was informed to take classes that I didn't really need. I didn't get the help that I deserved. I met with my advisor maybe twice. I went to talk to my advisor and she advised me to take certain courses, but when I got to [Site A] they asked why did you take these classes; some of the classes you shouldn't be taking; and I told them that I was advised to take these classes.

Students placed a strong importance on transparency during the post-transfer process as well. Respondents noted they felt overwhelmed and confused by institutional bureaucracy, offering that they had difficulty registering for classes, meeting unspoken deadlines, and understanding unofficial practices at the four-year institution. One student commented that the native students knew to pre-register to get the good classes but no one showed transfer students the "ropes" which meant seats in key classes were oftentimes unavailable to transfer students because all the seats were pre-filled by native students. Students were not aware that policies and practices were different at their new institution and met challenges as result. One student assumed the financial aid process was the same as the two-year institution and lost her financial aid for failure to meet deadlines mandated but not formally expressed by her new school. Students actually expressed more difficulty with navigating institutional bureaucracy than meeting academic demands during post-transfer. Adam believed,

I think that no matter how many credits that you have transferring into something [an institution], you should have a class or support there (in place); like hey, this is how [Site B] operates. So, someone [needs] to show me how to do those little small things like registering for class. How does FAFSFA work at least that first semester and then students can be better situated.

Theme 3: Collaborative student-centered advising. The theoretical framework in this study involved examining transitional supports that are stable across time, role dependent, and supports that change over time (Evans et. al, 1988; Schlossberg et al., 1995). As previously mentioned, student respondents utilized the role of family members as a form of support in making the initial decision to enroll in the community college.

However, as students matriculated through the community college, a role shift occurred. The role of family members in providing academic support and advising seemed to shift to institutional support offered at the two-year institution. Findings revealed that advisors could be found in the role of instructors, faculty, and staff members. Students enjoyed the autonomy of selecting their own advisor and based their selection due to the advisor's ability to provide personal attention and an open door policy. Leviticus, an international student, credited his psychology instructor with influencing his degree choice and providing transparency of what to expect as far as time commitment and rigor within certain degree majors. Initially, Leviticus selected music as a major and offered, "My mom really pushed me with focusing on music as a career which is amazing, like a mother pushing you to follow your dream!" However, as Leviticus matriculated through the two-year institution that role shifted and he began to utilize his instructor as an advisor and mentor during the pre-transfer environment. Leviticus explained,

My advisor and I had a really wonderful relationship; she was young. I think she had just graduated, so she really influenced me. After each class, I took so many of her classes; she taught all the behavior classes. We talked almost after each class because she had stuff she wanted to ask me, because she was interested in the run of genocide and wanted to know the healing process of my country. I took psychology from her and it was something that I just loved, like I love philosophy and I love ideas and mental health properties. She told us the reality of doing, like 3,000 unpaid hours to be a mental health counselor so I thought, I'm not that young first of all, I didn't think I would be able to do psychology. I kept thinking, if I was wise, like business would help me manage and invest my money better. So, I chose business since it's so broad and music is such a gamble. She helped me get on track with what classes I needed to take. We developed a great relationship.

In this study the theme of an informal collaborative advising approach extended to the post-transfer institution and continued throughout graduation. As students matriculated to courses that concentrated on a particular field of study, they noted the importance of a collaborative approach to advising. Many students felt that they benefited more from selecting instructors in their specific department to assist with advising that being assigned an advisor by the institution. Rachel, a STEM student offered that in her major, advising across departments is an unofficial practice that is critical for graduating. She added that when she initially enrolled in the four-year institution school, her advisor told her to take classes that she had already completed at the two-year institution. She elaborated,

One guy that's running the entire biology department doesn't know everything off the top of his head and I can't blame him; he's looking at the entire curriculum and does not know where to place you. In the STEM building we are very sheltered; you have several teachers that work with you to make sure you are on the right path to graduate. All of the respondents felt that a successful transition experience centered around a collaboration from faculty members, instructors, and advisors who offered flexible office hours and the ability to provide advising that met the individual needs of the student. Students expressing displeasure with advising at the two-year institution seemed to learn from prior experiences. Schlossberg (1988) believed that previous experience with a similar transition is a factor in conquering a transition. Stephanie had an unpleasant advising relationship at the two-year institution and recommended,

Find you an advisor or request one. I had to request mine; she was my instructor; I liked the way she paid attention to detail. She's done phenomenal. It is up to you to develop a one-on-one relationship with your teacher. Stick close to your advisor, become acquainted with your teachers, take advantage of office hours, and know the grievance process. Just in case you are having a problem.

Theme 4: Incorporate peers in transfer and socio-academic activities. While minority transfer students strive to effectively transition into their new learning environment, they struggle with being labeled a "new" student and being unfamiliar with their new environment. Racially ethnic minority transfer students described participating in activities such as formal transfer orientations, Transfer Tuesdays, campus cook outs, and numerous peer-led activities as a means to integrate academically as well as socially. Incorporating peers into these activities was a pervasive theme among all of the respondents. An important part of adjusting to the transition among this group was the need to feel "connected." Respondents expressed a strong sense of belonging due to cultural connections from peers and staff.

Many students who participated in orientation activities commented that including peers who had also transferred into the institution gave them an opportunity to have someone to relate to and who could identify with their struggle as a transfer student. Whether respondents were paired with transfer students or native students to assist with integration, the respondents discussed that incorporating peers created a sense of belonging and instant connection. Respondents were concerned with "who are the best teachers to take classes from" and "where is the bookstore located." One student commented, "the native students never bought books from the campus bookstore; they shopped on Amazon to save money."

The majority of the respondents believed the initial orientation should be formal to include a campus-led tour by campus administrators. Respondents desired socio-academic transfer activities to function informally, continuously, and peer-based. However, not all students participated in orientation during initial enrollment. One student missed orientation and described her experience on the new campus in these words: "I had to fiend for myself, I had to find out everything on my own." Transfer shock and the fear of integration seemed to be alleviated through continuous peer-led activities that targeted the specific needs of the minority of the transfer student population.

Research Question 4

The strategies phase provided understanding of the question, How can institutions structure programs, policies, and student support services to bridge the achievement gap among racially ethnic minority transfer students? The answers to RQ4 were captured in themes resulting from the following concepts extracted from 20 participants' responses: (a) Engage in self-talk, (b) sacrifice and prioritize, (c) join connect groups. and (d) utilize student learning centers. From these concepts two themes emerged from the data and reflect the perceptions of the sample: Theme 1. Take ownership; Theme 2. Culture is critical.   Table 4 summarizes the data analysis iterations resulting in these two themes.

Table 4
RQ 4: Themes and Supporting Concepts

Themes	Open Categories	Axial Concepts
Take ownership	Positive affirmations	Engage in self talk Sacrifice and prioritize Join connect groups
Culture is critical	Peer instruction Greek organizations	Peer-centered student learning centers

Concepts leading to these themes had expanded or specific meanings associated with the open categories. In addition to the roles of peer instruction and Greek organizations as critical dimensions of their culture, religious organizations, and other culture-sharing groups were important. Such groups as urban community, health awareness, academic and gender-specific support groups were identified. Also, athletic affiliation was noted as important to culture.

Strategies Construct

The strategies phase of Schlossberg's Transition Theory acknowledges the students' responsibility in developing coping skills to conquer the transition. Four modes of coping are usually initiated: (a) information seeking, (b) direct action, (c) inhibition of action, and (d) intrapsychic behavior (Goodman et. al, 2006). This phase can be viewed in three categories of coping, (a) strategies that seek to modify the situation, (b) strategies that control the meaning of the problem, and (c) strategies that manage the stress in the aftermath (Evans et al., 2010).

Theme 1: Take ownership. In response to overcoming academic challenges and modifying negative situations, students seemed to cope through information seeking behaviors and intrapsychic behavior. During the pre-transfer environment students heavily utilized intrapsychic behavior in the form of "self-talk." Student's controlled the meaning of their problems by convincing themselves that the negative situation was not as bad as it seemed. In describing 'self-talk' used to persist through community college, John told himself, "that at least if I have a degree, I could have a normal life and not some teenage job." After three years at the community college, Stephanie believed that "employers wouldn't value an associate's degree" and chose to persist to bachelor's degree attainment because she decided, "I've already devoted three years to this and I have a ton of student loans. I may as well go on and finish my bachelor's degree."

Although *ownership* strategies transferred over to the four-year environment, students appeared to depend on institutional services to cope with challenges at the four-year institution. Student respondents cited the use of learning centers that offered peer instruction to assist with developing study habits and understanding coursework, as a strategy to persist to degree attainment.

Minority transfer students viewed this strategy as an asset and critical in bridging the achievement gap between themselves and native students. Stephanie described the interaction at the Student Learning Center,

You have student tutors who are really good in a specific major to help you. These students are on work study. They break down information; just in case you don't understand your teacher, you can identify with one of your peers. You don't feel like they are talking at you; it is broken down in the level that you understand it. They have people in place just for math or science and then we have a writing center. It's definitely a great place for transfers to start.

At some point in their academic journey student respondents reported taking direct action in making changes in study habits and used phrases such as, "I had to buckle down and study more." Making sacrifices and prioritizing was evident with one student discussing her decision to eliminate co-curricular activities. Tamar stated, "The band took up too much of my time, so I couldn't study as much as I wanted to. I had to study more. Leaving the band helped me tremendously." Taking direct action by making sacrifices and remaining focused allowed minority transfer students to take control of their problems. Students expressed a great deal of resiliency and utilized previous struggles throughout the transfer process to persist to graduation. Schlossberg (1988) believed that a previous experience with a similar transition is a factor in adapting to change and conquering a transition, which is aligned with findings in this study. By comparing past obstacles to current challenges, students were able to quickly draw from past strategies to resolve problems before they became detrimental to bachelor's degree attainment. Esther said,

You may have plans but plans can change. I had a plan to go to the four-year university but it changed, and I had to make the best of it. I got what I wanted in the long run and that was to transfer to the four-year. I encountered barriers but I had tenacity and I look forward to graduating in May within the original four-year timeframe. I broke down barriers to get this education. I would not take no for an answer. Although I didn't want an associate's degree, it was actually a motivation for me.

Theme 2: Culture is critical. The student learning center seemed to not only bridge the academic gap, but also established social integration as well. The theme of culture and social integration resurfaced throughout discussions related to strategies that enhanced persistence in multiple ways. From the moment students step foot on campus at the four-year institution they admit to a bit of shock as being labeled a "new" student and being unfamiliar with their new environment. Attending an HBCU alleviated these feelings. John described his experience of transferring from a community college in Colorado:

You would think coming from Colorado, [with a] Black population less that 1% and then coming to South Memphis, that it would be such a culture shock. The two-year community college had all the bells and whistles, nice greenery and electronics. You see, they still do not have anything on this institution because it doesn't matter unless you feel comfortable with yourself. The sense of community and family here is second to none. Culture is obviously huge, just huge. If you have students on campus and they don't have anyone that can relate to them, they're going to have a really hard time adjusting.

Connect groups also provided racially ethnic minority transfer students with the tools to manage stress in the aftermath at the four-year institution. In relationship to timing, students noted that connect groups were more important during the middle of the transfer process. Students identified connect groups as their connection to the community, their connection to fellow classmates, and as a source of empowerment. Students categorized connect groups as Greek organization, social clubs, culture-sharing groups, and religious affiliations. Regardless of how racially ethnic minority transfer students labeled the group, the impact of the group created persistence, support, and resiliency when faced with challenges in transitioning and persisting to bachelor's degree attainment.

Conclusion

These conclusions are the result of one-on-one interviews, focus groups, and demographic questionnaires combined with implications from research and best practice literature for transitioning from two-year to four-year institutions. Findings from this study conclude that institutions can interrupt the drop out cycle of students who are labeled as the forgotten group on America's college campuses. Through attention to persistence needs of the transfer students, graduation with bachelor and above degrees can become a most common and timely event for the racially ethnic minority transfer student. The results suggest that degree attainment can be made less difficult with the reduction of bureaucracy that students encounter in following processes for completion, increased transparency, ensuring accurate advisement, and imparting clear and well-defined expectations.

It was important to utilize all forms of data collection methods used in this study in order to fully understand the lived experience and perspective of each student respondent. Their voices have spoken of challenges including financial and ill advisement. Understandings that support varied networking opportunities, learner-centered advising, and skill assessments were pronounced in the results of this study and undergird the need for considering their value in strategic planning for transitional services. Concluded from the results is that racially ethnic minority transfer students, similar to students of other ethnic groups, have basic needs that must be met in order for them to persist. Among these needs is motivation. Because of the characteristics of many racially ethnic minority transfer students -- financially disadvantage, skill deficient, and lack adequate knowledge of the processes included in attaining a bachelor's degree-- racially ethnic minority transfer students may require more direct strategies designed to inform and motivate them to persist. This recommendation is consistent with the literature revealing that racially ethnic minority transfer students are more likely to excel in environments where their culture is recognized. This research study informs the literature related to college persistence, retention, transfer students, and students of color through the voices of racially ethnic minority transfer students.

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