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Examining How Vertical Transfer Students Make Sense Of Their Transition Through The Transfer Admission And Enrollment Process During Covid-19

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EXAMINING HOW VERTICAL TRANSFER STUDENTS MAKE SENSE OF THEIR TRANSITION THROUGH THE TRANSFER ADMISSION AND ENROLLMENT PROCESS DURING COVID-19

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to all those doctoral students pursuing a degree while working full-time. Finishing is possible! Just keep going. One foot in front of the other. Writing that one sentence or paragraph at a time IS progress! You've got this!

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Abstract

Students transfer from one institution of higher education to another for many different reasons, and students' decision-making processes and enrollment patterns can be complex. This, coupled with a declining postsecondary enrollment nationally and the number of high school graduates leveling off, has forced the transfer admission offices to think creatively as they work to help fill an emerging enrollment gap and maintain current enrollment levels. This program evaluation took place at Liberal Arts University (LAU), a small, primarily undergraduate, liberal arts university in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States and used a case study approach. The theoretical framework that supported this study was composed the negative or deficit narrative around transfer (Green, 2006; Harper 2010), Schlossberg's (1981) transition theory, and Weick's (1995) sensemaking. To answer the evaluation questions, a qualitative approach was used, which incorporated focus groups, individual interviews, observational data, and a digital and material review. While each transfer student had their own individual experiences throughout the recruitment, admission, and enrollment processes, the themes they identified can help administrators to better understand the typical experience of this student population. The first major finding included understanding the transfer student journey with themes including (a) preparation for transfer and associated adjustments; (b) strategies for the transition and beyond; (c) expectations or obligations students had outside of the classroom; and (d) engagement on campus. The second finding was the transfer student concerns and negative experiences. The themes included (a) on-campus admission tours; (b) the overall structure of academic advising for new transfer students and the experience with academic advisors; (c) full-time student expectations; (d) on-campus housing; and (e) new transfer student orientation.

Keywords: vertical transfer, sensemaking, deficit narrative, transition theory, COVID-19

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The push for degree completion and creating a highly skilled workforce has been a focus in the United States over the past decade. In his 2009 address to a joint session of Congress, President Barack Obama stated:

> In a global economy where the most valuable skill you can sell is your knowledge, a good education is no longer just a pathway to opportunity, it is a prerequisite. Right now, three-quarters of the fastest growing occupations require more than a high school diploma. And yet, just over half of our citizens have that level of education. We have one of the highest high school dropout rates of any industrialized nation, and half of the students who begin college never finish. (para. 61-62)

To close these completion gaps and improve outcomes, higher education institutions have shined a spotlight on improving student success measures such as graduation rates, retention rates, and admission standards (Adelman, 2004; Kuh et al., 2005; Roksa & Calcagno, 2008; Seidman, 2012). The population of transfer students offers a way to think of filling enrollment gaps left behind by plateauing high school graduation rates (Bransberger & Michelau, 2016).

A good economy has a negative impact on postsecondary enrollment (Romano & Palmer, 2016), as high school graduates prefer to enter the workforce to earn money if jobs are readily available instead of heading to college and paying a high tuition bill (Chen, 2018). A measure of the status of the U.S. economy can be found in the unemployment data provided by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. In 2010, unemployment was as high as 9.9% but began to steadily decrease to as low as 3.5% in February 2020. Then, in March of 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic

dramatically impacted unemployment, with rates skyrocketing to as high as 14.7% (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020). Even with the sudden onset of high unemployment rates, the U.S. has continued to see postsecondary enrollment decline in the fall of 2020 (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2020), thus continuing, or even exacerbating the uphill enrollment battle higher education institutions face.

All of the factors discussed have increased the pressure placed on 4-year institutions to make their freshman class enrollment goals each year as the traditional market of high school graduates plateaus. One increasingly popular solution for campus admission offices is targeting specific student populations such as non-traditional adult learners, which is estimated to be about 95 million potential students nationally (Blumenstyk, 2018). Another solution is utilizing the transfer student population to help fill enrollment gaps, which has placed increased pressure on transfer admission and enrollment offices.

Understanding more about the transfer student process and the student experience is important to help 4-year institutions support students, to aid in increasing college enrollments, and, ultimately, to increase student success and bolster graduation rates. Gandara et al. (2012) point out that a "significant part of the transfer equation is the 'pull' factors—the degree to which the four-year colleges and universities attract and admit community college transfer students, and have the capacity to do so" (p. 6). In this study, I sought to better understand the student experiences of the transfer student admission process at Liberal Arts University (LAU), a small, liberal arts university in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States. I focused on how the LAU transfer narrative supports students in the transfer process, how students make sense of the process and their experiences, and how transfer students experience the transition to a 4-year institution. This research provides valuable insight to stakeholders to improve the transfer

admission process and experience, increase the admissions "pull" of LAU, and increase overall transfer student success.

Statement of the Problem

Several contextual problems exist that prompted the need for this program evaluation. First, students transfer for many different reasons, and students' decision-making processes and enrollment patterns can be complex (Adelman, 2006; Bahr, 2009, 2012; Handel & Williams, 2012; Hossler et al., 2012). Second, there has been declining college enrollment nationally (Chen, 2018; National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2020), coupled with the number of high school graduates leveling off and even declining (Bransberger & Michelau, 2016; U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System [IPEDS], 2021a). Therefore, transfer admission offices at 4-year colleges and universities are expected to fill the enrollment gap to maintain current enrollment levels. The recruitment and enrollment of transfer students is becoming increasingly important to schools and their leadership. Finally, because college enrollments are declining, many universities seek to increase the number of transfer students they enroll; however, university leaders do not always understand the complexity of the transfer process and the challenges and barriers in place for students seeking to transfer (Marling, 2013).

As noted, postsecondary enrollment has been declining across the United States over the past several years. Between 2015 and 2019, postsecondary enrollment has dropped 1.75% (see Table 1). This drop translates to a loss of 350,705 students that could have potentially enrolled in college directly after high school. An even more extreme trend has been seen across the state in which LAU is located, where postsecondary enrollment dropped 2.23% between 2015 and 2019

(IPEDS, 2021b). Initial reports from fall 2020 show that national undergraduate enrollment is down 8.1% from fall 2019 (Causey et al., 2020).

Table 1

Fall Term Postsecondary Student Enrollment in the United States and the State

Fall Term	National Enrollment	% Change Since Previous Year	State Enrollment[a]	% Change Since Previous Year[b]
2019	19,637,499	-0.07	557,000	0.91
2018	19,651,412	-0.64	552,000	-0.36
2017	19,778,151	-0.35	554,000	-0.54
2016	19,846,904	-0.71	557,000	-2.28
2015	19,988,204		570,000	

Note. National data adapted from U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS, 2021b). State data adapted from the state's higher education coordinating body.
[a] Data have been rounded to mask the state.
[b] Calculations based on rounded data.

Even more jarring is the enrollment drop at the community colleges within the state in which LAU is located (see Table 2). Over the past 6 years, community college enrollment has dropped 17% within the state with some community colleges decreasing as much as 40% in that same period. This decrease in community college enrollment further decreases the pool from which LAU can recruit transfer students. With fewer students enrolling in postsecondary education across the country and across the state, colleges and universities are feeling the pressure to meet existing enrollment goals and fill the enrollment gap that is left while recruiting from an increasingly smaller pool of applicants.

Table 2

Community College Enrollment in the State

Fall Term	Enrollment[a]	% Change Since Previous Year[b]
2020	153,000	-4.58
2019	160,000	-2.15
2018	164,000	-3.01
2017	169,000	-2.33
2016	173,000	-3.35
2015	179,000	-3.19
2014	185,000	

Note. Data adapted from the state's higher education coordinating body.
[a] Data have been rounded to mask the state.
[b] Calculations based on rounded data.

Contributing to the decline in postsecondary enrollment is the leveling-off and the expected future decline in the number of high school graduates through 2023 (Bransberger & Michelau, 2016). As shown in Table 3, between 2014 and 2020, the number of high school graduates nationally has slowly plateaued (IPEDS, 2021a). The state in which LAU is located highlights a similar trend and a more recent decline. Although there has been an increase in high school graduates until 2020, there have not been year-over-year increases as seen earlier in the period. In 2016, Bransberger and Michelau stated that "the pending national plateau is largely fueled by a decline in the White student population and counterbalanced by growth in the number of non-White public school graduates—Hispanics and Asian/Pacific Islanders in particular" (p. 3). With numbers of high school graduates leveling off, freshman admission offices at colleges and universities are pulling from a decreasing pool with fewer prospective students to recruit, admit, and enroll. This scenario is certainly the case at LAU.

Table 3

High School Graduates in the United States and the State

Academic Year	Projected No. of Graduates Nationally[a]	% Change **Since** Previous Year	No. of Graduates in the State[b, c]	% Change **Since** Previous Year[d]
2020-21	3,662,860	.30	92,200	-1.39
2019-20	3,652,130	-.62	93,500	0.75
2018-19	3,674,130	.30	92,800	0.22
2017-18	3,663,530	1.70	92,600	3.23
2016-17	3,603,550	.82	89,700	-0.55
2015-16	3,574,730	1.26	90,200	3.80
2014-15	3,530,250		86,900	

Note. National data adapted from the U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS, 2021a). State data adapted from the state's higher education coordinating body.

[a] As reported by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). An NCES graduate is defined as a graduate from a public or private day school program and excludes graduate who earn a high school equivalency certificate.

[b] As reported by the state's department of education. A graduate is defined as a student who earned a standard diploma, advanced studies diploma, other diploma, general educational development (GED), or certificate of completion.

[c] Data have been rounded to mask the state.

[d] Calculations based on rounded data.

LAU had experienced its own decrease in enrollment for the past several years. In the fall of 2014, LAU reached its peak in full-time enrollment of 5,096, but since then, there has been a steady decline, as noted in Table 4. It is important to note that during the fall 2020 term, enrollment dropped significantly and can be attributed to the COVID-19 global pandemic which began in the United States in March 2020 (Causey et al., 2020). COVID-19 significantly impacted recruitment and enrollment efforts for the Fall 2020 cohort. This proved to be an additional problem that this study ultimately worked to acknowledge and understand regarding the influence on transfer patterns.

Table 4

Liberal Arts University Undergraduate Fall Student Enrollment

Fall Term	No. of Students[a]	% Change **Since** Previous Year[b]
2020	4,760	-1.65
2019	4,840	-.41
2018	4,860	-1.82
2017	4,950	.41
2016	4,930	-2.38
2015	5,050	-.98
2014	5,100	

Note. Data adapted from Liberal Arts University's institutional research website.
[a] Data have been rounded to mask the institution.
[b] Calculations based on rounded data.

Program Description and Context

LAU is a small liberal arts and sciences university in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States. In fall of 2020, the undergraduate enrollment was 4,758 students and only an additional 110 students enrolled in graduate-level programs. Each academic year, the university enrolls approximately 215 undergraduate transfer students across the fall and spring semesters. The office that oversees transfer admission (referred to as the "Transfer Admission Office" throughout this study) is within the university division responsible for enrollment and student success. It is a small office with four staff members and manages several other essential enrollment functions such as transferring in all outside credit, managing student visas, and making residency decisions for transfers and current students.

The transfer admission process and new transfer student transition were the focus of this program evaluation study. The Transfer Admission Office aims to provide a streamlined and efficient process that is clear and consistent for all students. This office oversees and walks each transfer student through the entire process from recruiting, applying, accepting, and enrolling at

LAU. This experience includes the transferring in of all credit at the point of admission, the creation of initial class schedules for the student's first semester at LAU, and the assignment of academic advisors. The goal is to serve as the primary point of contact and as a resource for transfer students through the end of their first week of classes. Ideally, the Transfer Admission Office presents transfer students with a "one stop shop" for all things transfer.

Overview of the Evaluation Approach

This study followed a qualitative research design with program evaluation being the chosen methodology due to its usefulness in providing feedback about a program to be used by stakeholders in decision-making processes (Mertens & Wilson, 2012). I used a case study approach to program evaluation because I was studying a unique case in a specific context. This approach provided "a mechanism for gaining understanding about the day-to-day activities of a program as a way of uncovering hidden meanings" (Yin, 2018, p. 143) and allowed me to answer the program evaluation questions.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study consisted of three main elements including: the negative or deficit narrative surrounding the transfer student population and process (Green, 2006; Harper, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1990, 2012), transition theory (Schlossberg, 1981), and sensemaking (Weick, 1995). Each lens of this framework helps to better understand the research problem and research questions.

The transfer student process is often described as messy and complicated (Handel, 2013; Handel & Williams, 2012; Hossler et al., 2012; Xu et al., 2018), and the transfer student population is all too often depicted in a negative light. Instead of focusing on the positives that this student population brings to a college or university setting, many researchers and educational

leaders focus on the negatives and why these students are not successful. Therefore, with this study, I aimed to understand the discourse present and flip the negative or deficit narrative toward a more positive one to understand what makes students successful.

Transferring from one college or university to another can certainly be considered a moment of transition, so I incorporated Schlossberg's (1981) transition theory into the theoretical framework for this study. Schlossberg's (1981) transition theory is composed of resources she refers to as the four *S*'s: situation, self, support, and strategies. These four resources are used to determine how an individual will cope with and navigate the transition they are experiencing (Schlossberg, 2008). By working to understand the transition experienced by the transfer students in this study, I aim to positively inform the transfer process at LAU.

The final element of the theoretical framework for this study is the concept of sensemaking by Weick et al. (2005), which focuses on change and how individuals make meaning of their experiences and circumstances. Researchers then organize, analyze, and label these moments to make sense of an event. Examining transfer student transitions through sensemaking helps to better understand the transfer student population and their experiences, ease the impact of the change they are experiencing, and ultimately help to understand and change the deficit narrative into a more positive one. Specific details of this theoretical framework are addressed in Chapter 2.

Purpose of the Evaluation

The type of evaluation that was conducted was a formative case study program evaluation. Mathison (2005) defines this form of evaluation as one "conducted during the development or delivery of a program or product with intention of providing feedback to improve the evaluand" and "focuses on determining whether a program is unfolding as planned,

identifying obstacles or unexpected opportunities, and identifying midcourse corrections that will increase the likelihood of the program's success" (p. 160). For this study, I conducted the research during the delivery of the program, but the participants were students who were recently admitted and first attended LAU within the prior academic year or term. This approach provided the most recent snapshot of these students' experiences, barriers, assumptions, and opportunities and allowed for feedback to make changes before or as the next cohort of students were experiencing the transfer admission process and transition at LAU during COVID-19.

Focus of the Evaluation

The focus of this evaluation was to better understand the transfer student experiences of students going through the transfer admission process and new transfer student transition at LAU. I focused my research on new vertical transfer students who had transferred to LAU from in-state community colleges. The program evaluation focused on the transfer student narrative, experiences, and sensemaking to identify barriers and opportunities within the process. By understanding these areas, changes can be made to improve practices at LAU and ultimately increase transfer student success.

Evaluation Questions

The evaluation question and sub-questions for this study help to better understand the vertical transfer student narrative and experiences surrounding the transfer admission and transition process. These questions help to provide guidance in future transfer admission decisions such as enrollment goals, recruitment planning, and process improvement. The main evaluation questions were:

1. What is the vertical transfer narrative that helps to support students in their transfer process?

a. How do vertical transfer students experience the transfer process and their transition to LAU?
b. How do vertical transfer students make sense of the transfer process and transition to LAU?

Definitions of Terms

The following terms are used in this study. Terms used interchangeably are noted and citations are included to help provide readers with additional sources of information.

- *Formative evaluation:* "An evaluation conducted during the development or delivery of a program or product, with the intention of providing feedback to improve the evaluation and; it may also focus on the program plans or designs" (Mertens & Wilson, 2012, p. 559).
- *Transfer student*: A student that has graduated from high school, attended a postsecondary institution and is in the process of transferring to another post-secondary institution. For the purposes of this study, a transfer student has attended either a community college or 4-year institution prior to transferring to LAU and may or may not have already earned a credential such as a certificate or associates degree.
    - *Lateral transfer:* A student that has graduated from high school and completes college-level work at either a community college or 4-year institution prior to transferring to another institution at the same level (community college or 4-year institution; Bahr, 2009; Hossler et al., 2012). For example, a student could transfer from one community college to another community college or from one 4-year institution to another 4-year institution. This type of transfer is also referred to as horizonal or parallel transfer (Bahr, 2009).

    - *Vertical transfer:* A student who completes college-level work at a community college (also referred to as a junior college or 2-year college), and then transfers to a senior, 4-year institution (Bahr, 2009; Causey et al., 2020; Townsend, 2001). This type of transfer can also be referred to as an "upward transfer." In addition, the student may or may not have earned an associate degree prior to transfer (Bahr, 2009; Causey et al., 2020).
- *Native student:* A student who enrolls at a college/university as a first-time freshman without attending another college/university during a regular term (fall/spring) prior to their enrollment. A native student may or may not have dual enrollment, advanced placement, international baccalaureate, or Cambridge credit prior to enrollment as a first-time freshman.
- *Community college*: "Any not-for-profit institution regionally accredited to award the associate in arts or the associate in science as its highest degree" (Cohen et al., 2014, p. 5). Other terms for a community college include junior college, branch campus, and city or county college. Increasingly, the term "2-year college" is not in use, as many community colleges now offer 4-year degrees, and most students take longer than 2 years to complete their curriculum (Cohen et al., 2014).
- *Transfer student capital:* "Indicates how community college students accumulate knowledge in order to negotiate the transfer process, such as understanding credit transfer agreements between colleges, grade requirements for admission into a desired major, and course prerequisites" (Laanan et al., 2010, p. 177).

Summary

As postsecondary enrollment continues to decline and the number of high school graduates levels off, colleges and universities need to think creatively to solve the resulting enrollment gaps. The purpose of this program evaluation case study was to evaluate the vertical transfer admission and transition process while working to better understand the vertical transfer student narrative and experiences surrounding the admission process and associated transition to LAU during COVID-19. The evaluation questions addressed how students make sense of their experiences, how they experience the transition to LAU, and the narrative present throughout the process. In the chapters that follow, I detail the scholarly literature and how it related to this study (Chapter 2), the program evaluation methodology with a case study approach (Chapter 3), the findings of this study (Chapter 4), and conclude with a discussion, conclusions, recommendations for further study, and next steps (Chapter 5).

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

This chapter provides a review of the literature relevant to this study. The first section of the literature review centers on the community college context, including a brief history of the founding and evolution of community colleges, common terms used in this sector of higher education, and an overview of the contested mission of these institutions. Next, I discuss the experiences of transfer students with a focus on the history and current state of the transfer population. I also explain the many types of transfer pathways students take and why students choose to transfer. Finally, student success and enrollment are discussed with an emphasis on defining what that means for transfer students and higher education institutions, both community colleges and 4-year.

In the final section of this literature review, I expand on the theoretical framework of this study presented in chapter one. As noted, the theoretical framework was built on the deficit narrative surrounding the transfer population (Green, 2006; Harper, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1990, 2012), transition theory (Schlossberg, 1981), and the idea of sensemaking (Weick, 1995) and how students make meaning of their transfer experiences and transition. This study is rooted in program evaluation because of its "focus on real-world issues of importance" to the evaluator (Mertens & Wilson, 2012, p. 3). The intention of this program evaluation was to better understand the transfer student process at LAU and how students experience that process.

Community Colleges

There is a paucity of scholarly research on the community college and its students relative to 4-year contexts, but in the past decade or so there has been heightened attention to

this sector of higher education (Obama, 2009; U.S. Department of Labor, 2017). The push for degree completion and creating a highly skilled workforce became a focus of the Obama Administration in 2009. Since then, community colleges have been a focus to help push this agenda forward (Obama, 2009). All eyes have also been on community colleges since 2009 with the passing of the Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College and Career Training (TAACCCT) grant program. Between 2010 and 2018, this U.S. Department of Labor program invested 1.9 billion into community colleges to address an ever-changing workforce by recruiting workers who needed training and building new workforce development programs for in-demand fields (U.S. Department of Labor, 2017). Before these initiatives and throughout the history of higher education in the United States, community colleges have generally been ignored because the focus remained heavily on traditional 4-year research universities (Cohen et al., 2014; Hutcheson, 1999), even though nearly half of all undergraduates attend a community college at some point in their college career (Baldwin, 2017).

Community colleges in the United States first appeared at the beginning of the twentieth century as the demand for higher education grew across the United States. The early community colleges, such as Joliet Junior College in Illinois, were first accredited by their sister universities (Cohen et al., 2014). There were many reasons for the initial rise of community colleges, including an increase in the number of high school graduates and a demand for access to higher education. As the number of high school graduates skyrocketed, community colleges were viewed as the answer to this demand for higher education since universities were not interested in expanding their enrollments. In fact, in the early 1900s, many universities were trying to eliminate their burden of delivering the freshman and sophomore year curriculums in hopes the

community colleges would fill that gap. Thus, the community colleges were helping to satisfy multiple higher education needs (Cohen et al., 2014).

The desire for an individual to increase their social mobility and the overall affordability of community colleges also helped the expansion and long-term success of community colleges. Many students entering college were and are still doing so to get a better job and ultimately increase their human capital. Moving up the social ladder is the goal for many students. In addition, the affordable costs of community colleges allow these students to do so with less of a financial burden (Brint & Karabel, 1989; Cohen et al., 2014; Handel, 2013; Handel & Williams, 2012).

Additionally, when community colleges first came about, communities wanted to increase their prestige by having a college of their own in their town, serve the people of the community, and were also wanting to address local problems present in the community (Cohen et al., 2014). There was and still is a high pressure on higher education to solve the many problems present at local and national levels, and community colleges were there to help address these needs. In addition, the need to produce workers for the many growing industries in these communities and across the country was another focus of the initial growth of community colleges (Cohen et al., 2014).

Finally, in the mid-1940s, at the end of World War II, the G.I. Bill provided the first national financial aid packages for higher education that covered both tuition and living expenses, allowing millions of students access to higher education. Thus began another surge in higher education enrollment of students who previously may not have had the financial means to attend. Many of these initial reasons for the rise in community colleges are still true of community colleges today. They can be credited as the main force behind opening the door to

higher education for all, specifically populations that were not normally represented in the past such as minorities, women, students with a lower socioeconomic status, and students with poor preparation for higher education (Brint & Karabel, 1989; Cohen et al., 2014; Handel & Williams, 2012; Townsend, 2007).

Community colleges have gone by several different names since their inception. Until the 1940s, these colleges were referred to as "junior colleges," which simply described any institution that covered the first 2 years of post-secondary education. It is important to note that not all students finish within the 2 years. Initially, some of this push for the junior college came from the senior 4-year institutions not wanting to cover the first part of a 4-year curriculum (Cohen et al., 2014). The intention was for students to start at a community college and then transfer to a senior 4-year institution.

In the 1950s, the term junior college was narrowed to describe those institutions that were "lower-division branches of private universities and to two-year colleges supported by churches or organized independently, while 'community college' came gradually to be used for the comprehensive, publicly supported institutions" (Cohen et al., 2014, p. 4). This shift can be attributed to the Truman Commission, which suggested dropping the name junior college for community college (Brint & Karabel, 1989). Eventually by the 1970s, the term community college was used to describe all these institutions. Other common names for these institutions include branch campus and city or county college. "Other appellations signify the institutions' emphases: technical institute and vocational, technical, and adult education center have had some currency. The colleges have also been nicknamed people's college, democracy's college, contradictory college, opportunity college, and anti-university college" (Cohen et al., 2014, p. 4). To further complicate the identity of a community college, beginning in the 1990s several states

granted authority for 2-year institutions to award bachelor's degrees (Cohen et al., 2014; Floyd, 2005). Therefore, the term "community college" is a better descriptor of the modern-day 2-year institution that awards only associate degrees.

For the purposes of this study, a community college is defined as "any not-for-profit institution regionally accredited to award the associate in arts or the associate in science as its highest degree" (Cohen et al., 2014, p. 5). This definition excludes vocational schools, adult education institutions, and institutions that award their own baccalaureate degrees. The term community college will be used in this way throughout this paper.

Multiple Missions

The community college fills many functions within higher education. Major roles include serving as a path to a 4-year institution by way of transfer, serving as a training and/or retraining ground for the local community, serving adult or non-traditional students, serving diverse learners, and having a strong commitment to serve the local community. These institutions continually adjust their programming based on community need (Baldwin, 2017; Cohen et al., 2014; Handel, 2013; Handel & Williams, 2012; Mullin & Phillippe, 2013). First, they serve as a stepping-stone to provide students with a liberal arts education in preparation for transfer to a 4-year institution. In many states, students can complete an associate degree and transfer to a 4-year institution having fulfilled the general education requirements for a bachelor's degree and earning junior level status. Therefore, the curriculum at the community college often mirrors that of the neighboring 4-year universities, and the institutions look to these universities for guidance in course development (Handel & Williams, 2012). Many colleges and universities have developed articulation and/or guaranteed admission agreements with community colleges to assist students in transferring to the 4-year institution (Cohen et al., 2014; Handel & Williams,

2012). These agreements specify exactly how credits will transfer, what degree requirements will be met upon transfer, and/or honoring admission to the 4-year institution or a specific program if certain criteria are met. In some cases, graduating high school students might not be ready for the rigor or financial cost of a traditional 4-year institution, so a community college serves as a natural stepping stone (Baldwin, 2017; Cohen et al., 2014).

Another mission of the community college is to serve as a training and, often, retraining ground for its local citizens. Community colleges focus on the skills and knowledge that the community needs and when they need them. For instance, if a new technology company were to open a factory in the community, the community college would begin to develop programs and courses to ensure that the community is providing the workers and skills needed to fulfill the new jobs. In addition, many students who attend a community college do not have a desire to earn credentials and are simply attending to learn something new or expand their knowledge (Cohen et al., 2014; Mullin & Phillippe, 2013).

An increasingly important mission of the community college is to serve adult or non-traditional learners who are looking for such credentialing and retraining. Nationally, there are an estimated 95 million prospective adult learners, and many of them can be found in the community colleges (Blumenstyk, 2018). In addition, community colleges tend to have high populations of ethnically and racially diverse students, as they do a good job of recruiting these students and provide more access to higher education for these populations (Cohen et al., 2014; Handel, 2013). As the enrollment in community colleges surged throughout the 20th century, and particularly after World War II, the diversity of community colleges and higher education increased dramatically overall (Cohen et al., 2014). This high level of racial and ethnic diversity

ideally translates to the 4-year institutions as transfer students progress through the transfer pipeline.

Finally, as their name suggests, community colleges have a true focus on the local community (Cohen et al., 2014; Mullin & Phillippe, 2013). As Mullin and Phillippe (2013) noted, "community colleges have service areas that cover virtually every square inch of the country. This local orientation makes them unique in postsecondary education in that they have a strong commitment to their community" (p. 13). In addition to serving the needs of workers in their service areas, community colleges often provide cultural events, recreational programming, workshops, and courses for no credit. This type of programming is open to both the students and the local public (Cohen et al., 2014). The students who choose to attend a community college also have a commitment to the local community and tend to stay in the community even after they have completed their time at the college (Mullin & Phillippe, 2013).

Transfer Students

Hossler et al. (2012) found that 25% of students who started post-secondary education in the fall of 2006 transferred more than once, with the most common destination, regardless of where the student started, being a community college versus a 4-year institution. Students transfer between community colleges, from 4-year universities to community colleges, and from community colleges to 4-year institutions. This highlights the significant role community colleges play in transfer student pathways, the prevalence of transfer in higher education, and just how prevalent this student population is in the United States.

Meanwhile, the transfer process remains complex and frustrating to the students attempting to navigate it (Handel & Williams, 2012; Shapiro et al., 2017; Wang, 2020). While many policymakers are attempting to simplify the transfer process, what often results is "a

hodgepodge of initiatives that rarely simplify what is an already too complex process" (Handel & Williams, 2012, p. 11). With many initiatives in place, the latest data is not promising (Shapiro et al., 2017). Despite many students indicating an intention to transfer upon enrolling in a community college, only 30.74% of students from the Fall 2013 cohort ultimately transferred from a community college to a 4-year institution. Of those students, only 46.16% of students completed a bachelor's degree within 6 years of starting at a community college. In the end, of all students that started at a community college in Fall 2013, only 14.19% of those students completed a bachelor's degree within 6 years (Shapiro et al., 2017). There is still much work to be done to ensure students are earning bachelor's degrees after transfer.

The transfer student population can be defined in many ways; in fact, Handel and Williams (2012) note 14 different examples! For the purposes of this study, a vertical transfer student is a student that has graduated from high school, attended a community college, and transferred to a 4-year institution, specifically LAU. These students may or may not have earned a credential such as an associate degree prior to transferring. This type of transfer student enrollment pattern can also be described as vertical transfer (Bahr, 2009; Causey et al., 2020; Townsend, 2001).

Current State of Transfer

Today, many states are turning their attention to the transfer function of the community college given the desire to streamline the K-20 pipeline (Cohen et al., 2014). Aiding this process are transfer-orientated associate degrees, guaranteed admission agreements, common courses and programming between the community colleges and local 4-year partner universities, and new and updated transfer policies focused on degree completion, particularly in technology fields (Bragg, 2020; Cohen et al., 2014; Handel & Williams, 2012; Millard, 2014; Wang, 2020). To

broadly improve the transfer process, many states are straying away from individual institutional transfer policies and are instead focusing their efforts on state-wide transfer policies. Some of these initiatives include guaranteeing a certain number of transfer credit and lower-division general education requirements upon the transfer of an associate degree, common course numbering across systems, and the awarding of credit by assessment such as Advanced Placement (AP), International Baccalaureate (IB), or College Level Examination Program (CLEP; Bragg, 2020; Handel & Williams, 2012; Millard, 2014).

There has also been an increased focus on transfer within the state in which LAU is located and the neighboring states. Within the past 10 years, legislation was passed in the state to increase degree attainment, particularly science, technology, engineering and math degrees, and to increase financial aid and institutional funding. Even more recently, legislation was passed surrounding transfer that created the momentum and path forward for a state-wide transfer initiative. This initiative has brought together faculty and transfer staff at the community colleges and 4-year public and private institutions to remove barriers within the transfer process, transferability of credit, and to increase efficiency and student success. The goal was to create standardized degree maps, guaranteed admission agreements, reverse transfer agreements, and a state-wide transfer database that will house all transfer equivalents for all 4-year, public institutions in the state. This database will be readily accessible to all students interested in seeing how their credits would transfer to make the transfer of credits more accessible and transparent.

Even though much work is being done at the state-level across the country, there is much to be done to ensure transferring is a more transparent and streamlined process. As Handel and Williams (2012) note, policymakers must be careful not to make the process more complicated

by implementing too many short-term fixes that work more like bandages versus real long-term solutions. The need exists to look at transfer systemically.

Nationally, there has also been increased demand for and focus on degree completion, particularly in the technology fields (Mehaffy, 2018; Obama, 2009; Wyner, 2012). As the economy becomes more focused on technology, the United States must produce workers and knowledge to keep up with this demand and to compete globally (Handel & Williams, 2012). These increased needs for an educated workforce are coupled with a decline in the number of high school graduates (Bransberger & Michelau, 2016), thus resulting in a decline in college enrollment at both the community colleges and 4-year institutions (Chen, 2018; National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2020).

In 2013, the United States experienced its highest number of high school graduates, but since then the number of high school graduates has declined and is expected to continue to decline through 2023 (Bransberger & Michelau, 2016). Historically, a good economy also has a negative impact on postsecondary enrollment (Romano & Palmer, 2016). When there are plenty of jobs available, high school graduates prefer to enter the workforce and earn money versus heading to college (Chen, 2018). The high cost of higher education can be another significant factor (Handel & Williams, 2012). This combination of factors has significantly impacted post-secondary enrollment, and in 2019, the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (2019) reported that compared to Fall 2018, Fall 2019 college enrollments had decreased by 1.3%. This decline in postsecondary enrollment has been a trend for the past 8 years. Each year, with the declining number of high school graduates and fewer students enrolling in postsecondary education, colleges and universities of all types are finding it increasingly more difficult to meet their enrollment goals. In addition, there is the current unknown of how the COVID-19 pandemic

will influence enrollments in the years to come. Therefore, increasing pressure is falling on the transfer admission departments at colleges and universities across the country to help fill these enrollment gaps.

Transfer Pathways

There are many different paths students choose to take when they are in pursuit of a baccalaureate degree, and attendance patterns have become even more complex in recent years (Adelman, 2006; Bahr, 2009, 2012; Handel & Williams, 2012; Hossler et al., 2012). When thinking about transfer, the first pathway and certainly one that is considered the traditional path occurs when students transfer from a community college to a 4-year institution. However, research shows that this is not the only type and that there are many other pathways that researchers and practitioners must understand to help students from initial enrollment toward degree completion. The transfer pathways that are important to this study include vertical transfer, lateral transfer, reverse transfer, concurrent enrollment, and swirling (Adelman, 2006; Bahr, 2009, 2012; Causey et al., 2020; Handel & Williams, 2012; Hossler et al., 2012; Townsend, 2001).

Vertical transfer and lateral transfer are the two major types of transfer that exist among institutions of higher education. The first, vertical transfer, is more of a traditional transfer pathway in which a student starts at a community college post high school graduation and then transfers to a 4-year institution (Bahr, 2009; Causey et al., 2020; Townsend, 2001). This type of transfer is also called upward transfer (Bahr, 2009; Causey et al., 2020). Causey at al. (2020) note that in Fall 2020, 80.5% of students transferring to public 4-year colleges were continuing or returning (after a stop-out) students coming from community colleges (vertical transfers). These students may or may not have earned an associate degree prior to transferring, as this type

of transfer simply means moving from a community college to a 4-year institution. A stop-out refers to students who have stopped their enrollment at their current institution but ultimately re-enroll either at their previous institution or another institution. Ideally, however, students enroll in the community college to complete the first 2 years of the baccalaureate degree and earn an associate before transferring to a 4-year institution. Cohen et al. (2014) note that this type of transfer pathway and the earning of an associate degree prior to transfer is a core mission of a community college, but students are increasingly transferring prior to earning a credential (Causey et al., 2020; Shapiro et al., 2017). Even though vertical transfer is an ideal pathway, this certainly is not always the route for transfer students.

Lateral transfer is defined as transferring between schools of the same level (Bahr, 2009; Hossler et al., 2012). For example, this type of transfer could be from one community college to another community college or from one 4-year institution to another 4-year institution. This type of transfer is also referred to as horizonal or parallel transfer and is considered the second most prevalent type of transfer. In 2012, Hossler et al. (2012) noted that lateral transfer is on the rise and is only expected to increase in the coming decades as transfer students take more complicated and nontraditional pathways in pursuit of baccalaureate degrees. Today, as noted previously, two thirds of transfer students are vertical transfers. Most students who choose to transfer laterally only do so once, as "serial lateral transfer (i.e., numerous lateral transfers by a single student), is relatively rare" (Hossler et al., 2012, p. 292). Bahr (2012) found that many students laterally transfer due to moving or a new job, but overall, there is little research on the topic. Similarly, there is little research to date on the impacts of lateral transfer or vertical transfer and baccalaureate degree completion.

Transfer students rarely take a linear path; rather, the pathway is complex (Adelman, 2006; Cohen et al., 2014; de los Santos & Wright, 1989; McCormick, 2003; Townsend, 2001; Wang, 2020). Swirling, most notably defined by de los Santos and Wright (1989), refers to students who move between more than one institution of the same level. For example, swirling can describe a student who moves between multiple community colleges or multiple 4-year institutions. Swirling can easily be confused with lateral transfer, but the key difference is that students who end up swirling attend multiple institutions throughout their higher education journey and sometimes do so concurrently (Borden, 2004; Cohen et al., 2014; de los Santos and Wright, 1989; McCormick, 2003; Townsend, 2001). This swirling can result in an increase in time to degree, wasted credits, and higher costs to ultimately obtain a baccalaureate degree (Adelman, 2006; Baldwin, 2017; Taylor & Jain, 2017; Townsend, 2001).

Although my study will primarily focus on vertical transfers from in-state community colleges, it is important to note that other transfer and enrollment patterns do exist and complicate the examination of the transfer population and the policies surrounding it. Understanding the transfer landscape is essential when examining the transfer student population. These additional pathways include reverse transfer and concurrent enrollment. Students who reverse transfer do so by transferring credits from a 4-year institution back to a community college. Many of these students do so in order to earn the associate degree (Adelman, 1999, 2006; Hossler et al., 2012; Taylor, 2016).

Concurrent or simultaneous enrollment refers to students who are enrolled at two or more institutions as the same time (Adelman, 1999; Hossler et al., 2012; Townsend, 2001). For instance, a student may be enrolled at a community college and in the same term take a class or two at another institution. The credits earned are intended to transfer back to the primary

institution. Students may choose to concurrently enroll for several reasons, including to have access to courses their current community college does not offer, to find days of the week or times that fit better with their schedule, to have access to other services or programs, or to save on cost (Cohen et al., 2014; McCormick, 2003; Taylor & Jain, 2017; Townsend, 2001).

Lateral transfer is often complicated by these students who choose to enroll concurrently at two community colleges within the same semester (Bahr, 2012). This type of enrollment becomes problematic when studying community college students, because of the categorizing as a lateral transfer when in fact the simultaneous course enrollment is more often a form of swirling. Defining how institutions and researchers count transfers and who is included in the different pathways must be further refined, and this only further complicates an already difficult population to study.

Other gaps in the research include properly tracking these types of transfer pathways and the credentials that are ultimately awarded (Bahr, 2009; Cohen et al., 2014). In his 2009 study, Bahr noticed this gap and how the inconsistency of credential tracking, especially when students are laterally transferring out of districts or states. The question also remains as to which institution gets credit for the awarding of these credentials? Would the student's first institution of attendance be able to take partial credit (Adelman, 1999; Bahr, 2009)? Therefore, researching transfer students can be particularly challenging in that defining the different types of transfers and how to count them in research can vary greatly across states and among researchers (Cohen et al., 2014; Kirk-Kuwaye & Kirk-Kuwaye, 2007; McCormick, 2003).

Effects of Transferring on Students

Researchers have continuously examined the impacts on students of attending a community college versus a 4-year institution and the impacts of transferring on graduation rates

and baccalaureate degree attainment. There is a great deal of research suggesting that students who start their higher education academic career at a community college are simply less likely to earn a bachelor's degree than those students who started at a 4-year institution (Alfonso, 2006; Handel & Williams, 2012; Monaghan & Attewell, 2015; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Other studies have found more positive news by comparing transfer students to native students at 4-year institutions, noting that transfer students attain baccalaureate degrees at similar rates to those students native to the 4-year institution (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Xu et al., 2018). Even though these students are graduating at similar rates, it is common for transfer students to have earned more credits upon completion of a bachelor's degree compared to their native peers. This outcome may be due to credit loss and the need to earn more credits to fulfill degree or major requirements upon transferring to the 4-year institution (Alfonso, 2006; Handel & Williams, 2012; Monaghan & Attewell, 2015; Townsend, 2007; Xu et al., 2018). The programs offered by the 4-year institutions, the relationships that are initiated and sustained access across the colleges, the ease with which credits transfer, and the welcome provided by the institutions are all factors that influence whether students ultimately transfer.

It is important to note that transfer students are not counted in the federal graduation rate at 4-year institutions and that community colleges do not get credit for the transfer either. Thus, the transfer population is being widely ignored nationally. As pressures on enrollment increase, it is imperative that this population receive more attention, because transfer students will be filling enrollment gaps, add to degree completion, and meet the needs of an everchanging workforce. While community colleges play a major role in transfer, ultimately the 4-year institutions are the much-needed recipients of these students. Therefore, "programs offered by the four-year institutions, the relationships that are initiated and sustained access across the colleges, the ease

with which credits transfer, and the welcome provided by the institutions are all factors that influence whether students actually transfer" (Gandara et al., 2012, p. 6).

Barriers to Transfer

Upon entering a community college, many students indicate that they plan to transfer to a 4-year institution, yet few actually do (Causey et al., 2020; Hossler et al., 2012; Handel, 2013; Handel & Williams, 2012; Monaghan & Attewell, 2015). Monaghan and Attewell (2015) note that only 60% of students who earned about 60 credits (the equivalent to an associate degree) and intended to transfer did in fact transfer to a 4-year institution. These students have not necessarily earned an associate degree, however. When a student begins to explore or even consider transferring to a 4-year institution, the barriers in front of them may seem endless, and the transfer process is often described as messy and complicated (Causey et al., 2020; Handel, 2013; Handel & Williams, 2012; Hossler et al., 2012; Xu et al., 2018). Xu et al. (2018) noted that the transfer process itself is a filter to the 4-year institutions due to its complexity with only the best and most well-prepared students being equipped to navigate the process. If students do not have the ability or know-how to seek out the information or resources needed, the process may end with a frustrated student who does not transfer. In many cases, it is up to the student to navigate this process and discover the resources that are available. Additional barriers transfer students face include a lack of clarity in transfer policies and procedures, a lack of guidance throughout the process, differing institutional policies, the rising costs of higher education, inconsistent or limited acceptance and transferring of academic credit, and misconceptions about student preparedness for the 4-year institution (Handel & Williams, 2012; Monaghan & Attewell, 2015; Schudde et al., 2021; Wang, 2020; Xu et al., 2018).

Every institution has its own policies and procedures to follow, and unfortunately the responsibility for navigating these many differences falls on the student. Transfer students may be exploring transfer to several different institutions at once. Each institution has differing policies and procedures that complicates the transfer process, including differences in admission requirements, financial aid, advising, course registration, curriculum, academic cultures, transfer credits, and other factors. Another major concern is the inconsistent or limited acceptance of transfer students' academic credits and how these credits apply (or do not apply) toward a baccalaureate degree (Cohen et al., 2014). Upon transfer, it is common for students to lose credits or need to repeat courses equivalent to those taken at the community college. State-wide and institutional or program specific articulation agreements have worked to mitigate this problem, but these agreements can be just as complex and challenging to navigate as the transfer process (Cohen et al., 2014).

In addition to inconsistent policies on transfer credit, admitted transfer students are often asked to accept their offer of admission without knowing how their credits will apply to their degree at the new institution (Cohen et al., 2014; Handel & Williams, 2012; Monaghan & Attewell, 2015). As noted, the state in which LAU is located launched an initiative between the state and all public community colleges and 4-year institutions to streamline the transfer process and to address some of the issues and inconsistencies. Private institution participation across the state is optional but encouraged. This initiative hopes to build seamless transfer and to help students save tuition dollars by not losing credits in the transfer process. The rising cost of higher education is also a major concern for students looking to transfer. Often, students are attending a community college prior to transferring to a 4-year institution because the cost is significantly less than that of a 4-year institution (Handel & Williams, 2012).

Traditionally, community colleges have provided open access to higher education for all students. Therefore, student preparedness and ability may differ from those starting at a 4-year institution. Those differences also become a concern as students prepare to transfer to a 4-year institution (Cohen et al., 2014; Handel & Williams, 2012). Some believe the rigor of the curricula at the community college is not as high as a 4-year institution, and that students are therefore not sufficiently prepared upon transfer to the 4-year. This belief may also link back to the differing policies between institutions to include admission policies, since many community colleges have an open admission policy while 4-year institutions tend to be more selective (Handel & Williams, 2012). With all the barriers that are common for transfer students to face, it is important for faculty and staff who assist this population to continually work to eliminate them and maintain the focus on the goal of student success.

Transfer Student Success

In recent years, higher education has shifted its focus from access to higher education to completion of degrees (Mehaffy, 2018; Obama, 2009; Wyner, 2012). This attention on completion has become the newest measure of overall student success and calls for the concentration on transfer student momentum and success. The shift has forced institutions to take a deep look into initiatives that promote student success and ultimately, graduation. Community colleges have certainly become a focus of this agenda since they award associate degrees, but also because they prepare students who will transfer to the 4-year institutions, giving students an opportunity to earn a second degree. As stated previously, many researchers have noted the complexity of studying transfer populations because states, agencies, and researchers often define transfer populations differently, so gathering data can be quite the challenge. This

challenge cannot be underestimated, as measuring success of transfer students only further complicates the issue.

The Aspen Institute defines student success and excellence at the community college level with four domains: completion/transfer outcomes, learning outcomes, labor market outcomes, and equitable outcomes, as they believe "it is not enough for a college to make sure students learn and graduate; they also should care about students' post-graduation success" (Wyner, 2012, p. 17). While these variables are important at the community college level, they also cannot be ignored by the 4-year institutions. These variables, along with others noted in the next section, will continue to play an important role in the transfer process and overall transfer student success. Wang et al. (2021) state is simply, "supporting transfer student success is crucial in light of evolving demographics and enrollments in higher education" (p. 4).

Variables for Success

"Admitting only the most talented and well-prepared students is neither a solution nor an option" (Kuh et al., 2005, p. 8); therefore, other methods of predicting and measuring student success upon enrollment in higher education and upon transfer are necessary. Researchers have noted several key variables that are used to measure student success and ultimately earning a baccalaureate degree after transferring. These variables include academic preparation, motivation, transfer student capital, momentum, time spent at the community college, and student engagement (Adelman, 2004; Kuh et al, 2005; Laanan et al., 2010; Roksa & Calcagno, 2008; Seidman, 2012; Wang et al., 2017).

Sound academic preparation at the community college is a key indicator for students when they ultimately transfer, and pointedly, "a lack of academic preparation is associated with an 80% decrease in the odds of transfer to four-year institutions in any given term" (Roksa &

Calcagno, 2008, p. 23). However, many of the students who are academically underprepared do still transfer to 4-year institutions. What happens to these academically underprepared students once they transfer, and are they able to earn a bachelor's degree? This evaluation sought to understand how transfer students make sense of their experiences at a 4-year institution.

Motivation is another key variable in measuring student success (Adelman, 2004). It is no surprise that students who are more motivated academically and who aspire to graduate are more likely to earn a degree. The impacts of motivation are also highlighted in Alfonso's (2006) study comparing baccalaureate degree attainment between students who started at a community college and 4-year institution. That study found students who attend a community college first are less likely to earn bachelor's degrees, which contradicts other studies finding the opposite to be true. According to Adelman (2004), the importance of students spending "sufficient time at the community college prior to transfer" (p. 99) is a significant factor in community college students earning a bachelor's degree. Significant time at a community college means earning more than 10 credits at the community college prior to transferring to a 4-year institution; Adelman (2004) found that students with this level of prior course completion were more likely to earn a bachelor's degree than those who earned fewer than 10 credits. This 10-credit threshold is lower than that recommended by LAU, which requires students to earn at least 12-15 credits prior to transferring. Therefore, this research addressed the differences in transfer credit found within the transfer population and the influence, if any, this has on the transfer student experience and transition.

Transfer student capital plays a key role in the transfer student process and ultimate success in the transition process. Transfer student capital "indicates how community college students accumulate knowledge in order to negotiate the transfer process, such as understanding

credit transfer agreements between colleges, grade requirements for admission into a desired major, and course prerequisites" (Laanan et al., 2010, p. 177). Therefore, Laanan et al. (2010) suggested incorporating key success skills right from the beginning of the students' experience at the 4-year institution, such as orientation and workshops throughout the first semester. Increasing transfer student capital increases the likelihood of a student graduating from the 4-year institution with a bachelor's degree (Laanan et al., 2010).

Creating momentum out of the motivation and transfer student capital gained throughout a student's experiences while attending a community college is another key to successful transfer. Aspirational momentum is defined as "students' clear definition of and sustained commitment to their educational goals" (Wang et al., 2017, p. 314). The more a student engages with transfer student services while at the community college, the more likely they are to develop and increase their aspirational momentum, particularly for male students (Wang et al., 2017).

Student engagement also contributes to student success, and this engagement can be broken down into two parts (Kuh et al., 2005). "The first is the amount of time and effort the student puts into their studies and other activities that lead to the experiences and outcomes that constitute student success," and "the second is the ways the institution allocates resources and organizes learning opportunities and services to induce students to participate in and benefit from such activities" (Kuh et al., 2005, p. 9). Transfer students often have a hard time connecting to their peers at their new institution because their peers have already been at the institution for several semesters and are not experiencing the same transition. In addition, transfer students may also have difficulty connecting to other transfer students. Interestingly, Kirk-Kuwaye and Kirk-Kuwaye (2007) found that there is no difference in engagement levels with vertical transfer students compared to lateral transfer students. As the literature clearly states, students who are

less engaged in the college campus and community are less likely to perform well in the classroom, take advantage of experiences both inside and outside the classroom, and graduate on-time or at all (Kirk-Kuwaye & Kirk-Kuwaye, 2007; Kuh et al., 2005; Seidman, 2012). Therefore, institutions must ensure that resources are allocated to this population to ensure a successful transition and long-term student engagement.

Measuring Transfer Success

Hossler et al. (2012) acknowledge the complexity of measuring transfer student success due to students transferring between multiple institutions and community colleges counting these students as dropouts due to reporting requirements. Even though they may eventually finish a baccalaureate degree, they are still counted as a drop-out. As pressure mounts from all levels of government and accrediting agencies for accountability of higher education institutions and reporting on their outcomes and evidence of success, there is much work to be done in determining what should be reported and how. Typical measures of success include graduation rate, retention rate, and transfer rate. Measuring transfer student success varies from institution to institution, state to state, or more often than not, is non-existent in some cases (Cohen et al., 2014; Hossler et al., 2012).

Measuring transfer student success is complex, and to aid in creating a common language, Shapiro et al. (2017) developed five outcomes to measure transfer student success across postsecondary institutions. There are many other measures used, but the National Student Clearinghouse has worked to standardize outcome measures and represent student transfer in a positive light since typically, transfer students are counted as failures in traditional student success measures such as graduation rate and retention rate (Cohen et al., 2014; McFarland et al., 2019; Shapiro et al., 2017; IPEDS, 2016). These outcomes include (a) transfer-out rate: students

transferring out of the community college divided by the total cohort; (b) transfer-with-award rate: students transferring out of the community college having earned a credential, such as a certificate or an associate degree, divided by the total cohort; (c) transfer-out bachelor's completion rate: students transferring out of the community college and earning a bachelor's degree within 6 years of starting at the community college divided by the total cohort; (d) transfer-in bachelor's completion rate: students transferring out of *any* community college and earning a bachelor's degree at the selected 4-year institution within 6 years of starting at the community college divided by the total cohort; and (e) community college cohort bachelor's completion rate: students transferring out of a community college and into any 4-year institution and earning a bachelor's degree within 6 years of starting at the community college divided by the total cohort (Shapiro et al., 2017). In addition, there is some debate regarding how to best report these statistics across various agencies. For instance, the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) reports enrollment from a specific date each term, while the National Student Clearinghouse reports enrollment and changes throughout the term (Shapiro et al., 2017). While these measures and collection tactics have simplified studying and tracking transfer students, the data collection does rely heavily on community colleges and 4-year institutions working together to share and report data, yet data reporting is still inconsistent.

Measuring student success and reporting these figures to various stakeholders is an immense challenge at all levels of higher education (Cohen et al., 2014; Kirk-Kuwaye & Kirk-Kuwaye, 2007; McCormick, 2003). The complexity comes from increasing rates of student mobility and patterns of transfer, ever-changing definitions and interpretation, and varying requirements among the many states and accrediting agencies. These measures of student success, and others such as graduation rate and retention rate, have major impacts on a college's

reputation, the workforce and its ability to find trained workers, and the nation's economy. Most importantly, however, these rates are reflective of the students, so it is important that higher education leaders make every effort to collect these data sets, interpret them, create benchmarks, and make changes to better the student experience and overall success.

Theoretical Framework

Critical to this study is examining the negative or deficit narrative that exists regarding transfer students (Green, 2006; Harper, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1990, 2012). For too long, researchers have focused on the negatives of this student population and what is not working as opposed to studying the positive outcomes of what *is* working. A major goal of this study was to better understand the experiences of these students as they are navigating the admission transfer process. The first section of the framework addresses the use of a deficit narrative, as understanding the transfer process and the experiences of transfer students is central to this research (Wang, 2020).

Second, Schlossberg's (1981, 2011) transition theory helps practitioners define transition and understand how individuals experience it and ultimately navigate the change. The theory helps to understand anticipated or unanticipated transition, the meaning behind the transition, and the changes in beliefs, assumptions, roles, and relationships. Finally, also important in the transition process is sensemaking (Weick, 1995). How transfer students make sense of their transfer experience and transition to the 4-year institution sets the stage for their university experiences and can contribute to their success. Sensemaking describes when an individual organizes and makes meaning out of their experiences and how they construct their own reality of the situation or experience (Weick, 1995).

Transfer/Deficit Narrative

Many of the conversations surrounding transfer students, the transfer process, and transfer student success is often a negative narrative and focuses on why students are failing instead of focusing why and how they are successful. A number of assumptions exist regarding community college students:

> The conventional belief is that community college students—in contrast to students in four-year colleges—are less interested in academic studies and in learning for its own sake; instead, they are interested primarily in the practical, which to them means earning more money. (Cohen et al., 2014, p. 65)

This type of belief is just one of many aspects of the negative narrative surrounding transfer students and the transfer process. Several researchers have noted the impacts this negative narrative and deficit models have on students and encourage more of a focus on the positives and building a more positive model (Green, 2006; Harper, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1990, 2012). Therefore, in this study, I explored whether a negative narrative exists regarding the transfer population and process and focus for my participants and looked intentionally for the positive instances of success that are prevalent throughout this population and the process.

Ladson-Billings (2012) notes educational research carries with it many deficiencies because it borrows from many other disciplines across the social sciences:

> Education research borrows psychology's notions of normal and exceptional individuals, sociology's notions of normal and exceptional groups such as families and communities, as well as institutions and anthropology's notions of normal and exceptional cultures with implicit beliefs about the classification and ranking of cultural groups. (p. 117)

Ladson-Billings (2012) further noted that if researchers continue to ignore the fact that the best and brightest of all races are the ones that are attending school, then "we will continue to look through a glass, darkly" (p. 120). It is interesting to observe that she is quoting scripture here because, as she notes, in educational research, "we are using crude measures to sort and slot people into categories" (p. 118), such as race, which distorts the true view.

Creating or altering an existing narrative often requires the examination of discourse surrounding any topic. Spickard (2017) defined discourse as:

> An institutionalized way of thinking and speaking about things, embedded in language. This language shapes people's thoughts and behavior. Just as eyeglasses filter what we see, our ways of speaking about things filter how we think. Our thinking then influences how we act. Examining a society's dominant ways of speaking about things helps us understand that society's behavior. (p. 290-291)

Administrators and policymakers must first take the time to examine the discourse present within the populations they are working with to change the narrative to a positive view and ultimately build a better perspective regarding these student populations. A negative narrative and discourse can be present in conversations, policies, websites, brochures, and other areas and can apply to many student populations (Green, 2006; Harper, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1990, 2012), including transfer students. Hearing the narratives from the participants in this evaluation study can help expand the discourse around transfer students.

Several researchers have examined the presence and impacts of a negative or deficit narrative surrounding various populations (Green, 2006; Harper, 2010; Jain et al., 2017; Ladson-Billings, 1990). Underserved college-bound student populations who primarily attend community colleges face a challenging path in navigating the educational pipeline (high school

to college to the workforce), but they are also facing another invisible barrier. Policymakers and administrators have been focused on "a deficit model, in which minority, low-income, and first-generation college students are characterized as lacking the skills and abilities necessary to success in higher education" (Green, 2006, p. 24). Using an anti-deficit framework in research can help to reframe the many questions that researchers ask surrounding student populations that are typically researched in a negative light. By putting an emphasis on success and achievement, researchers can learn even more about these populations, and administrators can focus programming and efforts on what works instead of what does not work (Harper, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1990, 2012).

The focus on students' deficits influences how campus members interact with community college transfer students concerning expectations, self-fulfilling prophecies, and differential treatment. Instead of focusing on the positives and the many talents that each individual of a particular group can bring to table, the focus is on transfer student deficits and anticipated poor outcomes. Unfortunately, this negative orientation has been prevalent in the many relationships that these students rely on including with teachers, counselors, and coaches (Green, 2006; Harper 2010). To flip the narrative and better serve student populations, data collection must go beyond quantitative data such as grades, graduation rates, and enrollments, and must instead focus on more qualitative data such as interviews and observations (Jain et al., 2017; Wang, 2020). Collecting students' experiences, attitudes, and behaviors is imperative to understanding the barriers and opportunities that may exist (Green, 2006; Jain et al., 2017; Wang, 2020).

Transition Theory

The point at which a student transfers from one institution to another can certainly be considered a significant transition that promotes change in a student's life; therefore, I have

incorporated Schlossberg's (1981) Transition Theory into the theoretical framework. Schlossberg (1981) stated, "a transition can be said to occur if an event or non-event results in a change in assumptions about oneself and the world and thus requires a corresponding change in one's behavior and relationships" (p. 5). These changes can vary in subtlety, are solely defined by the person experiencing the transition, can either be anticipated or unanticipated, or can be events or nonevents (anticipated events that did not occur; Schlossberg, 1981, 2011). Transferring from one college or university to another can certainly be considered a moment of transition. The process of transitioning can take time, as the person is "leaving one set of roles, relationships, routines, and assumptions and establishing new ones" (Schlossberg, 2011, p. 160). The move from one college or university to another, regardless of type of transfer, is a major transition and therefore one I explored in this study.

According to Schlossberg (2008), there are four major resources that help to determine how someone will cope with a transition. They are known as the 4 *S*'s and are situation, self, support, and strategies (Schlossberg, 2008). Situation refers to the individual's situation when the transition is occurring; self explains the individual's ability to cope internally with the transition and can refer to the person's level of resiliency; support centers around how much help is available to the individual as they are experiencing the transition; and strategies refers to the coping strategies that the person may employ (Schlossberg, 2008). Evans et al. (2010) stated that the "individual's effectiveness in coping with transition depends on his or her resources in these four areas—in other words, his or her assets and liabilities—at that time" (p. 216). This theory provides researchers with an avenue by which they can analyze any sort of transition that a person may be experiencing throughout their lifetime. By working to understand transfer student

transitions and experiences, practitioners can then begin to make sense of their experiences and ultimately break down the deficit narrative.

Sensemaking

Weick et al. (2005) define sensemaking as "turning circumstances into a situation that is comprehended explicitly in words and that serves as a springboard into action" (p. 409). Sensemaking looks at individuals and how they make meaning of experiences and circumstances. Researchers then organize, analyze, and label these moments to make sense of an event. Sensemaking is highly descriptive in nature and looks at moments that have happened in the past to build a larger picture of what is happening. Simply, sensemaking works to answer two main questions:

> Answers to the question "what's the story?" emerge from retrospect, connections with past experience, and dialogue among people who act on behalf of larger social units. Answers to the question "now what?" emerge from presumptions about the future, articulation concurrent with action, and projects that become increasingly clear as they unfold. (Weick et al., 2005, p. 413)

It is critical to note that sensemaking does not just happen at the beginning of the change but that it occurs throughout the change process. Sensemaking tends to develop over time to form a more substantial understanding of the change or experience (Kezar, 2013). The process of sensemaking can be described by seven aspects including "identity, retrospect, enactment, social contact, ongoing events, cues, and plausibility" (Weick, 1995, p. 3).

The first property of sensemaking, being grounded in identity construction, is when individuals understand who they are in the context of the world around them. Retrospective, the second property, describes when an individual pauses for reflection and begins to form patterns,

or make sense of the past experience, according to their memories of their past experiences. The third property, enactive of sensible environments, describes when an individual learning from this past experience "often produce part of the environment they face" (Weick, 1995, p. 30). Sensemaking, and therefore the individual, is not passive and must engage with and shape the environment in which they exist. Sensemaking can also be described as a social process, which is the fourth property. Sensemaking is not an individual process but one where individuals interact with those around them and create a shared meaning or common language. The fifth property explains that sensemaking is ongoing. There is neither a starting nor a stopping point for the process, as it is continual. Sensemaking is also focused on and by extracted cues meaning researchers "need to watch how people deal with prolonged puzzles that defy sensemaking, puzzles such as paradoxes, dilemmas, and inconceivable events. We also need to pay close attention to ways people notice, extract cues, and embellish that which they extract" (Weick, 1995, p. 49). Here, Weick (1995) highlights that this property is less about the sense that is being made and more about the overall process. Finally, sensemaking is driven by plausibility rather than accuracy. Weick (1995) noted:

> If accuracy is nice but not necessary in sensemaking, then what is necessary? The answer is, something that preserves plausibility and coherence, something that is reasonable and memorable, something that embodies past experience and expectations, something that resonates with other people, something that can be constructed retrospectively but also can be used prospectively, something that captures both feeling and thought, something that allows for embellishment to fit current oddities, something that is fun to contrast. In short, what is necessary in sensemaking is a good story. (pp. 60–61)

It is important to note that all seven properties of sensemaking continually interact with each other throughout the process of sensemaking (Weick, 1995).

One of the main goals of this research was to better understand transfer student decisions, assumptions, and barriers. Examining these experiences through sensemaking will help to better understand the transfer student population and their experiences, ease the transition from one college to another, and ultimately help to change the deficit narrative in to a more positive one. Together with the selected theoretical framework, this program evaluation helps to better understand the transfer students that have been through the transfer process while ultimately improving the overall transfer process and experience.

Summary

Community colleges play an essential role in the higher education landscape and their local communities, as they are a critical entry point into higher education for many students (Cohen et al., 2014). However, many students who enter a community college plan to transfer to a 4-year institution but do not (Hossler et al., 2012; Handel, 2013; Handel & Williams, 2012; Monaghan & Attewell, 2015). Therefore, it is clear that the transfer process contains many barriers for these students. Barriers include navigating the challenging transfer process, the high costs of higher education, the differing transfer credit policies, and transfer student misconceptions. Having to navigate a complicated transfer process often on their own (Wang, 2020), a lack of clarity in transfer policies and procedures, a lack of guidance throughout the process, and differing institution policies all work against students as they are navigating the transfer process (Handel & Williams, 2012; Laanan et al., 2010; Monaghan & Attewell, 2015; Schudde et al., 2021). Transfer students from community colleges are especially sensitive to the increasing costs of higher education, which is why many start at a community college in the first

place due to the initial lower cost (Baldwin, 2017; Cohen et al., 2014). Inconsistent or limited acceptance and transferring of academic credit and misconceptions about student preparedness for the 4-year institution also increase barriers for transfer students (Handel & Williams, 2012; Monaghan & Attewell, 2015).

For this study, the theoretical framework was composed of three different aspects including the negative or deficit narrative around transfer (Green, 2006; Harper 2010), Schlossberg's (1981) transition theory, and finally, sensemaking (Weick, 1995). This framework helped to answer the evaluation questions. The purpose of this study was to evaluate the vertical transfer admission and transition process while working to better understand the vertical transfer student narrative and experiences surrounding the admission process and associated transition to LAU during COVID-19. Chapter 3 details the methodology used in this study.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to evaluate the vertical transfer admission and transition process while working to better understand the vertical transfer student narrative and experiences surrounding the admission process and associated transition to LAU during COVID-19. This chapter details the methodology and the various research design decisions, which include an explanation of the program evaluation case study approach, a description of the context being studied, participants, data collection and analysis, the delimitations, limitations, and assumptions, and ethical considerations.

Evaluation Questions

The evaluation question and sub-questions outlined below will help to provide guidance for future transfer admission and transition decisions such as enrollment goals, recruitment planning, orientation, and overall process improvement for vertical transfers. The evaluation questions are as follows:

1. What is the vertical transfer narrative that helps to support students in their transfer process?
    a. How do vertical transfer students experience the transfer process and their transition to LAU?
    b. How do vertical transfer students make sense of the transfer process and transition to LAU?

Program Evaluation Approach

Because my study focused on student experiences, transition, and the historical deficit narrative of transfer, I followed a qualitative research design. The eight main characteristics of qualitative research include conducting the research in a natural setting, the researchers serving as the key instrument, collecting and using multiple sources of data, conducting both inductive and deductive data analysis, focusing on the participants' meaning, applying an emergent research design, subscribing to reflexivity throughout the process, and finally, creating a holistic picture of the research problem (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Creswell and Creswell (2018) describe the importance of a natural setting in qualitative research so that data can be "gathered by actually talking directly to people and seeing them behave and act within their context" (p. 9). Therefore, this study was conducted on the campus of LAU, although mostly virtually due to COVID-19. However, due to COVID-19, virtual environments were already a part of their daily student experience.

Multiple forms of data were used to answer the evaluation questions including focus groups, individual interviews, reviewing documents and websites, and observing various transfer student events. Throughout this study, I served as the primary instrument to collect and analyze the data. I observed events and behaviors, examined documents, conducted focus groups and individual interviews, and interpreted all data. At some transfer events, a colleague served as an observer as well. As Creswell and Creswell (2018) note, these "are all open-ended forms of data in which the participants share their ideas freely, not constrained by pre-determined scales instruments" (p. 9). Both inductive and deductive reasoning were utilized when interpreting and analyzing the data. First, patterns and themes were identified and then utilized to determine the need to seek out more evidence (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

I sought to understand the transfer students' narrative and experiences. I was focused solely on the participants' meanings rather than any other source (myself as the researcher or any scholarly literature). The design of this study was emergent in that I was able to adapt and change the research process after I began to collect data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). For example, throughout this study I discovered new sources of data such as transfer student events to observe and also ended up incorporating individual interviews due to low turnout and scheduling complications with the focus groups.

The next aspect of qualitative research is reflexivity. Creswell and Creswell (2018) note that researchers must "reflect about how their role in the study and their personal background, culture, and experiences hold potential for shaping their interpretations, such as themes they advance and the meaning they ascribe to the data" (p. 182). I served in the role of "researcher-as-instrument" throughout this program evaluation case study because I was able to rely on my prior knowledge and expertise while conducting this study in an unbiased manner (Craig, 2009, p. 3). Finally, this research sought to provide a holistic account of the research problem while answering the evaluation questions. I incorporated multiple data sources and student perspectives throughout the process while answering the research questions (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

A case study approach was used in this program evaluation. According to Mertens and Wilson (2012), "case studies focus on a complex context and try to understand a particular object or case" (p. 331). Yin (2018) further defines a case study as "a social science research method, generally used to investigate a contemporary phenomenon in depth and in its real-world context" (p. 286). A case study approach was used opposed to other approaches because it is "a mechanism for gaining understanding about the day-to-day activities of a program as a way of uncovering hidden meanings" (Mertens & Wilson, 2012, p. 143). This was the best approach for

answering the evaluation questions and connected well with the theoretical framework, which included how students make sense of their experiences (Weick, 1995), transition theory (Schlossberg, 1981), and deficit narrative (Green, 2006; Harper, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1990, 2012). The evaluation questions also focused on answering "how" questions which, according to Yin (2018), are fundamental to a case study approach.

Constructivist Paradigm

A paradigm is defined as being "made up of four sets of philosophical assumptions related to the nature of ethics, reality, knowledge, and systematic inquiry" (Mertens & Wilson, 2012, p. 560), more formerly known as axiology, ontology, epistemology, and methodology. Paradigms help to guide the researcher in their approach to answering the research question(s). For this study, I used the constructivist paradigm due to its many parallels to qualitative research and the values branch, one of the four branches of program evaluation (Mertens & Wilson, 2012). Creswell and Creswell (2018) state "social constructivists believe that individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work. Individuals develop subjective meanings of their experiences—meanings directed toward certain objects or things" (p. 8). Because this study focused on narrative, sensemaking, and transition theory, this paradigm was the appropriate fit.

Description of the Program Evaluation

This evaluation is a formative program evaluation. Mathison (2005) defines this form of evaluation as one "conducted during the development or delivery of a program or product with intention of providing feedback to improve the evaluand" (p. 160). Furthermore, the approach "focuses on determining whether a program is unfolding as planned, identifying obstacles or unexpected opportunities, and identifying midcourse corrections that will increase the likelihood

of the program's success" (Mathison, 2005, p. 160). As noted, this program evaluation used a case study approach in which I studied a specific context—LAU—to better understand the transfer student narrative, experiences, transition, and admission process during COVID-19. Knowing my research interests were in an evaluation of the transfer experience, I took advantage of attending and documenting transfer orientation over the past 2 years. Once the study began, I first contacted potential participants via an email request (Appendix A), then conducted focus groups, individual interviews, and observed events. Next, I reviewed websites and documents. At the end of the study, recommendations and next steps were formed with the intention of sharing with stakeholders and decision makers who oversee the transfer admission process and transition to LAU. Sharing recommendations with stakeholders is a key aspect of program evaluation and cannot be missed (Mertens & Wilson, 2012).

Role of the Researcher

Creswell and Creswell (2018) described the nature of qualitative research as being one in which the researcher is "typically involved in a sustained and intensive experience with the participants" (p. 183), and that was certainly the case for this study. Throughout this study, I served as the observer in the field by way of unstructured observations at transfer events. During these observations, I collected field notes that were kept in a journal. During the focus groups and individual interviews, I served as the facilitator and asked open-ended questions to prompt discussion, and the sharing of opinions and experiences.

My previous influence on and interaction with the participants were also at play. I previously recruited, interviewed, and admitted the participants in this study to LAU, but my level of prior personal interaction with these participants varied. Some participants had been in close contact with me throughout the admission process in that I personally met them at a

community college visit or on-campus LAU admission tour, conducted their admission interview, and/or answered their questions via our main phone line or email account. Some participants had no direct personal interaction with me other than seeing my name on their letters of admission and various recruitment materials such as brochures, emails, and websites.

Creswell and Creswell (2018) note that "researchers' own backgrounds shape their interpretations" (p. 8). This was certainly a concern while conducting this research. I served in the role of "researcher-as-instrument" throughout this study, where I was "able to rely on expertise, draw on experience, and employ research skills in an unbiased manner" (Craig, 2009, p. 3). I had to remain aware of my own biases and prior knowledge before starting the study and throughout the research process. I avoided only reporting positive results (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) and reported any contrary findings that arose. Although I will always want the best for a department and institution in which I work, I also want to discover what is not working well in order to improve the process and overall student experience. I enlisted the help of others to collect data to help with eliminating my own biases. For example, the Registrar's Office provided the initial participant data so that accuracy could be ensured, and a fellow staff member also collected observational data following a protocol at various transfer related events. Our notes were compared after each event or observational period. Finally, it is important to note that I was not a transfer student and have no personal, first-hand experiences transferring from one institution to another. However, I certainly know many transfer students within my friend group and have worked with transfer students in various capacities throughout my career in higher education.

Recognizing my current role at the university, knowledge on the topic, and prior experiences with this population of students, brindling was practiced during this study. Dahlberg

et al. (2008) state that researchers must acknowledge previous knowledge and experiences throughout the research process. Bridling is composed of three different parts including "restraining one's pre-understanding", "not making definite what is indefinite," and "pointed forward" (p. 129-130). I tried my best to not let my prior knowledge influence the interviews, observations, coding, findings, and data analysis of this study.

Case Site

LAU is a selective, small liberal arts and sciences university in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States. In fall of 2020, the undergraduate enrollment was 4,758 students and only an additional 110 students. Each academic year, the university enrolls approximately 215 new undergraduate transfer students across the fall and spring semesters. LAU is approximately 260 acres in an urban setting and is highly residential with students who enter as first-time freshmen being required to live on campus for their first 3 years. Transfer students, regardless of the number of prior credits transferred in, are not required to live on campus. In 2020-2021, the freshman to sophomore retention rate was 87%, while the 6-year graduation rate was 80%. According to the most recent national data, 4-year institutions retain 81% of their students from freshman to sophomore year and graduate 62% of their students graduate within 6 years (IPEDS, 2019a, 2019b).

Transfer admission at LAU consists of a holistic assessment of each applicant. This involves review of the applicant's academic history and performance, credit hours earned, conduct records, leadership, service, and extracurricular activities. LAU also requires an admission essay, admission interview, and identification of intended major.

Once the applicant is admitted and has accepted their offer of admission, the Transfer Admission Office continues working with each student throughout the enrollment process. From

recruiting, applying, and accepting, to enrolling at LAU, the Transfer Admission Office engages with each student throughout the application and onboarding process and coordinates with various on-campus offices such as housing, orientation, registrar, and advising to help students. The Transfer Admission Office is responsible for the transferring in of all acceptable prior credit at the point of admission, creating initial class schedules for the students' first semester at LAU, and assigning an academic advisor to each student. This office serves as the primary point of contact and a resource for transfer students throughout their admission and enrollment process. It is also common for former transfer students to reach out to the office for guidance several semesters into their attendance at LAU.

Defining the boundaries of a case study is important and provides "distinction between the conditions that fall within as opposed to outside of the case in a case study—such as the time period, social groups, organizations, geographic locations, or other relevant features—understanding that the boundaries can be fuzzy" (Yin, 2018, p. 286). For this case study, participants were selected from the fall 2020 and spring 2021 vertical, in-state transfer cohorts.

Participants

The participants for this study included the entire population of new, in-state, vertical transfer students from in-state community colleges who entered LAU in the fall 2020 or spring 2021 terms. Over the past 5 years, there has been an average of 128 new in-state, vertical transfer students each year. These participants were currently enrolled as LAU transfer students. The fall 2020 and spring 2021 new vertical transfer cohort data was obtained from the Registrar's Office at LAU and was used to select in-state vertical transfer student participants for this case study. Each potential participant was sent an email to their LAU email address soliciting participation in the study (see Appendix A). A link was provided in the email for the students to opt-in to the

study, complete the consent form (see Appendix B), and choose a focus group time that worked best for them. The consent form informed the participants of the purpose of the study and how the data would be used. There was no incentive for participation in this study. This initial email was integral to setting the stage for the study and gathering willing participants.

Creswell and Creswell (2018) suggest a focus group size of 6-8 participants, however, I initially intended to keep focus groups to six participants so that more students had an opportunity to speak in the virtual format. The target was 3-6 focus groups for this study. One hundred and fourteen potential participants were asked to participate in this study, 15 opted-in to the study, and 12 who ultimately participated in the focus groups or individual interviews. These 12 participants are included in Table 5.

Table 5

Interview Participants

Name	Gender	Age[a]	Ethnicity	Major	Transfer Credits	First-Generation College Student?	First Semester at LAU
Adam	M	18-22	White	History	64	Yes	Fall 2020
Becca	F	18-22	White	Computer Science	51	No	Fall 2020
Charlie	M	18-22	White	Mathematics	69	No	Fall 2020
Diana	F	18-22	Asian	Psychology	70	Yes	Fall 2020
Emma	F	18-22	White	Communication	60	No	Fall 2020
Felicia	F	18-22	White	Biology	40	No	Fall 2020
Gabriella	F	18-22	White	Environmental Studies	55	No	Spring 2021
Heather	F	30-39	White	Chemistry	66	No	Spring 2021
Isaac	M	18-22	White	History	60	No	Fall 2020
Jack	M	18-22	American Indian or Alaska Native; White	Biology	60	No	Fall 2020
Kendra	F	18-22	Black or African American; White	Communication	37	Yes	Fall 2020
Lauren	F	18-22	Black or African American	English	49	No	Fall 2020

Note. LAU = Liberal Arts University
[a] Participant's age at the point of transfer to LAU.

A focus group approach was initially chosen because it would allow me to collect individual stories and experiences while allowing participants to converse about their joint experiences within the small groups or among participants with similar characteristics. I had initially intended to place students in focus groups based on similar student characteristics as determined by those who opted-in to the study and the information provided by the Registrar's Office including age, transfer institution, gender, race, major, first-generation college student, and number of transfer credits. Due to the relatively small number of participants that chose to

opt-in to the study initially and the challenges with scheduling times that were convenient for multiple students, the focus groups were scheduled solely based on student availability. Due to low turn-out and several students not showing up to their scheduled group unexpectantly, all four focus groups only contained two students.

To collect the data needed to conclude this study, I began offering individual interviews to the entire population including those that had already opted-in to the study and those that had not yet. An email was sent to these students notifying them of the additional interview opportunities. There were several students that opted-in to the study but were not able to make any of the scheduled focus group times so having an individual interview option allowed these participants to still participate in the study and schedule an interview time convenient for them. All students who were unable to make the focus groups did participate in the individual interviews. The same interview protocol (Appendix C) was followed for all focus groups and individual interviews.

Data Sources and Collection

Naturally, qualitative research combines several different data sources to answer the evaluation questions (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This study combines three main sources of data to answer the evaluation questions. From the selected participants, focus groups of three to six participants were formed and shaped based on who opted-in to the study and student availability. In addition, individual interview opportunities began to be offered to collect sufficient data for this study. The second data source was observational data, which included observing various transfer events hosted in the spring of 2021, such as orientation, on-campus tours, and student activities. Some of these events were hosted virtually due to COVID-19 restrictions while some of the smaller events were held in-person. The third and final data source

consisted of reviewing various websites, documents, brochures, and social media sites of LAU. The following sections outline these sources of data.

Focus Groups and Individual Interviews

"Interviewing is necessary when we cannot observe behavior, feelings, or how people interpret the world around them" (Merriam, 1998, p. 72). A focus group is composed of a small number of participants with whom the researcher moderates the discussion while "deliberately trying to surface the views of each person in the group" (Yin, 2018). Due to COVID-19, the focus groups and individual interviews were conducted virtually via Zoom. This population of students is already familiar with many different online platforms due to the learning environment created by COVID-19. This platform was used by many faculty, staff, and students at LAU, so it was familiar to participants. Consent (see Appendix B) was provided when potential participants opted-in to the study in the initial email.

The focus group and individual interviews were semi-structured in that there were both structured and open-ended questions (Merriam, 1998; see Appendix C). However, most of the questions were intentionally "broad and general so that the participants can construct the meaning of a situation, typically forged in discussions or interactions with other persons" (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 8). The focus groups provided the ideal environment for these types of discussions and conversations among participants and between the participants and myself while the individual interviews allowed me to dig deeper with each participant. Participants were encouraged to share their honest opinions and experiences during each interview session. The questions posed and protocol were kept the same for each interview for consistency in data. The protocol focused on three main areas including the recruitment/admission process, orientation, and students' first semester as new students at LAU.

At the end of each focus group, participants were given an opportunity to stay on the meeting to add anything else or to expand upon a prior point that was made. Each focus group and interview was recorded so that it could be transcribed for coding and analysis purposes.

Prior to conducting the first focus group interview, I chose to complete a pilot focus group to test the interview protocol and questions (Yin, 2018). For this pilot study, I emailed 75 out-of-state vertical transfer and in-state lateral transfer students. While only two students opted into the pilot study, I felt that this was adequate for the purposes of the pilot, practicing my interviewing skills, flushing out my questions and gave me an indication of any items to stay particularly attuned to in the interviews. Following the pilot focus group interview, I adjusted my protocol and questions to include clarifying the text of the questions and reordering some of the questions.

Observational Data

Observations in qualitative research "take place in the natural field setting…and represent a firsthand encounter with the phenomenon of interest" (Merriam, 1998, p. 94). As I noted previously, I had already attended two transfer orientations over the past 2 years since I knew my research interest was in evaluating the transfer student experience. I had taken notes, so I was able to retrieve them to add to the collection of data. Once the study officially began, another staff member and I attended several transfer specific events such as admission tours, transfer orientation, and specific events for current LAU transfer students throughout the period of this study (see Appendix D). We had intended on attending several in-person open house events, but they ended up being cancelled due to COVID-19. Attending the events allowed me to gain a firsthand account and multiple perspectives of various on-campus events in which the participants of the study are the target audience. As the observer throughout my data collection,

my researcher role was known to the group (Merriam, 1998). Due to my role at the university and the role of the staff member who assisted with collecting data, all transfer students either recognized us physically or recognized our names since they appear in all transfer related communications, and we both have regular interaction with members of the research population.

Throughout my data collection process, a fellow staff member and I made unstructured observations and documented our field notes in a journal. Some events were attended by both of us and others, just one of us were able to attend due to other responsibilities and conflicting priorities within the office. It is important to note that this staff member would have attended many of these events as part of their training for the position in which they hold and agreed to participate in the data collection and subsequent conversations about what we observed. Before the first observation, the staff member and I met to review the observation protocol and what was expected in this role. We reviewed what to look for during the observational periods, what to take notes on, and how to record the notes in the journal. During each observation, the date, time, and location were recorded, followed by notes regarding what was observed and our personal thoughts and feelings that arose throughout each observation period (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Merriam, 1998). We focused on key words that were spoken, direct quotations, body language, the substance of conversations, and descriptions of the setting and activities. All observations were in a public setting, and quotations were not ascribed to specific individuals. Following each observation period, more detailed notes were taken to provide a more complete picture of the observed event. Finally, after each event that we both attended, the staff member and I compared notes to clarify any discrepancies in the data. These events helped me to better understand the transfer student experiences surrounding the admission process and transition to LAU and assisted in building the focus group prompts.

Documents and Digital Materials

Mertens and Wilson (2012) note that "visual media such as photographs, videos, and web-based presentations can be powerful sources of meaningful data" (p. 388). In this study, these data sources provided an unobtrusive data collection method in the sense that no participants or institutional staff were needed in order to collect these data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Merriam, 1998). Through this study, I examined documents, websites, and brochures (see Appendix D) to better understand the research context and case and to answer the evaluation questions. The brochures and documents I examined included recruitment, admission, orientation, advising, academic policies, and state transfer materials. The websites I reviewed included admission, admitted student, orientation, and current student pages.

Data Analysis

The data analysis for this study focused on three sources of data: focus groups and individual interviews, observational data, and documents and digital materials. To keep track of the data and to conduct the analysis, I used the same coding with each data source. In qualitative studies, data collection and analysis are often simultaneous (Merriam, 1998), so the data analysis began after each new source of data was collected. For example, after each focus group, I reviewed the recording of the interview, downloaded the transcription of each interview, and coded the transcription with the established coding scheme. The coding scheme for the three data sources centered around the theoretical framework for this study, which included deficit narrative (Green, 2006; Harper, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1990, 2012), transition theory (Schlossberg, 1981), and sensemaking (Weick, 1995; Weick et al., 2005). Key words from each theory were used in the coding scheme (see Appendix E) throughout the data analysis process.

Triangulation was used throughout the data collection and analysis. Merriam (1998) notes that in "using multiple methods of data collection and analysis, triangulation strengthens reliability as well as internal validity" (p. 204). Therefore, I used several sources of data, or evidence, and analyzed them together to verify each finding of this study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Merriam, 1998; Yin, 2018). The data analysis procedures are described in the subsequent sections. The evaluation questions and the associated data sources, analysis approaches, and related literature are shown in Table 6.

Table 6

Program Evaluation Questions, Data Sources, Analysis Approaches, and Related Literature

Evaluation Question	Data Sources	Data Analysis	Related Literature
What is the vertical transfer narrative that helps to support students in their transfer process?	Focus groups, individual interviews, observational data, documents and digital materials	Coding, Triangulation	Green, 2006; Harper, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1990, 2012
How do vertical transfer students experience the transfer process and their transition to LAU?	Focus groups, individual interviews, observational data, documents and digital materials	Coding, Triangulation	Schlossberg, 1981
How do vertical transfer students make sense of the transfer process at LAU?	Focus groups, individual interviews, observational data	Coding, Triangulation	Weick, 1995; Weick et al., 2005

Note. LAU = Liberal Arts University

Focus Groups and Individual Interviews

Following each focus group and individual interview, the recorded session was transcribed. Once transcribed and once all interviews were completed, I reviewed each transcript and applied codes developed from the literature review and theoretical framework (see Appendix E). Merriam (1998) describes coding as "nothing more than assigning some sort of shorthand

designation to various aspects of your data so that you can easily retrieve specific pieces of the data" (p. 164). For example, if a student mentioned something about transfer students being treated in a more negative way compared to native students, I coded that section of the interview with "deficit narrative." This process allowed me to keep the data organized for further analysis.

I also took note of who volunteered to participate in this study and who did not as compared to the larger participant pool. For example, of the participants, 67% were female and 33% were men while the larger participant pool contained 54% females and 46% males. While gender was not necessarily an ideal representation of the vertical in-state transfer population, first-generation status was with 25% of students in this study 26% of students in this population declaring themselves to be a first-generation college student. This type of analysis provided me with information as to how representative the participants were to overall vertical transfer student population of approximately 130.

Observational Data

As noted, field notes were taken in a journal during several observation periods including new transfer student orientation, and other transfer specific student activities (see Appendix D). As noted, two transfer orientations were observed prior to the start of this study. Notes were made regarding language used, body language of participants, and direct quotations. After each observation concluded, the staff member and I further developed our individual field notes while the observations were still recent in our memory. Once the field notes were recorded, I applied the same coding (see Appendix E) used for the focus groups and individual interviews that related to the literature review and theoretical framework.

Documents and Digital Materials

Similar tactics for data analysis were used for the document and digital material review as were used with the observational data analysis. Notes from each review were kept in a journal and the notes included readability, language used, number of clicks needed to navigate to the page from the homepage, etc. Coding occurred immediately after each material was reviewed using the predetermined coding scheme (see Appendix E) that was based on the theoretical framework.

Delimitations, Limitations, and Assumptions

There were several delimitations, limitations and assumptions that were present throughout this study. As a researcher, it is important to be aware of the presence of these so they do not influence the outcome of the study or have negative impacts on the participants. The delimitations, limitations, and assumptions are detailed next.

Delimitations

There were three primary delimitations to note in this study, including the research study location, the selection of participants being studied, and the type of data collected. First, this study focused on a specific group of vertical new transfer students. I did not study other types of transfer students such as lateral or reverse transfer students. All participants transferred to LAU from in-state community colleges, so there were no participants from out-of-state community colleges. Because approximately 60-70% of new transfers at LAU come from in-state community colleges, this group was targeted for the study. I also narrowed my study to only the fall 2020 and spring 2021 cohorts, because this was the first class I fully recruited, admitted, and enrolled since starting in my current position and did not have the influence of the previous staff

members in the Transfer Admission Office. In addition, this cohort had a unique experience applying and transferring to a 4-year institution during COVID-19.

The second delimitation was the research location. I chose to only look at the transfer process and associated transition and experiences at LAU. I did not research other admission departments or other 4-year institutions within the state. Finally, I initially chose to use focus groups instead of conducting individual interviews. This decision was made because of the type of student being studied (new vertical transfer students from in-state community colleges) and the ability of focus groups to gather data on a shared experience that each student experienced. However, as noted previously, I was unable to conduct enough focus groups to gather enough rich data so I did have to revert to individual interviews. In hindsight, it was good to offer multiple interview options to get both shared and individual stories and experiences.

Limitations

Limitations are aspects of the study in which the researcher cannot control and there were several limitations that were present. As noted, in this study I served as the researcher-as-instrument (Craig, 2009). I recognize that I am the head of the department while also serving as the researcher and main data collector in this study. To help reduce this limitation, I acknowledged this in the introduction of the email, the consent form for participation in the research, and at the beginning of each focus group and individual interview. My roles as the researcher and as the head of the department did not affect the participants' relationship with LAU as there were no negative or positive impacts of their participation. Finally, as noted, all focus groups and individual interviews were conducted virtually rather than in-person due to COVID-19 precautions. Although this provided an unanticipated benefit of convenience for both the participants and myself, there may have been more hesitation for participants to share their

experiences and opinions in a virtual environment versus an in-person environment. Perhaps some were afraid to speak freely in the group format as well. However, as noted in the ethical considerations later in this chapter, steps were taken to ensure confidentiality and anonymity throughout the study.

Assumptions

There were several assumptions that I used in this study and it was important to identify them before I began my research. First, I assumed participants were sharing true and accurate information and were comfortable sharing these true experiences. Second, I assumed participants could use their memories to recall their experiences throughout the past year or two as they were being recruited, admitted, and transitioned to LAU. Finally, I assumed that the selected participants provided a range of experiences that represent vertical transfer students at LAU and that these interviews, observations, and document reviews were able to address the evaluation questions.

Ethical Considerations

Prior to seeking Institution Review Board (IRB) approval, I spoke with my direct supervisor to ensure the research problem I identified was present at LAU and this study was a good use of time. My supervisor was a gatekeeper in this study, and her support was critical to my success. Gatekeepers are defined as "individuals at research sites who provide access to the site and allow or permit a qualitative research study to be undertaken" (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 248). Once we agreed on the problem that was present and evaluation questions to be addressed, I sought IRB approval.

IRB approval was necessary at both William & Mary, where I was pursuing this doctoral degree, and LAU, the research site for this case study. The Education Institutional Review

Committee (EDIRC) at William & Mary provided approval for this study on January 29, 2021 Next, I contacted the head of the LAU IRB to begin the final approval process that was needed to begin my research. LAU IRB approval was granted on February 23, 2021.

Several steps were taken to protect the participants and to ensure each participant was treated the same (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Merriam, 1998; Yin, 2018). First, as noted, each participant was informed of the purpose of the study and how the data would be used, and they were provided with an informed consent form to sign (Appendix B). Each participant was informed that they were neither required to participate in the study nor sign the consent form if they chose not to participate. Second, participants' real names were masked to protect their identity throughout this study. At no point throughout the research study or this report could the identity of the research participants be uncovered. Finally, the computer in which all research data was stored, including interviews, audio recordings, observations, and participant data, was continually locked if not in use and stored in a secure location.

Timeline

The timeline for this program evaluation included four phases. The first phase, obtaining institutional review board approvals, was completed at both my home institution (William & Mary) and my research site institution (LAU). Phase one was completed in February 2021, immediately after a successful dissertation proposal defense. After IRB approval was received, the second phase began. This included obtaining participant data from the Registrar's Office. Phase three included the formation of focus groups and individual interviews, obtaining participant consent, and conducting the focus groups and individual interviews. Phase three was completed by the end of April of 2021. Transcription, coding, and analysis of the interview data immediately followed. The fourth phase, conducted throughout the study included the review

and analysis of related transfer websites, documents and brochures, and campus events such as transfer programs and new transfer orientation. All data were collected by the end of May 2021 and data coding was fully completed by the end of June 2021.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

The evaluation question and sub-questions for this study sought to better understand the vertical transfer student narrative and experiences surrounding the transfer admission and transition process during COVID-19. The main evaluation questions include:

1. What is the vertical transfer narrative that helps to support students in their transfer process?
    a. How do vertical transfer students experience the transfer process and their transition to LAU?
    b. How do vertical transfer students make sense of the transfer process and transition to LAU?

Understanding the answers to these questions will provide guidance in future transfer admission decisions such as enrollment goals, recruitment planning, and process improvement at LAU. To answer the evaluation questions, I conducted virtual focus groups, individual interviews, reviewed documents and digital materials from the site institution, and observed several transfer related programs and activities. After each piece of data was collected, a coding scheme was used (Appendix E) that was based on the theoretical framework.

The focus of this chapter is to detail the findings from my data collection process. This chapter is organized by emergent themes associated with the theoretical framework and evaluation questions and concludes with a summary of the overall findings. As noted, the theoretical framework for this study consisted of three main elements including: transition theory (Schlossberg, 1981), sensemaking (Weick, 1995), and the negative or deficit narrative

surrounding the transfer student population and process (Green, 2006; Harper, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1990, 2012).

This evaluation concluded with two major findings including understanding the transfer student's journey and transfer student's concerns and negative experiences. Regarding the transfer student journey, I identified four themes including participants' preparation for and adjustment to transferring, strategies for their transition and beyond, expectations or obligations outside of the classroom, and their engagement on campus. Participants spoke in detail about their experiences prior to transfer, if and how they used on-campus resources, the challenges they faced with living on- or off-campus, obligations outside of the classroom such as work and family, the challenges they faced engaging with on-campus activities, meeting other new transfer students, and connecting with continuing students who already had established friend groups.

The second major finding consisted of the participants' concerns and negative experiences in the transfer process and in settling in at LAU. Throughout the interviews and observations, participants shared their concerns, negative experiences, and provided valuable insights for improvements for future semesters. The major concerns could be summarized into five themes including the on-campus admission tours, academic advising structure for new transfers and interactions with their academic advisors, the institution's full-time student expectations, housing for new transfer students, and new transfer student orientation. Two on-campus admission tours were observed, and the experience and information communicated regarding transfer students was contradictory from one tour to another. Additionally, participants felt their advisors were too busy to spend the necessary time advising a new transfer student, the advisor spoke negatively towards the students due to their status as a new vertical transfer student, found it hard to manage the institution's full-time student requirements due to various

obligations outside the classroom, were treated differently throughout the on-campus housing process, and found that orientation was not memorable and/or not relevant or helpful towards their transition. These findings are further detailed in the sections that follow.

The Transfer Journey

Understanding the transfer process and the experiences of transfer students going through the process is central to this research (Wang, 2020). While each student had their own unique experiences throughout the transfer process and transition, several major themes were common among many of the participants. The major themes that emerged from my research included preparation for transfer and associated adjustments, strategies for the transition and beyond, expectations or obligations students had outside of the classroom, and connection with others.

Preparation and Adjustment

Throughout this study, participants noted that they generally felt supported throughout the admission process and prepared to start classes at LAU after transferring from an in-state community college. Several participants, including Adam, Becca, Charlie, Diana, and Felicia, spoke of how they relied heavily on the Transfer Admission Office throughout the admission process. They would contact the office often with their questions. Regarding this high level of support, Felicia noted "[LAU] gave me everything I needed possible with the transfer process which also made me like [LAU] more, because I felt like that communication was there and I needed that communication." The high-level of communication, quick responses to emails, someone always picking up the telephone during office hours, and a welcoming environment, were all aspects that helped these participants feel supported throughout the admission process.

Level of Preparation. Participants generally felt prepared to start their first semester at LAU. Becca, stated "I felt prepared, I was nervous just because like it's a new school but I think

that was just like a personal thing. I felt prepared." Another participant, Adam, echoed her feelings and experience about the academic transition by stating, "I felt really prepared as well. I mean it's also the excitement of going to a new school and you know everything is kind of flashing by but I mean I felt more than prepared at the time." These participants were much more focused on the excitement of a new experience and journey instead of a deficit narrative. Regarding the social and academic transition, Diana noted:

> I was actually, like, pretty excited to be honest, because I was like you know there's going to be a new place, new people. Like, I was so excited to like be a good student. So far, it's been smooth driving. Everyone has been pretty nice and everything and classes aren't too hard.

Becca, Adam, and Diana all noted that they genuinely felt prepared academically to start classes at LAU and were much more focused on the excitement of a new experience and journey instead of a deficit narrative. Personal motivation seemed to have played a large role in their preparation for the transition to LAU.

Diana continued on by saying that her transition was made easier because the Transfer Admission Office created her initial class schedule prior to the start of her first semester at LAU. She stated:

> They had already had a first semester schedule for me, which was wonderful. That took a lot of, you know, burden off my shoulders because I was wondering what classes should I take, like what professors are good, and which ones aren't, you know.

This onboarding process made the initial transition smoother as the schedule was built for each student based on their intended major, incoming transfer credit, and missing degree requirements, all with a timely graduation in mind which is one of the objectives of the Transfer

Admission Office and LAU. Once a student received their schedule, they could meet with their major advisor to discuss any necessary changes. Diana did end up making some adjustments just before the start of semester during the add/drop period but felt less stressed having an initial class schedule already in place for her first semester at LAU.

However, some students did encounter some complications throughout the transfer process and associated transition. Even students not experiencing personal difficulties acknowledged that others likely have had some complications. Becca offered, “I mean, for me, I feel like I've already said it was relatively smooth but I know that's not the case for everybody, but yeah, for me personally, it was relatively smooth.” For example, Lauren experienced some transfer shock due to the increased level of academic expectation and rigor upon transferring. She stated, “had I realized how much and how different my work was going to be leaving community college and coming to a 4-year, I would have done more like small programs and training during the summer, that I didn't do.” She continued to identify examples such as study skills and basic writing skills.

Diversity on Campus. Other topics that arose in several of the focus groups and interviews was diversity and culture. Several students noted that that the diversity and culture of the campus was different from their community college. About 25% of the participants noted they were not expecting the lower level of diversity upon transferring to LAU. Regarding the differences in cultures, participants noted the high level of student engagement at LAU compared to their community colleges. Emma, a married white student, explained this by saying:

> This might just be me, because there are a lot of people [at LAU] from [a particular geographic region within the state], but going from [a community college] to LAU is like totally a different culture. I wasn't involved like at all at my community college, like

> extracurricularly, but I made friends in classes. It was also like very, very diverse and then I come to LAU and it is totally different. It was very apparent once I got to LAU. I was like, weird, this is very different.

Emma was not the only student who noted a difference in diversity upon transferring to LAU. Felicia, another white student, noted that because she toured campus during the summer (pre-COVID) when campus was nearly empty, she did not get an accurate picture of what the campus looked like in terms of diversity. Therefore, she relied on pictures, online brochures, and the website to help paint the picture. Based on this review, Felicia anticipated that like her high school and community college, LAU would be diverse. LAU enrolls about 23% students of color, which is markedly different than most community colleges in the state which combine to enroll 42% students of color. While conducting the document and website review, there was notable diversity present within these materials.

In her interview, Lauren recalled that her friends and parents were concerned for her as a Black woman attending a predominately White institution. She added, “my parents were concerned as well, because I'm a woman of color and we knew it was a predominantly White campus as well, so they were concerned about me getting roommates that work and wouldn’t be hostile towards me.” On her campus tour, which occurred in the Spring of 2020 when COVID-19 was starting, she noted there were not a lot of students on campus at the time. She stated:

> There weren't many students wandering around. So that at first made me nervous because I didn't really get to see people in their natural habitat, but the campus was beautiful, and I don't know, something about just being on it and walking through the campus made me feel like this is where I should be.

Even so, Lauren found that attending a predominately white institution as of course different than her experiences attending a more diverse community college and high school but she had not yet had any negative experiences at LAU that would cause her concern.

Living on Campus. The transition to living on a college campus for the first time was another transition point for some participants. While new transfer students are not required to live on-campus, students who come to LAU as first-time freshmen are required to live on-campus for 3 years. Therefore, many transfer students will notice that their native student peers are living on-campus. At LAU, approximately 79% of all students and about 50% of participants in this study lived on-campus. Jack noted that his transition to on-campus living went smoothly:

> Once like I got into the groove of getting used to it since this is my first time living on-campus. In community college, I would commute a lot and so now…I'm staying in the place that I'm learning… So just trying to figure out that piece of living on-campus, because you aren't used to that coming from the community college.

For the six participants who lived on-campus, adjusting to on-campus life such as living in a residence hall with roommates, learning how to share a space, do laundry, use a meal plan, etc. all worked to complicate the vertical transfer student transition and added an extra layer of stress to their overall transition to a 4-year institution.

Orientation. Finally, even though the topic of transfer orientation made up a large part of the interview questions, most participants could not recall much about the experience or if they even attended. Diana did remember attending orientation but could not recall much about the experience. She stated, "I can't really remember. I just remember it was like an hour or two meeting and a lot of information being thrown at us. I know they were trying to make it as like evenly paced as possible." Other participants echoed this sentiment. While they remembered that

there was an orientation, it seemed to be a distance memory and they could not recall much of the details. This could indicate a small lasting effect of the sessions or, now that they have successfully transitioned to LAU, a lack of memory as to what they did not know entering LAU and what they specifically learned as a result of attending new transfer student orientation.

All Fall 2020 and Spring 2021 orientation sessions for new transfer students were virtual. Becca spoke of a positive orientation experience she had even though it was virtual. She noted how the orientation leaders did the best they could to engage with the new transfer students. Becca stated, "I liked how [orientation leaders] went around and asked everybody basic ice breakers but also wanting to get their input about like transferring to LAU and stuff like that. I thought they did a good job with orientation." Throughout the focus group interview, Becca continued to reference her orientation leader's continued efforts to engage, even after the orientation day had concluded. Her orientation leader continued to message the group weeks into the semester to check-in and see if she could offer any assistance to the new transfer students. This seemed to be a common theme as several participants noted the continual engagement on the part of their orientation leader throughout their first semester.

Strategies for the Transition and Beyond

Several participants were able to recall the strategies they used when preparing to transition to LAU and during their first semester, and other participants noted what strategies they learned in their first semester (Fall 2020 or Spring 2021) and hoped to utilized in their next semester at LAU (Fall 2021). These strategies included using on-campus resources such as the tutoring and writing centers, going to their professors' office hours, attending on-campus student activities, relying on their peers for assistance and information, and finding where each of their classes were physically located before the start of the semester.

Engaging With Faculty. Diana reflected on the transition to a 4-year university and her experience during orientation at LAU. She noted that "transferring to a completely new school is very different especially to a university from community college." In the busyness of starting a new semester at a new school, she had not utilized the various academic resources available on-campus and planned to use them in future semesters as she felt as though she missed an opportunity. Her experience so far LAU and the busyness was different than her previous community college because the campus was larger, has more students, and there is much more activity on-campus including many more obligations outside of simply attending class.

Heather stated that she missed out on connecting with her professors in a meaningful way due to her current class schedule and COVID-19 restrictions. She hoped to change that moving forward. Heather added:

> This is my fault, like, you know, my schedule just is really terrible right now. So, you know, something that I really wanted to do is get to know the teachers and like that's something I'm disappointed I really haven't been able to do because I don't have time to go to office hours right now. I should be able to do that in the fall, so I just think that would be mine. I wanted the teachers to know me since like I haven't been here very long. I wanted to have felt like I could go to them for help [because I had gotten to know them since I had started at LAU]. Yeah, I don't really feel like I'm there yet.

In her first semester at LAU, Heather realized how important this in-person interaction was with her professors and is proactively adjusting her schedule next semester to accommodate for this valuable time with her professors.

Engaging With Students. Lauren spoke of her experiences trying to meet other LAU students during her first semester. She found that she had to be intentional in reaching out to

peers and did this by attending on-campus events. Yet, at the on-campus events sponsored by LAU, she noted it was hard to meet current students because they "were sticking to their friend groups that they already knew because it was easier, but it made us feel more like outsiders, because of that." New transfer students lack the friend base that many current LAU students built due to being on campus at LAU for a longer period of time.

Emma had a similar experience when she joined a few clubs in her first semester. She recalled that many of the students in the clubs would continually reference traditions, professors, or experiences that she was not familiar with yet. This situation made her also feel like an outsider. She found this experience encountering returning students who had already formed close friend groups to be a barrier in trying to connect with these students. Emma did note that she had made some friends by exchanging phone numbers with classmates and has used these connections for homework help, study groups, and to ask general questions she has about LAU. However, many of these peers she had not yet been able to meet in-person or been able to meet outside of the classroom due to COVID-19 concerns and restrictions. Even though Emma sought out social engagement in clubs on campus, it was through classes that she made most of her connections with other students, and this ability to nurture friendships was stymied by COVID-19.

The majority of the participants in this study noted that they had already attended a few on-campus events but found it was hard to connect with other students because even though they were on campus, COVID-19 restrictions such as physical distancing and masking made it hard to meet with others informally. Kendra spoke about how she did join a few clubs her first semester at LAU but noted she was inconsistent in attending club meetings therefore, she stated her strategy for next semester was to focus more on being consistent with at least one club so that

she could connect with other students within the club in a more meaningful way. The transfer student participants were looking forward to experiencing campus life post-COVID-19 as they felt it would be much easier to meet new people and make friends. As participants planned for a post-COVID-19 college experience, they planned to try to join new clubs, attend more activities, and connect with fellow students in classes in the coming semesters.

Engaging With the Campus. In nearly every interview and focus group, students noted that they were stressed leading up to the first day of classes because they did not have the opportunity to come to campus for orientation and/or find their classrooms for the semester. This lack of time on campus caused an increased level of stress the first week because they did not know the names and locations of the buildings on campus, which made their transition even more difficult. For many of the participants, they were stepping on LAU's campus for the very first time since the campus had been closed for the several months leading up to the fall semester and when it did open, campus tours were limited.

Some students were able to come to campus a day or two early before the first day of classes to find the academic buildings, however, some encountered locked buildings due to COVID-19 regulations requiring a campus ID card to swipe into the building. For example, Charlie said he headed to campus a few days early to pick up his student ID card and was able to get into some of the academic buildings to locate his classes, which helped him feel less stressed and more prepared for the first week of classes.

Similarly, Diana would have liked to get to campus early to explore and find her classes. With access to campus and campus buildings limited, she was unsure if she would even be able to get into the buildings before the first day of classes, so she did not attempt to come to campus early. The virtual orientation format did not provide the opportunity to explore campus. She had

hoped that having the time to find her classroom locations would have been incorporated into the orientation programming. If she had known that was not going to be incorporated and knowing how much she struggled to find her classes the first week of school, she would have found time to do so before the first day of classes. Because of this experience, or lack thereof, many of the participants noted that they would take the time in future semesters to find their classes before the beginning of the semester because, while they now know where the buildings are located, the insides of the buildings are often confusing due to many of them looking identical on the inside.

Throughout this study, participants were able to clearly identify the resources or strategies they used to ease their transition to the 4-year institution, ones they wished they had utilized, and those that they planned to use in the coming semester. These strategies included using on-campus resources such as the tutoring and writing centers, going to their professors' office hours, attending on-campus student activities, relying on their peers for assistance and information, and finding where each of their classes were physically located before the start of the semester.

Expectations or Obligations Outside of the Classroom

While some of the new transfer students were busy adjusting to living on a college campus for the first time, other students were adjusting to living off-campus. Fifty percent of the participants lived off-campus. As noted previously, new transfer students are not required to live on-campus. Some of these off-campus participants felt isolated due to limited interactions with other students since most LAU students live on-campus (79%). Isaac, a student who lives off-campus and has many off-campus responsibilities, reflected on the hectic experience other participants shared in the focus group about moving into on-campus housing and stated, "So that's one thing I didn't have to stress as much about because I just had the same system that I've

had for forever now." While he did not have to navigate changes in his living environment, Isaac did note how hard the social transition has been because he has a young son to care for, an off-campus job, and therefore, limited time and opportunities to meet people due to living off-campus. Having adult responsibilities while in college is a common experience for community college students, and rarer for the traditionally aged students who attend LAU.

Other vertical transfer students to LAU had similar family responsibilities. Adam commented that he is a primary caregiver for his grandparents and that creates a lot of obligations outside of being a full-time student. He is constantly going between campus, his current residence at his parents' house, and his grandparents' house which creates "a lot of back and forth." Likewise, Emma, a student who is married and owns a house off-campus with her husband, spoke about how her transition was drastic because she moved from California when her now husband was stationed at a nearby military base and then got married. She started at the local community college and then transferred to LAU. The stresses of being far from home, navigating a new marriage, homeownership, and holding a job all while trying to focus on school created a lot of competing priorities for her that are difficult to balance. Therefore, she has chosen to not focus as much on the social aspect of college. She stated:

> For me it's not a huge priority, you know like I do want to make study groups like that's important, but you know I think I'm just focused on my school and then I want to go home because I am tired. I don't have a lot of extracurricular time. Yeah, we have had some like Zoom meetings with some of the chemistry students, so we get outside of the classroom time.

Another non-traditional participant, Heather, had a similar experience balancing school, work, and married life. She explained how she had been contemplating finishing school and what her day-to-day life looks like. She stated:

> I guess, as a like non-traditional transfer student, I really struggled this semester with having any sort of work-life balance. There's definitely been a couple times where I honestly am not like 100% sure that, you know, like I really want to graduate. It's something I've been working towards for a long time but honestly it's like a mental health thing. At some point, you know, how much can you take? I get up for work at 4am, you know, and then I come here and I do homework all night and then I don't have a life. I miss my husband.

The non-traditional students that were interviewed (two are married and a third has a young son) struggled greatly with balancing school with all their obligations outside of school. They have many responsibilities to attend to outside of the classroom so sometimes academics cannot always be their priority like it may be for other, more traditional college students.

Isaac, a student who is balancing going to school full-time while working off-campus and supporting a child explained how the Transfer Admission Office was able to work with him to create a class schedule that fit around his work hours and childcare obligations. He stated:

> I mean I guess I feel like maybe if I had participated in more of the events. They were definitely there, you know, for people to do, and like I feel like they would be fun if I was maybe in a different place in my life….I work right now too, so I can't take any night classes really…I don't know ya'll just made it work for me.

Isaac noted that there are events for students, and specifically transfer students, that he was interested in but that he did not have the time to focus on that aspect of traditional college life.

He stated, that while he has not had what many would consider an ideal social transition/experience and wished he had the time and fewer obligations outside the classroom to engage more in campus life, it was an example of how LAU is willing to work closely with non-traditional students as they navigate a highly traditional institution. Isaac was able to work directly with his advisor and the Transfer Admission Office to fit his classes around his outside obligations such as childcare and work.

Student Engagement

Participants noted the difficulties they faced meeting and connecting with other students, both with other new transfer students and with current LAU students, and engaging with campus activities. As stated previously in the findings of this study, several non-traditional students, such as Isaac and Heather, noted that attending social activities was not a large priority due to their obligations outside the classroom such as work, childcare, and family obligations but also living off-campus made meeting new people much more challenging. However, other participants explained how meeting, connecting with other students, and engaging in campus activities was a priority that they actively pursued. Lauren explained her approach and stated:

> I knew it was going to be difficult but it definitely was challenging because of my personality. I had to actively always pursue other, like, personal relationships. I had to be the one to, like, initiate some friendships because I actively, like, went out of my way to ask people "hey, do you want to have lunch" or "hey, do you want to study together?" last semester. It worked out in terms of, like, I did meet people that way, um, but it was, it was challenging for me because it was like a personal challenge of overcoming who I naturally am.

Other participants noted the tactics they employed in the classroom such as actively engaging with students who were seated near them in the classroom, creating study groups, engaging with their resident assistant, joining clubs, and so forth.

Charlie spoke of a meeting he had with a professional staff member as being something that helped to encourage him to engage with faculty, staff, students, and get involved in activities on campus. Each new transfer student is required to have an engagement meeting with a staff member in the orientation office within the first month or so of their first semester. While dreading the meeting at first, Charlie spoke about how he ended up enjoying the meeting and appreciated connecting with a younger professional at LAU. In the meeting, they were able to brainstorm ideas for how he could get engaged with campus life and he left the meeting with action items and points of contact.

The participants in the study reported a mix of experiences and reactions of their orientation with some being ok with the level of engagement of students and orientation leaders and others reported being dissatisfied. There was no correlation between neither traditional and non-traditional students nor on-campus or off-campus students. Emma noted her experience during orientation trying to engage with other new transfer students and that she was very excited to engage with other, currently enrolled LAU students. She tried her best, but she said there was a lack of engagement from other new transfer students throughout orientation According to Emma, the orientation leaders tried to engage and do their best but students just were not reciprocating, asking questions, and engaging with the orientation leader or other new transfers. Similarly, Felicia noted that she wished orientation had more of a focus on meeting and connecting other new transfer students but understood that because of the virtual format this

year, that was challenging. She was relying on her orientation experience to expose her to other new transfer students and being the process for making friends.

I attended two transfer student lunches that were hosted by LAU in which transfer student are encouraged to bring their lunch and socialize with other transfer students while they eat. A staff member from student affairs and one or two former transfer students are typically present to engage with these students and encourage conversation. At the two events that I attended, I only saw one of the participants from this study. While conducting the focus groups and individual interviews, I mentioned these transfer student lunches and most participants had at least heard about them via email advertisements but had not attended because they were not on campus that day, it interfered with other activities during the same time, or they were nervous to attend. Two participants did attend (Kyle and Lauren). Kyle attended frequently throughout the semester and said it had always been a positive experience. Lauren had also been to two other activities on campus, one of which was geared to transfer students. Regarding the activities for transfer students, Lauren stated they often conflict with her schedule, but she wished there were more transfer specific events because it was nice to be around students who were also transfer students.

Kendra had a similar experience with the timing of the lunches due to other meetings or events being hosted at the same time and stated "I've been trying to go to the transfer lunches and it just never works out…Eventually, I will get there and I will attend." She is hopeful that she will be able to attend in the future since she sees the value of meeting other transfer students and making new friends.

Student Concerns and Negative Experiences

Throughout this study, participants were asked to reflect on their experiences, share concerns and pain points in the transfer process, and give feedback on areas they wish were improved. Many of the students were able to pinpoint several areas for improvement. Five major themes emerged including the on-campus admission tours, the overall structure of academic advising for new transfer students and the experience with academic advisors, full-time student expectations, on-campus housing, and new transfer student orientation. These five themes are detailed in the sections that follow.

Admission Tours

The on-campus admission tours and associated presentation were a prominent point of discussion within the focus groups and individual interviews. For the few students who did mention they took a tour LAU's campus, they able to remember their campus tour and identify specific memories regarding the experience. Some students had toured campus when they were still in high school, had toured with an older sibling when they were going through the college search process, and others toured a semester or two prior to transferring. Gabriella, a 19-year-old on-campus student, commented specifically on the on-campus tour experience during COVID-19. She stated that she thought the campus tour and registration process "was very well done... I was pretty concerned coming down here because my mom is high risk. Campus was very clean and nice and I did appreciate that."

Another participant, Emma, remembers being the only transfer student in the presentation before the tour. She stated:

> It's a bunch of perspective freshmen and their parents and I remember sitting there, and I think you walked up to me you're like, are you the transfer student? I was like yes. You're

like, okay, come with me. It was really great and really personalized because it was one-on-one. I got all the questions answered that I needed.

Ultimately, Emma had a great tour experience and had all her questions answered but she wondered what her experience would have been if someone from the Transfer Admission Office had not been there to meet with her individually. Each time a transfer student signs up for an on-campus tour, the Transfer Admission Office gets an email notification and a staff member is then assigned to that prospective transfer student's tour. At the beginning of the tour experience, there is an introductory video that plays in the main presentation room and then the transfer student(s) are excused from the freshman admission presentation to meet with someone from the Transfer Admission Office. After the presentations, the two groups reconvene and then head out for the tour of campus. The policy of the Transfer Admission Office is to ensure that someone from their office is available to meet with each transfer student in the tour, otherwise, a prospective transfer student would have to sit through the freshman admission presentation which covers the admission criteria, admission process, and scholarship program information that is specific only to first-time freshmen. By meeting with the transfer office staff, the prospective transfer student learns more about the transfer admission process instead.

For many students like Emma, the on-campus tour experience is the crucial point in which a prospective student decides if they will apply to or attend the institution. Lauren talked about the significant impact the on-campus tour had on her transfer decision making process and how it was the moment where she knew LAU was where she needed to transfer. She stated:

> I did my tour for LAU in the spring before my fall semester, which was right when COVID was starting to become a thing. The tour itself wasn't bad. There weren't many students wandering around so at first it made me nervous because I didn't really get to see

> the people like in their natural habitat. But, the campus was beautiful, and I don't know, something about just walking through the campus made me feel like this is where I should be. I was just like, go with that gut feeling type of thing so I was just like, I think I'm supposed to be here. So I'm just gonna put all my effort into making sure I'm ready to come here in the fall.

Lauren also mentioned that at several points in the tour she felt like an outsider as a prospective transfer student compared to the prospective freshmen on tour. Her tour guide was frequently giving "freshmen answers to a junior question and that was not helpful during the tour." This experience made her wonder what life at LAU would be like as a new transfer student. The tour guide was aware she was a transfer but was not prepared to answer anything other than freshman related questions.

While observing two on-campus admission tours, I noted how the tour guide certainly matters in what the prospective student experiences. On the tour I observed, the tour guide was aware there was a transfer on the tour and she was able to cater all her answers to both freshmen and transfers. For instance, when she was explaining one of her favorite traditions at LAU, she emphasized that new transfers can also participate and that it was not just for first-time freshmen. Similarly, she talked about freshmen housing but then also talked about what the housing looks like for upperclassmen and new transfer students. This tour guide was intentional in including information that was of interest to both prospective freshmen and transfers students visiting LAU.

On another on-campus tour that a colleague observed, the experience for the prospective transfer student on tour was quite different. The prospective transfer student asked a lot of questions throughout the tour but the tour guide was unable to answer them since they were

transfer specific questions. The questions included items like do transfers interview, do they have to live in on-campus housing, are the general education requirements different for transfers, and are transfers invited to participate in various LAU campus traditions? In one instance regarding housing, the prospective student knew the answer to the question better than the tour guide. This tour experience may leave some prospective transfers feeling excluded and it could have a negative impact on their feelings towards transferring to LAU. If they do not feel included while on a campus tour, what do they think their experience might be as a new transfer at LAU?

Academic Advising Structure and Advising Experiences

As noted in Chapter 1, all new transfer students are assigned to the department chair or the program director for the major they intend to pursue. If students are undecided on their major, they are assigned to a member of the faculty who oversees all faculty advising for LAU. During Fall 2020 and Spring 2021, advising meetings happened in a variety of ways including virtual, phone, in-person, and email. The format of the meetings was dependent on the student's and advisor's level of comfort due to COVID-19.

Two topics that at least six participants (Diana, Charlie, Becca, Felicia, Emma, and Adam) spoke about in the interviews were the downsides of being a new transfer student and having the department chair or director of their program as their academic advisor, and how some academic advisors negatively viewed their preparation at the community college for LAU and a 4-year institution. On average, a department chair or program director for 2020-2021 was assigned nine new transfer students, with business (43), chemistry and molecular biology (25), and physics and computer science (34) being the three departments with the most transfer students. Regarding her academic advisor, Diana stated:

> I know [the department chair is] a little bit swamped because I believe he's like the head [of the department]. Yeah, so I know he's like very busy right now and class enrollment is opening soon so I think he is a little swapped with emails but I'm hoping that he'll give me advice when I see him next. I think that will probably be like my third time meeting with him.

In reflecting on advising experience, Diana noted that she is still having trouble getting in touch with her academic advisor quickly even though she is now in her second semester and about to register for her third semester at LAU. It is up to the department chair or program director as to whether they assign the student a new academic advisor after the initial advising meeting. Oftentimes, the department chair or program director keeps the new transfer students as their advisees throughout the student's time at LAU.

Charlie voiced similar concerns about availability of his academic advisor and suggested changing advisors for transfer students after the first meeting. He stated:

> The possibility after the first semester to change advisors, and the only reason is because I know as a transfer you interface with the department chair but the department chair is pretty busy no matter what department. The reduced course load as a department chair because of administration responsibilities means you're less likely to see that person in class. And so, I don't know, it's like the only time I see my department chair is for those meetings and I email him all the time. He's friends with my teachers I have but like he doesn't see me in the classroom at all.

Charlie noted how important it is to him to get to know his professors outside of the classroom because it has led him to undergraduate research opportunities and connections with professionals within the community in his field of study. He had hoped he would have this same

type of interaction and opportunity with his academic advisor (the department chair) in the classroom at some point so he could connect with him in a different way. In the classroom, his advisor could get to know him as a student and his qualities such as his work ethic and high level of engagement in the classroom and could lead to opportunities such as research, employment, networking and even a reference letter for graduate school eventually. Charlie does not believe taking a class with his advisor will be a reality due to the department chair's many responsibilities outside of teaching.

While most students had positive things to say about their experiences interacting with the academic advisors, a few participants brought up a negative experience. One participant, Emma, recalled that her advisor mentioned that she should take a lighter load (12 credits instead of the typical 15 credits) because "this isn't a community college." While the advisor may have had the best of intentions in warning the student about an increase in the academic rigor the student was about to experience, the comment came off as condescending and deflating to a student who had not even started classes at LAU. When reflecting on this experience with her advisor, Emma noted:

> I went to a prestigious private high school and graduated with a 3.8. I left my community college with a 4.0 and the only time I ever struggled there was when I would procrastinate. Yeah, I think I would have handled five classes but I didn't want to come in too hot since, you know, you're meeting your advisor for the first time. That's hard to navigate.

When Emma recalled her experience with her advisor in the focus group, this brought up a recollection for Felicia who was in the same focus group. Felicia remembered emailing her faculty advisor to ask if she should add a fifth class to her schedule and the advisor replied back

stating, “Are you sure? You’re a science major. It's different than [the community college].” While Felicia noted she ultimately understood where the advisor was coming from in her warning, she had wished that the advisor explained a bit more or the conversation happened in-person versus a short comment in an email. While several faculty advisors made comments related to their advisees being new transfer students due to their specific role advising new transfer students, a faculty member in the classroom would not be able to identify who was a transfer student and who was a native student in their classes.

Similarly, Kendra also had a negative conversation with her academic advisor. Kendra’s advisor noted that she might not be successful in a particular major because they saw the student had previously taken developmental mathematics at the community college. Kendra stated that her advisor:

> Assumed that I wasn't going to be successful within my major because of my math skills. Just because I'm in developmental math doesn't mean anything. When I went into community college I didn't realize how big these [math] placement tests were so I didn't study that much for it and prepared for it. So, I ended up getting placed in developmental math.

Kendra met the admission standard for college-level math upon transfer as that is a requirement for all new transfer students. Many students take developmental mathematics at the community college, and their progression in the math sequence must meet the admission entrance requirements at the 4-year institution. Kendra stated that her goal while taking the developmental mathematics was to improve her math skills because she knew she had previously struggled in math and knew it would be a needed skill upon transfer to a 4-year institution. She felt confident in her abilities having done this work at the community college and since entering LAU did not

struggle with math in her classes. Ultimately, this conversation with her original academic advisor convinced her to change her major and pursue another major that had less of a focus on math. Although she is ultimately happy she changed her major because she does believe she is now in major that better suits her, regardless of the math, she spoke of this moment as being a negative experience in the LAU transition.

Jack, an interview participant and a student who regularly attended the transfer student lunches hosted by LAU, noted at one of these lunches that he was warned about being treated differently after transferring from a community college to a 4-year institution. Prior to transferring to LAU, Jack remembered an interaction with his academic advisor from his community college in which she warned him that he may be treated differently since he was coming from a community college. Therefore, upon starting classes at LAU, he was already wary about how he would be treated as a new transfer student.

Full-Time Student Expectations

At LAU, a policy in the university's undergraduate catalog states that all degree-seeking students must enroll in a full-time schedule of at least 12 credit hours each semester. Students who have extenuating circumstances may request an exception to the rule on a semester-to-semester basis. While the idea behind the policy is to progress students towards graduation in a timely manner, this policy often negatively impacts non-traditional students, many of which could be new transfer students.

Heather, Isaac, Adam and Jack all mentioned the demands of being a full-time student while also balancing obligations or expectations outside of the classroom such as taking care of a child, working a job to provide for themselves or their families, and devoting adequate time to a marriage. Both Heather (30-year-old married female) and Isaac (20-year-old male with a young

child) detailed their day and the difficulties they encountered scheduling their classes around these outside obligations. As noted previously, Heather wakes up at 4 a.m. most days to fit everything in and because of her busy schedule and competing priorities, often misses out on time with her husband. Making so many sacrifices for school and work has made her contemplate finishing her degree in the first place but she knows she has come this far and just needs to finish.

Isaac mentioned multiple times throughout the focus group how much his work schedule and childcare responsibilities played a role in his class schedule each semester. As noted previously, he was able to work closely with his academic advisor and the Transfer Admission Office to make time for all his classes and outside responsibilities, it was quite the long process and was not easy. Attending a highly traditional institution like LAU, he realized that there are limited sections of classes he needs to take for his degree and day/time offerings. If Isaac wanted to take all his classes at night or on just a few days of the week, that is likely not possible.

Adam (19 years old) also found balancing full-time work and full-time school to be challenging and decided that he will not return to LAU next semester (Fall 2021). When asked if he planned to graduate from LAU he stated:

> Honestly, there's zero percent chance I'm not coming back next semester. It has just been such an overall difficult experience that I just don't find the struggle that I have to put in any effort I have to put in to try to get the bare minimum done to be rewarding enough to continue moving forward.

Adam continued by stating he plans to transfer to an online school where he can take one or two classes a semester so that he can focus on his career. He knows he needs to earn a degree

eventually and genuinely wants to complete it but it is not an immediate priority in his life and it was not worth the stress of having to be a full-time student as well.

The issue of fitting in the demands of academics was noted by others too. At one of the transfer-student lunches, Jack mentioned that he has worked when he was attending community college but he knew that academics at a 4-year institution would be more demanding and he would need to be a full-time student so he quit his job upon transferring to LAU. Heather, Isaac, Adam, and Kyle all both mentioned the challenges they faced maintaining a full-time class schedule and their other obligations and had hoped there would be more flexibility in the full-time class schedule policy.

Housing

The on-campus housing process was a prominent topic of discussion throughout the interviews as many of the participants felt that they were treated differently or placed at an automatic disadvantage due to their status as a new transfer student. At LAU, all new transfer students who request on-campus housing are automatically placed on a waitlist so that current students, who have a residency requirement, can be placed first. Students who come to LAU as a first-time freshman are required to live on-campus for 3 years. Seventy-nine percent of LAU students and 50% of the participants in this study live on-campus. On-campus housing is a large part of campus life and student identity at LAU. While not all students who transfer to LAU are traditional, many of the new, traditional transfer students come to LAU for the residential campus experience that they missed in community college. Therefore, being automatically put on a waitlist regardless of how early in the process you sign up for on-campus housing and possibly not having the opportunity to live on-campus can be a disappointing and stressful experience for these students.

Felicia articulated her on-campus housing experience, being placed just two weeks before classes started, and stated the on-campus housing process contributed most significantly to her increased anxiety leading up to the start of her first semester at LAU:

> My biggest thing was definitely housing. Housing definitely took a lot longer and I was not receiving responses as quickly as I thought I would be. …Getting in contact with other people who might be living off-campus was hard but I also get it was at everyone's own, like, leisure. … I don't know, saying to a sophomore, "yeah, you're not guaranteed housing because you're a transfer" then trying to find housing off-campus it just got to a point where I lost all ability to get housing because I was basically asking people to like wait for me to decide [to sign an off-campus lease]. I kind of had no options [for on- or off-campus housing] and then I, all of a sudden, got [on-campus] housing in a day. Yeah, I got on-campus housing two weeks before classes started.

The late timing of the on-campus housing assignments for new transfer students certainly adds a layer of stress to an already stressful transition. Another new transfer student, Kendra, echoed this experience with on-campus housing. Ultimately, she decided to live off-campus her first semester due to the uncertainty. She explained her experience and stated:

> One process that was extremely frustrating with applying as a transfer student was housing. So, the fall semester I actually went off-campus. You don't know until the last minute if you get [on-campus] housing. So, I had to go get an apartment and, like, put a deposit down on my apartment because I didn't know if I was going to get housing on-campus. So, that was the most frustrating part coming in as a transfer because I wanted to be on-campus, but it wasn't guaranteed so I ended up just getting housing somewhere else. However, I am on-campus now, which I love.

Once a new transfer student has entered LAU, they are then considered a returning student in the on-campus housing process and can sign up for housing with all the other current LAU students. They are not placed on a waiting list in subsequent semesters just because they were once a new transfer student.

Several other new transfer students echoed Felicia's and Kendra's experiences and mentioned on-campus housing was also an important part of their transfer process and transition but that it was one of the most stressful points overall. As previously noted, 50% of the participants in this study lived on-campus which is representative of the overall transfer student body in recent years. However, due to COVID-19, the new transfer students were placed in their on-campus housing much later than in previous years due to the uncertainty of the amount of on-campus housing that was to be set aside for students in COVID-19 isolation or quarantine. Ultimately, the housing office was able to place new transfer students who requested on-campus housing, but due to this process happening so late and the uncertainty, many new transfer students for Fall 2020 and Spring 2021 ultimately declined their offer of admission to attend another institution that could guarantee on-campus housing or was close enough to their home that they could commute.

Orientation

For the Fall 2020 and Spring 2021 semesters, transfer orientation was conducted virtually due to COVID-19. In a typical year transfer orientation occurs in-person over a day and a half. The virtual orientation was made up of several pre-recorded videos that students and parents could view before orientation day and then several live webinars that were conducted on orientation day. The live videos were then posted to be viewed later if a student missed orientation or wanted to re-watch a session. It is important to note that about 10 first-time

freshmen attended the spring 2021 orientation because they had deferred their admission for one semester due to COVID-19. Typically, first-time freshmen only enter LAU in the fall semesters and they have their own, freshman-specific orientations.

The live orientation sessions and pre-recorded videos focused on the following topics: orientation welcome, academic transition, registration, campus engagement, community safety, community health (COVID-19), on-campus living, and living off-campus. The sessions were followed by virtual breakout rooms to meet with a former transfer student in a small group. Since the freshmen were included in the spring orientation sessions, many of the videos for that semester spoke to both audiences which may be why many transfer students commented on orientation being a waste of time and not useful. In some instances, such as the academic transition session, the presenter focused more on the first-time freshmen and did not go into transfer specific concerns. Many of the transfer students have been in college for anywhere from one to six semesters so they do not need basic information that may be helpful to a first-time college student but instead could have benefited from information more catered to the transfer population. It was also evident that some of the pre-recorded videos were recycled from the fall orientation. For instance, the student engagement presenters spoke about events that were coming up in August and September, yet the students watching the videos were new spring 2021 students.

As mentioned previously, when asking participants about their experience with transfer orientation and how that helped or hindered their transition, many students were unable to even recall if they attended. Those that did remember they attended could only remember small pieces of the experience. This prompted the participants to provide substantial feedback for how they thought the experience could be improved.

When Emma was asked about orientation, she spoke up immediately and voiced her disapproval of the experience by stating, “transfer orientation was a waste of time. I knew most of the material we talked about.” Clearly, her orientation experience was memorable but not in the positive way LAU hoped it to be. She continued by acknowledging that her already being 21 years old, being married, and previous life experiences may have been the main factors in her feelings about orientation. She explained:

> I guess this is terrible to say but it's just because like, I'm older. I felt like a lot of the orientation did not apply to me at all, and probably didn't apply to a lot of transfer students because it was like, about dorm life and, you know, stuff like that. I don't know how you would like exclude people like me but, like I own my own house. You know, it's just a little different.

Emma felt much of the information shared at orientation was not useful for older, married students and/or those that are not living on-campus. Fifty percent of the participants lived off-campus, two of whom were married. Emma also noted, however, that she was certain orientation would have been much better in an in-person format as she learned less in the virtual format due to the lack of engagement in the online setting.

Summary of Findings

The participants in this study were able to articulate their experiences, expectations, and feelings, and also provide recommendations for improvement as new vertical transfer student throughout the focus groups, individual interviews, and observations. While each transfer student had their own individual experiences throughout the recruitment, admission, and enrollment processes, the identified themes can help administrators to better understand the typical experience of these students. The first major finding was the overall transfer journey. The themes

that emerged from this finding included preparation for transfer and associated adjustments, strategies for the transition and beyond, expectations or obligations students had outside of the classroom, and student engagement. The second major finding centered around student concerns and their negative experiences throughout their transfer experience. The concerns and negative experiences can be broken down into five major themes including the on-campus admission tours, overall structure of academic advising for new transfer students and the experience with academic advisors, full-time student expectations, on-campus housing, and new transfer student orientation.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The evaluation question and sub-questions for this study helped to frame data gathering and analysis to better understand the vertical transfer student narrative and experiences surrounding the transfer admission and transition process. This research helps to provide guidance in future transfer admission decisions such as enrollment goals, recruitment planning, and process improvement. The main evaluation questions included:

1. What is the vertical transfer narrative that helps to support students in their transfer process?
    a. How do vertical transfer students experience the transfer process and their transition to LAU?
    b. How do vertical transfer students make sense of the transfer process and transition to LAU?

To answer the evaluation questions, a program evaluation case study approach was used which incorporated focus groups, individual interviews, observational data, and a digital and material review. All sources of data from this study were coded using a coding scheme (see Appendix E) I created, which was based on the theoretical framework.

This chapter begins by summarizing the major findings and how they relate to the theoretical framework, which included Schlossberg's (1981) transition theory, Weick's (1995) sensemaking, and the negative or deficit narrative surrounding the transfer student population (Green, 2006; Harper 2010). Second, several recommendations that were developed from the findings are shared and how they could be considered and/or implemented at LAU. Finally, this

chapter will conclude with suggestion for future research that could be conducted to further this line of research and contribute to the study of transfer student populations both at LAU and more broadly.

Summary of Major Findings

Throughout the focus groups and individual interviews in this study, participants were able to articulate their experiences, expectations, feelings, and recommendations for improvement as new vertical transfer students. While each transfer student had their own individual experiences throughout the recruitment, admission, and enrollment processes, the themes they identified can help administrators to better understand the typical experience of this student population. The first major finding included understanding the transfer student journey with themes including (a) preparation for transfer and associated adjustments; (b) strategies for the transition and beyond; (c) expectations or obligations students had outside of the classroom; and (d) engagement on campus. The second finding was the transfer student concerns and negative experiences. The themes included (a) on-campus admission tours; (b) the overall structure of academic advising for new transfer students and the experience with academic advisors; (c) full-time student expectations; (d) on-campus housing; and (e) new transfer student orientation. Further explanation of these themes and connections to the theoretical framework occurs in the sections that follow.

Discussion of Findings

In the sections that follow, I have connected the findings to the related literature and theoretical framework detailed in Chapter 2. Each of the three pieces of the theoretical framework were clearly present within the findings. Transition theory (Schlossberg, 1981) was evident in each focus group, interview, and observational period. Students were able to reflect on

how their individual situations played into their transition, how they each navigated their transition and coped with it internally, the support systems they sought out and relied on throughout their transition, and finally, the strategies they employed to deal with the challenges they faced. During the time of transition, each student worked to make sense of their experiences (Weick, 1995), which were informed by relying on experts, prior experiences, and internal agency. Finally, negative/deficit transfer narrative (Green, 2006; Harper, 2010) was found to be present on LAU's campus and occurred most notably within the academic advising experience, during the on-campus tour, and within the on-campus housing placement process.

Transition Theory

A student transferring from one school to another can certainly be considered a moment of transition so the first sub-question for this study focused on student experiences throughout the transfer process and associated transition to LAU. The goal of this question was to better understand how students experience Schlossberg's (1981) transition theory. Schlossberg's (1981) transition theory is composed of resources she refers to as the four *S*'s: situation, self, support, and strategies. These four resources are used to determine how an individual will cope with and navigate the transition they are experiencing (Schlossberg, 2008). Major themes that developed from my research that related to this piece of the theoretical framework included preparation for transfer and associated adjustments, expectations or obligations students had outside of the classroom, strategies for the transition and beyond, connection with others, and strategies students developed and employed for future semesters.

Situation. Situation refers to the individual's situation when the transition is occurring (Schlossberg, 2008). While each participant certainly brought their own individual situation with them as they navigated the admission process and transition to LAU, participants brought

individualized situations into the transfer process, which were evident while reviewing the findings of this study. Schlossberg (2011) notes that some situations can be more stressful than others. Emma, Heather, Adam, and Isaac each had situations that worked to complicate their transitions to LAU. This may be because they do not fit the typical, very traditional profile of a LAU. Emma, 21 and married and had to manage moving across the country with her husband, starting at the local community college, and then transitioning to LAU. She spoke of the challenges she faced managing her schoolwork with her marriage, job, and household, all while being very far from home. Heather, an older student (30 years old) and married, spoke about how her situation was unique because she works many hours per week while also managing her marriage. Both Heather and Emma noted that they often miss their husbands and that they intentionally chose to spend less energy and effort on the social aspects of college because they did not have the time to manage all these priorities in addition to socialization.

Adam spoke of his situation in which he works full-time while also managing school. When discussing making friends and attending on-campus events, Adam noted that he has not tried "because I have a lot of work to do, and I don't have time to interact. Even if there was a medium to do that it's just, it's hard enough." Ultimately, Adam's situation was not conducive to the environment at LAU and reducing his work hours was not an option he wanted to pursue. He plans to transfer to an online institution so he can focus more on work and not have to come to campus for classes. Isaac was the only participant in the study with a child. Because of his responsibilities as a new father, he had no spare time to focus on anything other than work, school, and childcare. All four of these students had situations that differed compared to the typical traditional student that attends LAU, resulting in a different transfer adjustment to LAU. These non-traditional students had to navigate a culture shift going from a community college

with many non-traditional students, to a traditional campus with few non-traditional students such as LAU.

Finally, the six participants that chose to live on-campus at LAU had an additional layer of their transition to navigate. Since all the participants in this study were vertical transfer students from in-state community colleges that do not offer on-campus housing, each had an additional transition to navigate as they entered LAU. All commented on the new experiences they faced, such as learning to live with roommates, living on their own for the first time, living and learning in the same place, using a meal plan, the late placement into on-campus housing, and/or being surrounded by other people on a constant basis.

Self. The second *S,* self, refers to the individual's ability to cope internally with the transition and can refer to the person's level of resiliency (Schlossberg, 2008). "A person's behavior and outlook are very critical to managing change" (Schlossberg, 2008, p. 58). Throughout this study, participants were able to speak to their personal characteristics and behaviors that either helped or hindered their transition process.

As noted, Adam struggled with managing the workload of a full-time class schedule and a full-time job. While there are sure to be other students navigating this situation and doing so successfully, Isaac seemed to come to a decisive conclusion that he no longer wanted to balance both. He had realized that his business was more important to him at this point in his life. Adam is planning on transferring so that he can attend school part-time and take online classes, neither of these options are available at LAU. Lauren worked her first and second semester at LAU but has already decided that she will quit her job prior to the next semester because she had learned that she needs to spend more time on her schoolwork to graduate by her expected graduation date. Jack, however, recognized the amount of additional work he would have to dedicate to his

schoolwork prior to transfer and quit his job because he knew he would have to focus more time and energy on schoolwork once at LAU.

Kendra knew she would struggle with mathematics in college based on her past experiences in high school, so she chose to take the mathematics assessments and enroll in developmental mathematics at the community college. She was self-aware and decided to tackle this challenge at the community college so that she was well-prepared for the level of mathematics required for her major and degree requirements at whichever 4-year institution she ultimately decided to transfer.

Several participants, including Becca, did not consider themselves to be very social prior to transfer but upon transfer, realized the importance of meeting new people, making friends, attending events and joining clubs and organizations on-campus. Becca and Kendra both noted that quite often they forced themselves to attend on-campus events and put themselves out there. They recognized that this was an important personality trait they needed to acquire in order to be engaged in campus life and be socially successful and happy at LAU.

Support. Support refers to how much help is available to the individual as they are experiencing the transition (Schlossberg, 2008). Schlossberg (2008) states that "people can potentially get support from many sources: intimates, families, friends, strangers, and institutions" (p. 65). In this study, participants commented on the support their received prior to transferring to LAU and the support their received once they enrolled at LAU. Participants described that their support systems included family, significant others, current or former LAU students, academic advisors at their community colleges, the Transfer Admission Office, and/or online resources. It is interesting to note that students did not identify their academic advisor at their community college as a source of support for them throughout the transfer process. The

participants felt they were left to navigate advising and the transfer process on their own. Navigating the transfer process on their own is a common transfer student experience and barrier (Wang, 2020) and it was found to be the case for many of this study's participants at LAU.

Regarding family support, participants commented that their family was there for support and three participants, Becca, Felicia, and Kendra in particular, relied on their family more heavily throughout the transfer admission process. Becca commented that her mother "took a backseat" and allowed her to make her own transfer decision but was always there to provide support and to talk through each decision she made. Felicia relied on her family, particularly her mother, throughout the transfer decision process. Jack is a legacy LAU student due to his brother being a LAU graduate so he remembers touring LAU with his brother many years ago and loving the campus at that time. Therefore, LAU has always been the place he wanted to transfer. Emma and Heather, the two participants who are married, relied heavily on their husbands' advice and support through the process. Some participants, such as Charlie, did not know anyone at LAU prior to transfer but others, such as Adam, Becca, Heather, and Felicia, were able to comment on their experience relying on current or previous LAU students to gain their perspectives and to answer questions they had about LAU.

Overwhelmingly, participants commented on the high-level of service and support provided by the Transfer Admission Office at LAU. Adam and Becca noted that heavily relied on the support of the office because whenever they had a question during the transfer process, their first step was to send an email to the Transfer Admission Office. Charlie commented that he appreciated that Transfer Admission made his initial class schedule and always was there to answer any questions. Having the office create his first schedule allowed him to focus on other aspects of his transitions and not have to worry about what classes to take or finding open seats

in the sections of courses he needed. Felicia commented on the Office's communication and summarized the general feelings of many participants well by stating, "I feel like a lot of my panicked questions about something for school were answered like right away and not in a way that made me feel dumb." This structure of support was noted more often than support structures for transfer at the participants' community colleges.

Other comments included a real human picking up the phone at the Transfer Admission Office at LAU every time they called, voicemails and emails being answered within a day or even minutes in some cases, a transfer staff member being available for on-campus tours, and the friendliness and supportiveness of the admission interviewers. Four participants (Charlie, Diana, Emma, and Kendra) commented on how the admission interview specifically provided a great deal of support through the entire transfer admission process. Regarding her interviewer, Kendra noted:

> She gave me her email and she said that if I had any questions or anything like that to let her know. So that was extremely helpful especially as a first-generation student because I didn't know what was going on. She was able to answer a lot of my questions.

While extremely nervous prior to the interview, they were glad they did complete the optional, but highly encouraged interview because they felt the interviewer created a warm and welcoming interview environment, answered all their questions, and served as a constant resource beyond the interview and throughout the admission process. Participants noted it was nice to have a personal connection to the office and be able to continually work directly with the same staff member in which they were already comfortable, particularly during a pandemic which forced many things to be virtual.

After the point of admission and throughout their transition, participants noted the ample resources available on LAU's campus, such as the Transfer Admission Office, career center, LAU academic advisors, counseling, wellness, academic coaching and tutoring, peer mentoring, etc. As noted, the Transfer Admission Office was a constant place of support, not only through the admission process, but also throughout the first few weeks of their first semester. Some participants noted that they used resources through the career center (Charlie) and tutoring center (Gabriella) while other participants, such as Diana, noted that they wish they had utilized these resources because she realized how crucial they could be to her success at LAU. Gabriella, Emma, Isaac, and Felicia commented on how helpful their academic advisors have been since transferring to LAU. Since their required initial meetings prior to the start of the first semester, each have continually returned to their advisors for advice and assistance, even beyond any required meetings.

Diana and Charlie relied on their orientation leader their first semester. Diana's orientation leader would message her orientation group to check-in throughout the first semester and she would use this point of connection to ask questions as needed. Charlie would message his orientation leader directly whenever something simple came up such as where to park or if he was lost and could not find a particular building. For these students, they found their orientation leader to be engaging and readily available, so it was a resource they returned to frequently throughout their first semester.

Some participants were also able to find support through on-campus clubs and activities. The new transfer student lunches were an event that a few participants noted regardless of whether they were able to attend or not. Those that could attend, such as Jack, noted that it provided a safe space because all students were transfer students experiencing the same

transition. Gabriella commented that she attends on-campus events to continually put herself out there and it serves as her main way to meet other students.

It is important for academic advisors and all staff who interact with new transfer students at LAU understand that this population is working through a significant transition in their lives and their interactions with these students need to be through that lens (Schlossberg, 2011). They also need to be well versed on the many on-campus resources and forms of support available all students but in particular, ones that are specific to new transfer students such as the orientation leaders who are former transfer students, the Engagement Office who meets one-on-one with each new transfer student, and the Transfer Admission Office who builds their initial class schedule.

Strategies. The final *S,* strategies, describes the coping strategies that the person may employ throughout the transition (Schlossberg, 2008). Utilizing office hours, visiting the career center, introducing themselves to students in classes, going to on-campus events, and joining clubs. Charlie used the career center to see what his starting salary might be for his major and then met with them to get connected with alums currently working in his area of study. Charlie also spoke about his experience joining two on-campus clubs and getting an on-campus job which helped him meet other students but also helped to connect him to other resources on campus. Jack spoke of his experience with an on-campus religious group in which he has been able to create a small group of friends through that experience. He has since branched out and met more people through that initial group, and also attended many of the transfer student lunches.

Diana focused her strategies in the academic arena. She noted that in her first semester "whenever we made like study groups I would ask, are you a psychology major and if so give me

like the good and the bad of like every single professor. Then, I knew who to take." Heather also took this approach and used initiating study groups to meet other students.

As noted, orientation did not include a tour of campus or time to find their classroom locations so many participants took matters into their own hands. Some came to campus early to explore and locate their classrooms while others took a different approach. Emma, for example, used the students she had met in her first semester to help her navigate campus in her second semester. She had yet to go inside several buildings so prior to the first day of classes of her second semester, she reached out to some of the friends she had made and asked them to meet her before class to walk her to her classroom so she did not get lost.

Sensemaking

The second sub-question for this study focused on how vertical transfer students make sense of their transfer process and transition to LAU. Sensemaking (Weick, 1995) focuses on how individuals make meaning of their experiences and circumstances, and in the case of this study, student experiences during times of transition. Examining transfer student transitions through sensemaking helps to better understand the transfer student population and their experiences, learn from these findings to help understand the influence of the change they are experiencing, and ultimately help to understand and change the historic deficit narrative of transfer into a more positive one in the future. Weick's (1995) seven aspects of sensemaking and how they connect to this study are detailed in the sections that follow.

Identity Construction. Identity construction describes how individuals understand who they are in the context of the world around them (Weick, 1995). Heather understood she was a non-traditional student on a traditional college campus. She is older than the typical LAU student and is married, therefore, she had a different focus on her college experience which was less

about making friends and the social aspects and more about balancing her full-time work schedule with classes, completing her degree, and advancing her career. Emma has had a similar experience being married as she has other priorities at this point in her life compared to the typical traditional student who attends LAU. Isaac also experienced this difference in traditional priorities with having to care of a young child while also balancing school. All three of these participants understood where they were in the context of a traditional campus such as LAU. The findings highlight that the identity construction includes two types: non-traditional students in a traditional environment and border crossers from a 2-year commuter environment to a 4-year residential environment.

While these three non-traditional participants had more unique circumstances and situations, other participants were also able to understand their own context at LAU. For instance, many participants understood that they were new on campus and therefore, were behind experiencing and engaging in LAU traditions, understanding the culture, building connections with faculty, and creating their own social circles. All of which the native students had already experienced and established and are essential in creating identity on LAU's campus. Therefore, the new transfer students are having to catch-up in these areas.

Retrospective. Retrospective describes when an individual pauses for reflection and begins to form patterns, or make sense of the past experiences (Weick, 1995). Participants in this study were able to do so now that there is a little bit of distance between the interviews and when they first transferred to LAU. Heather was a good example of this aspect of sensemaking. Her experience so far at LAU was different than her previous community college because LAU's campus is larger, has more students, and there is much more activity on-campus including many more obligations outside of simply attending class. She noted that she wished he had joined a

club much sooner at LAU as that would have helped to ease her transition to LAU and would have helped her connect to campus in a meaningful way. This was not as important to her and she did not pursue at her previous community college. Isaac also reflected on his sense of belonging at LAU compared to how he felt at his previous community college. He stated, "I feel more like a [LAU's mascot] than I felt like a [former community college's mascot]." The sense of belonging Isaac felt is quite remarkable considering he had only been at LAU just over a semester while he had spent 2 years at his community college.

Looking back on their transition so far, several participants noted that they had already learned a great deal about themselves in their first semester at LAU. For instance, Diana wished she had utilized more on-campus resources in her first semester. She came to understand the benefits and how it could help her academically and socially at LAU in the future, so she voiced plans to use these resources next semester. Heather also learned quite a bit during her first semester at LAU. She realized the importance of getting to know your professors right at the beginning of the semester so that you can use them throughout the semester, when you are struggling, and as she pursues her future career and/or graduate school. Therefore, in the next semester she had already scheduled her classes so that she would have time between classes to engage with her faculty while still meeting her work obligations. The participants in this study engaged in reflection of their transition and are adapting to their new environments. This is aiding in their transition to LAU over their first semester or two.

Enactive of Sensible Environments. When an individual is learning from an experience, they "often produce part of the environment they face" (Weick, 1995, p. 30). Sensemaking, and therefore the individual, is not passive and the individual must engage with and shape the environment in which they exist (Weick, 1995). This aspect of sensemaking was evident

throughout this study and participants were able to give many examples of this at work. Lauren, Emma, Kyle, and Kendra are a few examples of participants that took matters into their own hands to pursue new friends and connections on campus. Charlie pursued connecting with the career center and department faculty to learn more about potential careers, earning potential, connections with alumni, and pathways that lead to the various careers he was exploring. He also engaged with the Engagement Office to learn more about on-campus resources and opportunities. These examples of new LAU transfer students taking initiative and pursuing things that are important to them such as relationships, connections, and resources counters the narrative of transfer students not having agency.

Social. Sensemaking is not an individual process but one where individuals interact with those around them and create a shared meaning or common language (Weick, 1995). In the focus groups, interviews, and transfer student lunches, it was apparent that the students had common experiences and there able to play off each other with their answers to my questions. I observed a lot of "oh, me too" moments in which one student would say something and others would echo their point. Emma and Felicia were especially playing off each other's experiences to make sense of their own. They hit it off so well in the focus group and both had expressed they were struggling making new friends that they decided to make plans for later in the week to grab a coffee and show each other around campus.

In addition, many participants acknowledged the importance of relationships with others (students, staff, and/or faculty) in their successful transition to and ultimately their graduation from LAU. They noted that they had to be intentional with engaging other students since new transfer students lack the friend base and connections with faculty and staff that many current LAU students built due to being on campus at LAU for a longer period. They knew the social

aspect of college was important and even integral to their success, particularly at a traditional and highly residential campus such as LAU.

Ongoing. As noted, sensemaking is an ongoing process. There is neither a starting nor a stopping point for the process, as it is continual (Weick, 1995). Clearly, the participants in this study are actively transitioning to LAU and making sense of this transition. At no point did the participants note that they felt completely settled in their new environment or that they had figured out what works best for them yet. Many of the participants stated that they still wanted to get more involved on campus, make friends, get to know their professors, learn their way around campus, and/or utilize some of the many resources, academic or otherwise, available on the LAU campus. Participants were also making sense of their transition throughout the focus groups as they were reflecting on their past and current experiences, feelings, and thoughts. Here, the participants recognized that their process was ongoing and there was still work to be done on their transition to this new environment. A transition does not just happen overnight and participants were aware of that aspect of sensemaking.

Focused on and by Extracted Cues. According to Weick (1995), researchers "must watch how people deal with prolonged puzzles that defy sensemaking, puzzles such as paradoxes, dilemmas, and inconceivable events. We also need to pay close attention to ways people notice, extract cues, and embellish that which they extract" (p. 49) and it is much more about the overall process. COVID-19 can certainly be considered a dilemma or inconceivable event that the participants in this study experienced and were forced to navigate. None of these participants anticipated having to navigate a global pandemic, particularly while applying to and transitioning to a 4-year institution. Emma recalled a conversation she had with her mom prior to her first semester at LAU. In this conversation, she remembered how her mom would also recall

her own college experience but Emma already knew her experience would be much different due to COVID-19. Emma stated:

> There's so many things that my mom called like the quintessential college experience when I was growing up. It's like, I have never been drunk at a college football game so when my mom talks about her experience in college, I have no idea what she's talking about which sucks because I feel like I'm missing the college experience that everyone else has had. I'm realizing more and more that there's no way I was ever going to get that.

COVID-19 certainly complicated the participants' transitions to LAU by limiting social interactions with other students, moving orientation to a virtual format instead of the typical in-person two-day experience, moving advising meetings and class sessions to virtual formats, and limiting on-campus traditions. This overall lack of or limited in-person experiences certainly worked to complicate these students' sensemaking and transition to LAU.

Even though they had just about completed one or two semesters at LAU, all participants except for Adam who spoke of his plans for transferring, were focused on being successful at LAU. They spoke of their plans to continue trying to make friends, engage with on-campus activities, build connections with faculty and staff, etc. regardless of how bad COVID-19 impacted their LAU experience. They were, however, excited to experience as the impacts of the pandemic on their experience slowly decreased over their next couple of semesters.

Driven by Plausibility Rather Than Accuracy. Weick et al. (2005) comment that "communication is a central component of sensemaking and organizing" (p. 413). Researchers must focus on what is being communicated and what story is being painted. It is less about the accuracy in the story than it is about sufficiency and reasonability. One of the purposes of this study was to learn about transfer student experiences as they apply to and transition to LAU

which aligns directly with this aspect of sensemaking. I listened closely to the participants' experiences, stories, and challenges and was therefore able to draw conclusions about the general in-state vertical transfer student experience at LAU during COVID-19. Their stories and experiences were also heavily impacted by institution actions and decisions concerning COVID-19. For instance, social distancing and capacity rules were put into place which prevented in-person transfer orientation and limited social events and student activities on-campus which ultimately impacted the participants' transition to LAU.

Throughout this study, it was evident that there are clear intersections between Schlossberg's (1981) transition theory and Weick's (1995) sensemaking. For instance, the third piece of transition theory, support, intersects well with the fourth piece of sensemaking, social. In both cases, individuals must rely on others for support and to help navigate the change and transition they experienced. Transition theory and sensemaking are not individual processes or ideas and they are meant to be experienced with others. In this study, participants noted the sources of support they relied on throughout the admission, enrollment, and transition process. Another example of the interaction of transition theory and sensemaking is how situation from transition theory interacts with the first and third points of sensemaking, namely identity construction and enactive of sensible environments. Each student had to navigate their individual circumstances, engage with their situation or environment, and understand who and where they are in the context of the transition they were making sense of and experiencing. While each theory was created as an individual theory, they certainly complement each other and work together within the context of this study.

Negative/Deficit Narrative

The transfer student process is often described as messy and complicated (Handel, 2013; Handel & Williams, 2012; Hossler et al., 2012; Xu et al., 2018), and the transfer student population is all too often depicted in a negative light. Instead of focusing on the positives that this student population brings to a college or university setting, many researchers and educational leaders focus on the negatives and why these students are not successful. For example, one participant in this study, Jack, was warned by his community college advisor that he might be treated differently upon transferring to a 4-year institution.

The negative/deficit narrative was a topic that was explored in detail in this study and emerged throughout the interviews. To flip the narrative and better serve student populations, data collection must go beyond quantitative data such as grades, graduation rates, and enrollments, and must instead focus on more qualitative data such as interviews and observations (Jain et al., 2017; Wang, 2020). Therefore, this study focused on collecting students' experiences, attitudes, and behaviors to understand the barriers and opportunities that may exist (Green, 2006; Jain et al., 2017; Wang, 2020) at LAU. The major themes that emerged from this research that align with a negative/deficit narrative include the academic advising structure overall, experience with academic advisors, and on-campus housing.

Academic Advising Structure and Experience. The academic advising structure for new transfer students was raised by participants. Some were able to share their positive experiences while others shared negative experiences which could add to the deficit view of transfer students. While being assigned to the department chair or program director of their major can be considered an advantage due the high-level of knowledge the chair has about major requirements, graduation requirements, and the ability to give student overrides and approve

course substitutions, not all participants in this study spoke of a completely positive experience with their advisors. Two students (Diana and Charlie) spoke about how they noticed how busy their assigned academic advisor was because of their dual-role as an academic advisor to new transfers and the chair of their department. This role added many more responsibilities outside of teaching and advising. The participants spoke of how getting in contact with their advisor could, at times, be challenging and not having their advisor in classes due to their reduced teaching load resulting from being the department chair was not ideal. Charlie had noted that he wished he had more opportunities to get to know his advisor in the classroom as that would benefit their advising relationship. Being assigned such a knowledgeable resource for their academic advisor is an advantage but the administration making this decision needs to acknowledge that there are some negatives to this advising format and some new transfer students, particularly those from departments with a high number of new transfer students, can be negatively impacted.

Underserved college-bound student populations who primarily attend community colleges face a challenging path in navigating the educational pipeline (high school to college to the workforce; Green, 2006). In addition, it is often assumed that they are underprepared for the rigor of a 4-year institution (Handel & Williams, 2012). Students, such as Kendra, attend a community college for many different reasons (Baldwin, 2017; Cohen et al., 2014; Handel, 2013; Handel & Williams, 2012; Mullin & Phillippe, 2013). For Kendra, one of those reasons was to become stronger in mathematics. She signed up for developmental mathematics at her community college so that she would be well-prepared for mathematics courses required for her associates degree at the community college and for those required by her intended major at whatever 4-year institution she would transfer to afterwards. In her initial meeting with her academic advisor, Kendra was told that she likely would not be successful in her intended major

because her advisor had seen that she had previously taken developmental mathematics at her community college. This ultimately influenced her to change her major to one that required less mathematics. Since transferring to LAU, Kendra has taken a mathematics course and did well. Despite the preparation Kendra made to increase her math proficiency, her prior work was deemed "less than" by her advisor. She did not exercise agency to counter her advisor and pursue her intended major. The deficit perspective her advisor held influenced the trajectory Kendra took at LAU and ultimately into her future career options. Sound academic preparation at the community college is a key indicator for academic success upon transfer to a 4-year institution (Roksa & Calcagno, 2008) and is an aspect that the Transfer Admission Office closely reviews during admission review. Yet, the example above highlights that even when students have met the university standards, their prior community college experience is deemed less than sufficient.

Both Emma and Felicia also experienced the negative narrative surrounding transfer students when their academic advisors suggested adjustments to their class schedules because they were no longer at a community college. While meant to be supportive comments to ensure the students did not get in over their heads and did not experience transfer shock in their first semester, the students felt the comments were condescending and they felt defeated. Vertical transfer students are often "characterized as lacking the skills and abilities necessary to success in higher education" (Green, 2006, p. 24). Both Emma's and Felicia's advisors made this assumption and instead of explaining that all new transfer students are at-risk for transfer shock in their first semester due to navigating a new environment, these new transfers took it personally since they were transferring from a community college. New transfer students rely heavily on relationships with teachers, counselors, and coaches throughout their transition, so instead of focusing on transfer student deficits and anticipated poor outcomes, staff working directly with

this population must focus on the positives and the many talents that each individual can bring to table (Green, 2006; Harper 2010).

On-Campus Admission Tours. Understanding the prospective transfer student tour experience was one way to examine the transfer student discourse and narrative present at LAU. Spickard (2017) defines discourse as "an institutionalized way of thinking and speaking about things, embedded in language. This language shapes people's thoughts and behavior" (p. 290). For most participants who toured LAU, the on-campus tour experience was one filled with positive experiences. However, for some participants and for one of the staff members when they were observing a tour, the on-campus tour experience contributed to the negative transfer narrative on LAU's campus. When a tour guide was unable to answer a general question about the LAU transfer student experience or when the tour only focused on the native student experience when transfer students were also present on the tour, the tour only increases the negative narrative. Administrators and policymakers must first take the time to examine the discourse present within the populations they are working with (Spickard, 2019) to change the narrative to a positive view and ultimately build a better perspective regarding this student populations. This tour experience may leave some prospective transfers feeling excluded and it could have a negative impact on their feelings towards transferring to LAU. If they do not feel included while on a campus tour, what do they think their experience might be as a new transfer at LAU?

On-Campus Housing. As noted, on-campus housing was another pain point for the participants and one that was examined in this study. On-campus housing is a large part of campus life and student identity at LAU because 79% of LAU students and 50% of the participants in this study live on-campus. Since transfer students are not required to live on-

campus, the policy is that all new transfer students interested in on-campus housing are placed on a waitlist initially so that all current students can be placed first.

Since many of the new, traditionally aged, transfer students are coming to LAU for the residential campus experience, they are often shocked to be placed on a waitlist immediately. The possibility of not having the opportunity to live on-campus can be a disappointing and stressful experience for these students. It also contributes to the negative narrative of transfer students since every other student is considered for on-campus housing before transfer students. This discourse paints the picture that transfer students are not a high priority for on-campus services such as housing.

Implications for Policy and Practice

With nearly half of all undergraduates in the U.S. attending a community college at some point in their college career (Baldwin, 2017), the transfer student population cannot be ignored. Today, many states are turning their attention to the transfer function of the community college given the desire to streamline the K-20 pipeline (Cohen et al., 2014) and maintain or grow higher education levels within their states. The purpose of this section is to identify implications for policy and practice and recommendations for moving forward based on the findings of this study.

Institutional policy recommendations include providing earlier access to on-campus housing for newly admitted transfer students. Changes to practice include improving the language used and communications surrounding the process, eliminating deficit narrative, improving transfer orientation to be more inclusive of non-traditional students and ensure an in-person experience in the years to come, education academic advisors on the transfer student admission standards and benefits of this population to the LAU community, improving the

diversity recruiting efforts and ensure diversity is accurately reflected in all outbound communications, provide general transfer student information at tour guide training, and finally, create first-generation college student events for both prospective and new transfer students.

On-Campus Housing

The first recommendation is to improve the process, language, and communication surrounding on-campus housing for new and prospective transfer students. Handel and Williams (2012) stress the following:

> programs that are currently valued and provided to first-year students on four-year campuses (such as orientation programs, timely advising, adequate housing, and access to the same academic majors that first-time students receive), should be calibrated for transfer students as well. (p. 62)

Since housing is not guaranteed for new transfer students and they are immediately put on a waitlist upon applying for housing, the message they receive is negative and does not convey a sense of welcome to campus or belonging. Many prospective students come to LAU because of the on-campus housing facilities and because on-campus housing is such a large aspect of student life. With about 50% of new transfer living on-campus each year, many new transfer students are impacted by the housing waitlist.

In this study, it was found that new transfers were often placed in housing just days before classes began so they were left in limbo for the entire summer or winter break prior to enrolling at LAU. In future terms at LAU, it is expected that new transfer students will begin to be placed earlier since there will not need to be housing held for students in COVID-19 quarantine and isolation. The decision on how much space needing to be reserved was made just prior to the start of each semester since the COVID-19 situation was always changing.

I also recommend working with the Housing Office on the wording/communications with these new transfer students. Phrases like "you're on a waitlist automatically" can be scary to a new transfer that is really wanting to live on campus. The use of this language also contributes to the negative or deficit transfer narrative (Green, 2006; Harper 2010) on LAU's campus. Historic placement patterns at LAU indicate that all transfer students have received housing placements and none have been denied. What remains unknown is how many students who desired housing opted instead to find off-campus housing like Kendra did due to the language of being waitlisted. Late placement of students and losing students due to the uncertainty surrounding on-campus housing is a missed opportunity to welcome this student population, and ultimately, a missed revenue opportunity since there are openings in which these students could have been placed.

I also recommend that the Housing Office provide students with resources and assistance finding off-campus housing since about 50% of new transfers do not live on-campus. It is encouraging to note that the Engagement Office did hold a virtual roommate mixer in the summer of 2021 to assist the fall 2021 transfer students in meeting potential roommates and finding openings in on- and off-campus housing. This event was widely advertised to the new transfer student population.

Orientation

Bahr et al. (2020) note that adult students are different from traditional college aged students and therefore, have different needs at postsecondary institutions. Therefore, student services such as orientation must be different for this population. In this study, two participants noted that their orientation experience was not as helpful in their transition because many aspects of the current orientation did not apply to them, and they felt it was a waste of their time. These students have different needs and many more life experiences than a traditional college student.

Orientation could have been a large aspect of support for new transfer students but the virtual format and, in most cases, the lack of interaction with other new transfer students and orientation leaders was a detriment to the new transfer student orientation experience. In her focus group, Becca noted that while her orientation leader tried their best to interact and engage, her suggestion was for there to be time for informal interaction with other new transfer students without the orientation leader being present. Diana agreed and recommended more time to meet other students in an informal setting and allocated time to walk around campus and find classrooms. In previous years, prior to COVID-19, there was plenty of time with the orientation leader and new transfer students, this was limited and executed poorly in the virtual orientation format.

Academic Advising and Faculty

Some participants in this study mentioned that they did not meet with their academic advisor prior to the start of the semester. Meeting with an academic advisor is essential to ensure the class schedule is correct, to begin building rapport with the advisor, and to create a sense of belonging for the new transfer student. Therefore, the Transfer Admission Office must ensure that each new transfer student meets with their advisor before the start of their first semester, or at the minimum, prior to the end of their first add/drop period. To help ensure these meetings occurs, the Transfer Admission Office needs to communicate more regularly with both academic advisors and new transfers about the importance of these meetings and to ensure meetings occur.

The Transfer Admission Office must also brainstorm ways to communicate the transfer admission standards to advisors since, in at least three cases (25% of participants), advisors assumed these students were not prepared for LAU due to prior attendance at a community college and/or were seeing a student's previous enrollment in developmental courses such as

mathematics. However, several researchers have noted that transfer students attain baccalaureate degrees at similar rates to those students native to the 4-year institution (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Xu et al., 2018). How advisors speak to and interact with new transfer students is important in this critical point in the transition from the community college to LAU. Handel and Williams (2012) states that 4-year institutions must "create a transfer-affirming culture that spans your respective campuses" (p. 11). Some students in this study were discouraged when their advisors made comments such as the advisor that suggested the student take a lighter load since "this isn't community college." Instead, the advisors could focus on the positives of this population and the benefits of coming from a community college prior to attending LAU. Faculty serving as "a safe and accessible resource helps level the playing field for transfer students" (Wang et al., 2021, p. 6). By putting an emphasis on success and achievement, researchers can learn even more about these populations, and administrators can focus programming and efforts on what works instead of what does not work (Harper, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1990, 2012).

Not only do the academic advisors need to receive some training on the transfer student population but also the faculty and staff would benefit from such training since essentially all faculty and staff interact with new transfer students. It is important to remember that, while transfer students may arrive at LAU as Juniors academically, they are still new to campus. This population needs to be treated as such. Faculty need to recognize that there may be new students in their courses each semester and that these students will need assistance with the basics such as how to use classroom systems, where academic resources are located on campus, degree requirements, and class registration procedures, to name a few. Faculty must address the needs of this student population. In addition, faculty need to question their own assumptions about

transfer students to prevent the negative or deficit narrative (Green, 2006; Harper, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1990, 2012) currently present on LAU's campus.

Department chairs/program directors might not be the best advisor for transfer students in the long term. These advisors need to be reminded that they have the flexibility to move the transfer students to a different advisor within the department after the initial meeting. This approach may be a solution for the departments with large numbers of new transfer students each semester. Perhaps they can reassign each new transfer student to a faculty member that best suits their interests in research and/or career. Department chairs are busy and adding new transfer students to their advising load each term can be overwhelming in the long term for the advisor. The new transfer students, therefore, may have a less than adequate advising experience.

One out of four students noted the busyness of their academic advisor due to their role as the department chair or program director and therefore, having trouble getting in touch with them for advising. This is a critical point of connection for new transfer students, so it is imperative that academic advisors prioritize this interaction and reply to emails and inquires as soon as possible. Many new transfer students are anxious about their impending transition, so it is imperative that they connect with their academic advisor easily and quickly.

Diversity and Inclusion

As noted, two students spoke of their experiences with marketing materials, websites, and other materials and how they painted a different picture from what they have experienced at LAU since enrolling. They noted that the pictures on website do not line up with on-campus experience as they were expecting more diversity on campus. Therefore, I recommend improving diversity-related recruiting efforts and ensuring diversity is accurately reflected in all outbound communications and experiences with prospective transfer students. With 56% of all Native

Americans and 53% of all Hispanics, 43% of all Blacks, and 38% of all Asian/Pacific Islanders undergraduates attending a community college in fall 2019 (American Association of Community Colleges, 2021), there is a large opportunity to recruit this diverse population and ensure that all student feel welcome (Wang et al., 2021).

Wang et al. (2021) note that transfer students are likely to be first-generation college students. In this study, Diana, a first-generation college student, noted that she would have liked to have seen more events for transfer students but particularly for first-generation college students. Due to LAU's recent emphasis of diversity, equity, and inclusion, this is already being implemented for the 2021-2022 academic year. An event will be scheduled for all in-state, first-generation, community college transfer students focusing on the admission process, financial aid, and advising. These are topics in which first generation college students are less likely to receive help with from home since they do not have a parent that has graduated from college.

On-Campus Admission Tours

One of the findings of this study was that the on-campus tour experience was dependent on the tour guide giving the tour. On some tours, the tour guide was knowledgeable about the transfer student experience while on other tours, that was not the case. Therefore, I recommend that transfer student training is provided to the tour guides on an annual basis as it is imperative that the transfer student population feel welcomed and included (Gandara et al., 2012; Wang et al., 2021) on campus tours so that they can envision themselves as a student at LAU.

Finally, sharing recommendations with stakeholders is a key aspect of program evaluation and cannot be missed (Mertens & Wilson, 2012). This study followed a qualitative research design with program evaluation being the chosen methodology due to its usefulness in providing feedback about a program to be used by stakeholders in decision-making processes

(Mertens & Wilson, 2012). Therefore, these recommendations and next steps were formed with the intention of sharing with stakeholders and decision makers who oversee the transfer admission process and transition to LAU. These results will be shared is relevant stakeholders at LAU so further change can be made at the institution.

Recommendations for Future Research

Several recommendations for areas of future research emerged because of this program evaluation study. The first set of recommendation pertain to LAU but could of course be researched at institutions similar to LAU. The first area that needs to be explored more deeply is the non-traditional student experience at LAU. While this study incorporated three non-traditional students (two married, one of which was older than 18-22, and one with a child), more research is needed on this population at LAU. Research questions include, what does this population look like at LAU (characteristics), what does the transition looks like for non-traditional students in a traditional campus environment, where do they find their place on-campus, and finally, what services need to be provided to these students?

My second recommendation for future research is to look at the overall success of transfer students at LAU. Some of the participants in this study transferred to LAU after two semesters at their community college while others transferred after four to six semesters and having earned an associate's degree. Therefore, it needs to be researched if the point of transfer from a community college to LAU impacts GPA or graduation rates. Do graduation rates differ among traditional and non-traditional students at LAU and if so, what supports could be put in place?

Third, I recommend a longitudinal study following transfer students from the point of admission until graduation at LAU. The fifth property of Weick's (1995) sensemaking tells us

that sensemaking is ongoing. There is neither a starting nor a stopping point for the process, as it is continual. Therefore, a longitudinal study across a student's time at LAU would provide a more complete picture as to how this vertical transfer student population makes sense of their experience.

Finally, understanding more about why community college students did not choose to attend LAU could provide insights into other transition barriers. These students could provide valuable information to the Transfer Admission Office at LAU regarding why they did not choose to attend LAU, why they chose their current institution, the barriers to transferring to LAU, but also what was done well. Gaining the perspectives of this student population who chose not to attend LAU could help administrators improve messaging and processes within the Transfer Admission Office.

Conclusion

The purpose of this program evaluation case study was to evaluate the vertical transfer admission and transition process while working to better understand the vertical transfer student narrative and experiences surrounding the admission process and associated transition to LAU during COVID-19. The evaluation questions addressed how students make sense of their experiences, how they experience the transition to LAU, and the narrative present throughout the process.

Throughout the focus groups and individual interviews in this study, participants were able to articulate their experiences, expectations, feelings, and recommendations for improvement. The major themes that emerged included preparation for transfer and associated adjustments, strategies for the transition and beyond, expectations or obligations students had outside of the classroom, and connection with others, the overall structure academic advising for

new transfer students and the experience with academic advisors, on-campus housing, and new transfer student orientation. While each transfer student had their own individual experiences throughout the recruitment, admission, enrollment, and transition processes, the themes they identified can help administrators to better understand the typical experience of these students.

Using the theoretical framework consisting of transition theory (Schlossberg, 1981), sensemaking (Weick, 1995) and how students make meaning of their transfer experiences and transition, and the deficit narrative surrounding the transfer population (Green, 2006; Harper, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1990, 2012), helped to understand the experiences of the transfer students in this study. The first major finding was an analysis of the overall transfer journey. The themes that emerged from this finding included preparation for transfer and associated adjustments, strategies for the transition and beyond, expectations or obligations students had outside of the classroom, and student engagement. The second major finding centered around student concerns and their negative experiences throughout their transfer experience. The themes included the on-campus admission tours, overall structure of academic advising for new transfer students and the experience with academic advisors, full-time student expectations, on-campus housing, and new transfer student orientation.

As a result of this program evaluation, key takeaways were formed and were used to inform practice. Recommendations include providing earlier access to on-campus housing for newly admitted transfer students and improving the language used and communications surrounding the process. In terms of new transfer student orientation, improving transfer orientation to be more inclusive of non-traditional student populations and ensuring an in-person experience in the years to come will help students get more out of their orientation experience and ensure that it is a bit more memorable. Regarding the academic advising experience, it is

evident that academic advisors for new transfer students need training on the admission standards and benefits of this population to the LAU community. Finally, improving the diversity recruiting efforts, ensuring diversity is accurately reflected in all outbound communications, and creating special opportunities for first-generation college students would help new transfer students in the recruitment, admission, and transition process.

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APPENDIX A

EMAIL TO POTENTIAL PARTICIPANTS

SUBJECT: Request for Your Participation in a Transfer Student Study

BODY:

Dear Student,

My name is Evanne Raible and I am a doctoral student at the College of William and Mary. I am emailing because you have been selected to participate in a study concerning transfer students at LAU. The purpose of this study, titled "Examining How Vertical Transfer Students Make Sense of Their Transition Through The Transfer Admission And Enrollment Process During COVID-19," is to evaluate the vertical transfer admission and transition process while working to better understand the vertical transfer student narrative and experiences surrounding the admission process and associated transition to Liberal Arts University during COVID-19.

Should you choose to participate in this study, you will be asked to participate in one ~1.5 hour-long focus group interview consisting of 3-6 other LAU transfer students or an individual interview. All interviews will be conducted virtually at a time convenient for the participants. All participants' identity will be kept confidential throughout the process and within the final report.

If you are interested in participating in this study, please click the link below to opt-in to the study, sign the participant consent form, and select your interview date/time. Please let me know if you have any questions prior to opting-in and I would be happy to assist!

(LINK TO OPT-IN AND CONSENT FORM)

All the best,

Evanne Raible

APPENDIX B

RESEARCH PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

You are invited to voluntarily consent to take part in in a research study that is looking to understand the community college transfer experience to the university. The information in this form is meant to help you decide whether or not to participate. If you have any questions, please ask. By volunteering, I request that you participate in one audio/video recorded focus group interview or individual interview (~1-1.5 hour in length) on a voluntary basis. Risks of your participation in this study includes a potential loss of confidentiality and/or recognition, although great care will be taken to protect your identity and associated data. While participants are not expected to directly benefit from their participation in this study, Liberal Arts University, associated stakeholders, and the scientific community will benefit from the information you provide.

WHAT DO I HOPE TO LEARN FROM YOU?
The purpose of this study, titled "Examining how vertical transfer students make sense of their transition through the transfer admission and enrollment process during COVID-19," is to evaluate the transfer admission and transition process for students who transferred from a community college to Liberal Arts University. An outcome of this work is to better understand the transfer student narrative and experiences surrounding the admission process and associated transition from a community college to Liberal Arts University during COVID-19. This study will increase understanding of the transfer student population, transfer admission practices, and transfer programming. In addition, the results of the study will be shared with and benefit stakeholders at Liberal Arts who make decisions regarding enrollment goals, recruitment planning, transition programming, and overall process improvement.

WHAT WILL I REQUEST FROM YOU?
I request that you voluntarily participate in one audio/video recorded interview (~1-1.5 hour in length) during the course of this study.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION
Please know that:
• Reasonable steps will be taken to protect your privacy and the confidentiality of data. All data will be stored on a password protected, University-owned laptop that is stored in a secure location. Only the researcher will have access to this laptop. Online transmissions do have the potential for security breaches. E-mail and the Internet are not 100% secure although all reasonable measures will be taken to protect your identity and responses.
• Information from this study may be reported individually, or as group or summarized data but your identity will be kept strictly confidential. Pseudonyms and masking will be used so that the participants and institution cannot be identified. The full results of the study will be available through ProQuest.
• Only the researcher will know your name and other identifiable information. Neither your name nor any other personally identifying information will be used in any research presentation or

publication without prior written consent.
• You may refuse to answer any questions presented in the interview if you so choose.
• You may also terminate your participation in the study at any time. To do so, simply inform the researcher of your intention. Your participation will be terminated immediately upon request. Neither of these actions will incur a penalty of any type.
• Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. If you decline to participate, this decision will not endanger your current or future relationship with Liberal Arts University.
• Potential risks of your participation in this study include a loss of confidentiality and recognition by staff members. Due to the role of other Transfer Admission and Enrollment staff at Liberal Arts, they are familiar with student information and/or experiences and may be able to assume a student's identity within the final report. However, reasonable efforts will be made to protect your privacy and the confidentiality of all data. Final results will be reported with extensive masking, blurring, and reporting will be done in a composite manner as necessary.
• While this study is not expected to directly benefit the participants in this study, it will benefit the research community's understanding of the transfer student population, transfer admission practices, and transfer programming, and Liberal Arts University.
• Any significant new findings developed during the course of this study, which may relate to your willingness to continue participation, will be provided to you.
• This study aims to conduct 3-6 focus groups with 3-6 participants each. Individual interviews are also presented to participants as an option for participation. Therefore, there are 9 to 36 potential participants for this study.

HOW CAN YOU CONTACT ME?
If you have any questions or concerns about this study, please contact Evanne Raible (ecraible@email.wm.edu) at William & Mary, Williamsburg, Virginia. If you have additional questions or concerns regarding your rights as a study participant, or are dissatisfied at any time with any aspect of this study, you may contact, anonymously if you wish, Dr. Tom Ward at 757-221-2358 (EDIRC-L@wm.edu), Dr. Pamela Eddy at 757-221-2349 (peddy@wm.edu), Dr. Jennifer Charlies 757-221-3862 (jastev@wm.edu), or LAU's IRB Chair at XXX-XXX-XXXX (irb@lau.edu).

By checking or Xing the "I agree to participate" response below, then typing your name and email address, you will indicate your voluntary agreement to participate in this study, and confirm that you are at least 18 years of age.

_____ I agree to participate
_____ I do not agree to participate

Once completed and received, the researcher will provide a copy to you for your own records.

Participant Name: _____

Participant Email: _____

Researcher Signature: _____ Date: _____

APPENDIX C

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS AND PROMPTS

Date: _____ Start Time: _____

Recruitment/Admission Process

1. Describe your experience exploring LAU and deciding to apply to LAU?
    a. How did you first learn about LAU?
    b. Did you explore LAU websites or marketing materials?
    c. Why did you decide to apply to LAU?
2. Why did you decide to accept your offer of admission and ultimately transfer to LAU?
    a. Were there specific factors that influenced your decision?
    b. What outside influences or people played a role in your preparation for and decision to transfer to LAU?
3. What aspects of the admission process felt most supportive during your transfer process?
    a. Were you able to get your questions answered?
    b. Who did you rely on for information?
    c. Did you know someone already attending LAU that was a resource?
    d. Did you ever feel unsupported?
4. What suggestions do you have to improve the recruitment and/or admission process?

Orientation and Preparing for First Semester

1. Describe the weeks leading up to your first semester and your orientation experience.
    a. What was the most useful or memorable piece of orientation?
    b. What aspects did you find to not be useful?

2. Were you able to connect with other students during orientation?
    a. If so, in what ways were you able to connect?
    b. Did you know people transferring to LAU at the same time?
3. Describe your first meeting with your faculty academic advisor.
    a. What were the main topics of discussion?
    b. What stands out to you most from this meeting?
4. After orientation, how prepared did you feel to start classes at LAU?
5. What suggestions do you have to improve orientation?

First Semester/Year as a New Transfer Student

1. How did you navigate/approach the first few weeks as a new transfer student?
    a. What supported you the most?
    b. What surprised you?
    c. What negative experiences did you have as a transfer student? Did you ever feel like you were treated differently due to your status as a transfer student?
2. How did you connect with other students at LAU, both new transfer and continuing students?
    a. Describe specific events or ways in which you were able (or unable) to connect with others.
    b. Did you find it easy or difficult to connect with others?
3. How does your lived experience on campus compare to what you expected based on the information on the website, brochures, campus tours, presentations, etc? Essentially, what were your expectations compared to the reality you are living now?

4. What have you learned since your first semester and taken with you to the second semester?
5. What suggestions do you have to improve the first semester at LAU?

Wrap-up

1. How likely is it that you will continue at LAU?
    a. What contributed to this decision?
    b. How connected do you feel to campus?
2. Is there anything you would like to share that you have not had to the opportunity to share that would help me in understanding your experiences transferring and transitioning to LAU?

Option for all participants to stay on the call for if they would like to share any additional information or expand on a prior point. Breakout room available.

End Time: _____

APPENDIX D

LISTING OF OBSERVATIONAL DATA AND WEBSITES AND DOCUMENTS REVIEWED

1. Observational Data
    a. Admission On-Campus Tour (2)
    b. Orientation (1)
    c. Student Activities Targeted to Transfer Students (2)
2. Websites
    a. Transfer Admission (1 main; 10 subpages)
    b. Admitted Transfer Student (1)
    c. Orientation (1)
    d. Student Activities/Engagement (1)
3. Documents/Brochures
    a. Transfer Admission (2)
    b. Orientation (1)
    c. Student Activities/Engagement (1)

APPENDIX E

DATA ANALYSIS CODING SCHEME

Deficit/Negative Narrative (DNN)

Transition (TR)

- Situation (SI)
- Self (SE)
- Support (SU)
- Strategies (ST)

Sensemaking (SM)

- Identity Construction (IC)
- Retrospective (RS)
- Enactive of Sensible Environments (ESE)
- Social (SO)
- Ongoing (ON)
- Focused on and by Extracted Cues (FEC)
- Driven by Plausibility Rather Than Accuracy (DP)

Recommendations/Improvements/Suggestions (RIS)

VITA

Evanne C. Raible

Education:

2022: Doctor of Education: Educational Policy, Planning, and Leadership, Concentration in Higher Education Administration, William & Mary

2014: Master of Education: Educational Policy, Planning, and Leadership, Concentration in Higher Education, Administration, William & Mary

2011: Bachelor of Science: Environmental Science, Minor in Chemistry, Christopher Newport University

Experience:

November 2018 – Present: Director, Office of Transfer Admission

August 2012 – November 2018: Graduate Assistant, August 2012 – May 2014; Academic Coordinator, June 2014 – October 2015; Assistant Director, October 2015 – November 2018, Office of Student-Athlete Academic Excellence, Department of Athletics, William & Mary

January 2018 – August 2018: Program Director, Global Business Minor Program, Raymond A Mason School of Business, William & Mary

Summers of 2012 and 2013: Enrollment Services Assistant, Office of the Registrar, Christopher Newport University

June 2011 – May 2012: University Fellow, Office of Admission, Christopher Newport University