This dissertation titled
A Case Study of the Perceptions of Community College Students Who Transfer to a
College of Arts and Sciences at a Midwest Research University

by

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Abstract

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A Case Study of the Perceptions of Community College Students Who Transfer to a College of Arts and Sciences at a Midwest Research University

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The focus of this dissertation was the perceptions of transfer students on their transfer experience, including some of whom experienced transfer shock. While many studies regarding transfer students have involved numerical data, little research exists regarding the perceptions of transfer students—namely, their perspective on what they experienced during the transfer process. In their estimation, what were the good and bad experiences during their transfer process?

The pioneering work done by Hills (1965) operationalized the term transfer shock which is the drop in a transfer student’s grade point average following transfer. In the 30 years since his seminal work was published, the study of transfer students has expanded and much has been learned. Little is known, however, of how transfer students perceived their transfer experience including those who experienced transfer shock. In order to better understand these perceptions, this research sought to investigate these perceptions.

This research was guided by the overarching question of: What are the salient academic and social experiences of students who transferred from community colleges to a Midwest research university, which is home to primarily traditional age, residential students? A corollary question asked how did particular personal and institutional
characteristics impact participants’ transfer experiences and subsequent academic and social adjustment?

According to Merriam (1998), qualitative research seeks to understand the lives and experiences of people. This interpretive narrative research was conducted through semi-structured interviews with transfer students. Those factors that influenced their grade point average and overall transfer experience were examined.

Major themes that emerged from this study were the transfer students’ motivation to transfer including the community college experience and level of academic preparation. For participants, the academic objective was a four-year degree. By first attending a community college, they were able to save money and earn transferable college credits that could be applied to a four-year degree. Because many participants were underprepared academically, they utilized the community college resources and relationships with faculty and staff to improve their personal and academic confidence.

Personal and academic goals, including the completion of a four-year degree, provided impetus for transferring. Tangible (e.g. expanded employment opportunities) and intangible (e.g. sense of pride) goals were factors that influenced their decision to transfer. Finally, the overall transfer experience suggested that orientation programs designed specifically for transfer students and the opportunity to provide one-on-one academic advising were factors in the transfer students’ overall perception of the transfer experience.

Transfer students must learn to negotiate in a new academic environment which includes new policies, procedures, and relationships. Successfully navigating in this new
environment and attaining academic success in the process can be challenging; however, students can and do meet with success.

These results cannot be generalized to the transfer student population as a whole; however, it did reveal factors that influenced these students in their integration into their new academic environment including their transfer experience, the role of relationships, and those personal and institutional characteristics that influenced their academic success and social adjustment.
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## Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgments</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter One Introduction</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statement of the Problem</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research question</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Significance of the Study</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limitations</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terminology</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assumptions</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dissertation Overview</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Two A Review of the Literature</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schlossberg’s Transition Theory</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transfer Student Retention</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Examining Transfer Shock</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutional and programmatic factors</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transfer student motivation</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social issues</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic outcomes</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Three Methodology</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Section</td>
<td>Page</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transfer experience</td>
<td>143</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transfer shock</td>
<td>145</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal characteristics contributed to success</td>
<td>146</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutional resources</td>
<td>147</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What she wished she had known</td>
<td>148</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>148</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cross Case Analysis</td>
<td>149</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preparing the way: The community college experience</td>
<td>150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academically underprepared</td>
<td>152</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivation to transfer</td>
<td>154</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutional and personal characteristics create “fit”</td>
<td>158</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Making the transition</td>
<td>160</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Living at the university</td>
<td>161</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationships—the Good, the Bad, and the Ugly</td>
<td>163</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family</td>
<td>163</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationships with others</td>
<td>166</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty relationships and influence</td>
<td>168</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finding Academic Success and Facing Challenge</td>
<td>169</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>172</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Five Discussion</td>
<td>173</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Question</td>
<td>177</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Characteristics</td>
<td>180</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Personal Reflection ................................................................. 210
References ............................................................................................... 211
Appendix A: Interview Questions ......................................................... 221
Appendix B: Consent Form ................................................................. 222
Appendix C: Ohio University IRB ....................................................... 226
Chapter One Introduction

The study of college transfer students has received considerable attention in the research literature. Extant scholarship reveals that transfer students travel a variety of pathways to their new institutions. Some transfer from a community college, considered a vertical transfer, while others transfer from one four-year institution to another, a process described as lateral transfer (Bahr, 2009). The student’s level of high school academic preparation, ethnicity, gender and reason to transfer represent only a few of the issues transfer students bring to the transfer table. Their diversity of experiences and characteristics is so great that the only thing the entire population has in common is that they transferred from one school to another.

Unfortunately, many college administrators tend to view transfer students as a homogenous group with similar needs. Scholars, including Astin (1982) and Ishitani and McKitrick (2010), have suggested that transfer students are sometimes viewed as not wanting to engage in the campus life at their new institution. Because they have already attended one institution of higher education, many transfer students felt they did not need any assistance as they transitioned to their new institution (Beckenstein, 1992). Moreover, they viewed orientation programs targeted to transfer students as unnecessary or inconvenient.

Research suggests that transfer students have lower graduation rates than their “native” peers (Best & Gehring, 1993; Christie & Hutcheson, 2003; Eimers & Mullen, 1997). One reason might be the phenomenon known as “transfer shock.” Transfer shock, or the drop in the transfer student’s grade point average following their transfer to
a different institution has been represented in research literature spanning over forty years and reflects the belief that the transfer process can be challenging (Diaz, 1992; Hills, 1965; Janeeson, 2005; Peng & Bailey, 1977; Richardson & Doucett, 1980).

Even though much research supports the reality of transfer shock, little is known of its causes or the extent of its impact. Students, especially those transferring from community colleges, face a variety of new tasks and challenges. According to Eggleston and Laanan (2001), transfer students face issues related to the academic environment and social integration; both of which have been associated with transfer shock. These transitions often result in the transfer student performing academically more poorly than their “native” peers. Diaz (1992) reported that community college transfer students, on average, experienced a grade point average drop from between 0.25 to .030 at the end of their first semester.

Numerous studies have been conducted detailing issues related to transfer students, especially those transferring from community colleges to four-year institutions (Flaga, 2006; Glass & Harrington, 2002; Ishitani & McKitrick, 2010; Townsend & Wilson, 2009). It is generally accepted that the community college environment differs significantly from the four-year university environment. Piland (1995) suggested that community colleges tend to promote an atmosphere geared at helping students develop the skills they will need should they decide to transfer to a four-year university. Moreover, students at community colleges often find smaller class sizes and more individualized attention from faculty aid in the learning process.
A history of poor academic performance is one of the causes of attrition and low graduation rates (Dougherty, 1992; Gao et al., 2002). Researchers also found that students transferring to more academically rigorous institutions had greater academic transfer shock (Hills, 1965; Jones & Lee 1992; Preston, 1993; Webb, 1971). Furthermore, Jones and Lee (1992) reported that transfer students who take developmental courses had lower grade point averages and lower graduation rates than students who do not transfer. Conversely, students who transfer with an associate’s degree or those who had accumulated many credit hours tend to have higher grade point averages (Best & Gehring, 1993; Graham & Hughes, 1994; Richardson & Doucette, 1980).

In addition to the academic challenges of transfer, transfer shock also related to other factors. Laanan (1996, 1998) reported on the social component of transfer shock. His study focused on the social, academic and psychological factors that impacted adjustment and how involved students were at both community colleges and four-year institutions. Townsend (2009) suggested that transfer students are affected by academic and social integration issues similar to those faced by native students in their first year in college. According to Flaga (2006), “the transfer shock literature does not tell the full story of transfer student transition; academic performance is an important part of students’ experiences, but grades are the result of a complex set of processes that occur throughout the semester” (p. 4).

While most of the studies demonstrating the difficulties of the transfer experience have been quantitative in nature, little research exists regarding the perceptions of transfer students—namely, their perspective on what they experienced during the transfer
process. The quantitative studies using large samples provide important information. However, qualitative approaches are necessary for providing a more complete picture of the phenomenon. As I began this study, I was interested in gaining an understanding, through a qualitative approach, of how the transition affected their academic performance. Through my interviews of nine participants, however, it became apparent that their general life experiences, including social realities, were important to understand as well.

**Statement of the Problem**

There are multiple factors that influence and impact a student’s academic success and eventual graduation from college. Since transfer students are often less successful academically and are less likely to graduate from college than their native counterparts, it is important to gain a better understanding of these factors and the extent to which they influence this student group. This qualitative study is about the transfer experiences of students who transferred from community college settings to a Midwest research university, primarily comprised of traditional age students.

**Research question.** The overarching question is: What are the salient academic and social experiences of students who transferred from community colleges to a Midwest research university, which is home to primarily traditional age, residential students? A corollary question is: How did particular personal and institutional characteristics relate to participants’ transition and subsequent academic and social adjustment?
Initially, it was my intention to study students who had experienced transfer shock, which is defined as the drop in a transfer student’s grade point average after their transfer to a new institution. Of the nine participants, five reflected this phenomenon. However, I found that there were not sufficient available participants that met my criteria. Therefore, I broadened the criteria for the study to include other transfer students not having experienced the particular dynamics associated with transfer shock. This allowed me to study a more diverse group. What all of these of these students have in common, however, is that they transferred from a community college setting to a residential research university, known for its traditional age student population.

Significance of the Study

This study adds to the literature regarding transfer students, including several who experienced transfer shock, by presenting the perceptions of students about the meaning of these transfer experiences. The number of students transferring continues to increase. As transfer students stop-out or swirl between institutions, it is important for universities to understand these students’ experiences. It is through in-depth research projects that institutions will understand and thus adapt to this important student population.

According to Glesne (1999), a phenomenological perspective “focuses on descriptions of how people experience and how they perceive their experience of the phenomena under study” (p. 7). Unlike much of the extant research on transfer students, this study avoided assumptions about a normative transfer experience. Rather, I sought to learn about the unique experiences of nine students who overcame initial challenges in their transfer to a new institution, and subsequently navigated their way to success.
The concept of appreciative inquiry is related to the significance of this research. Appreciative inquiry, as a research paradigm, looks at the “best practices” approach and suggests that every experience has something positive that can be gleaned from the experience (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005). In this vein, appreciative inquiry encourages people and encourages a higher standard or belief. Rather than focusing on the more negative aspects of an experience, appreciative inquiry looks for the successes and positive aspects of an experience. By understanding the experiences of transfer students and what worked, administrators will benefit from a heightened awareness of the student perspective which can lead to improved programming for transfer students in the areas of admission, orientation, and advising.

The goal of this research was to add to the understanding of the transfer experience, the perceptions of transfer shock and the impact these may have on academic outcomes. In addition, it sought to better understand the students’ perspective of the transfer experience and to explore the environmental, social, and affective factors that may contribute to transfer students’ success.

**Limitations**

Most of the participants included in this study experienced a drop in their grade point average following their first term of enrollment in a Midwestern research university. Since the concept of transfer shock suggests that transfer students may experience such a phenomenon, these students represented an “expected” outcome. While the other participants did not experience a drop in their grade point average, all nine participants’ perspectives were unique, and possibly unlike the experience of many
other transfer students. Their unique perspectives were colored by their individual lens through which they view their situation.

The students interviewed for this study were all enrolled in the College of Arts and Sciences. Since transfer students must meet different entrance requirements depending upon their chosen major, the student perspectives may not be representative of students enrolled in majors not housed within the traditional Arts and Sciences areas.

**Terminology**

Academic probation—obtaining a quarter grade point average or accumulative grade point average below a 2.0 on a 4.0 scale.

Academic success—for the purposes of this study, the receiving university defines academic success as maintaining a cumulative grade point average of at least 2.0 on a 4.0 scale.

Community College—any public postsecondary institution offering courses leading to the awarding of an Associate Degree.

Lateral transfer—transferring from a two-year postsecondary institution to another two-year institution or from one four-year institution to another four-year institution.

Native student—any student who enrolls, attends and earns credits from one postsecondary institution whose period of enrollment begins as a freshman and persists through to degree attainment.

Transfer ecstasy—a rise in grade point average experienced by students who transfer from one postsecondary institution to another.
Transfer shock—a dip in grade point average experienced by students who transfer from one postsecondary institution to another.

Transfer student—any student who has previously enrolled, attended, and earned college credits from one postsecondary institution, who then leaves, enrolls in a different college or university and earns credits at a new institution with the intention of completing degree requirements.

Vertical transfer—a student who transfers from a two-year institution to a four-year institution.

Assumptions

In qualitative research, the researcher enters with certain thoughts and beliefs through which the phenomenon is viewed. The primary assumption of this research came from a phenomenological perspective. Pritchard and Trowler (2003) stated that phenomenology has “the intent of identifying and delimiting the range of individual perspectives of a social phenomenon in order to better understand how a particular sector of people conceptualize a singular social phenomenon” (p. 179).

Most of these transfer students performed poorly in their first term of enrollment at their new institution and subsequently improved their grade point average over their next terms of enrollment, thus they represented a unique subset of students. They all shared a common experience (i.e. transfer to the same institution) and had access to similar institutional resources. They also shared an ostensibly similar emotional experience. This research was an attempt to identify this combination of environmental and personal characteristics that were involved in their experience. The researcher
believed that in order for these students to improve their grade point average, they had to find the appropriate combination of environmental and personal factors that facilitated their academic success.

**Dissertation Overview**

This study is organized into five chapters. Supporting material such as charts, graphs and tables are included as appropriate. A reference section and appendices are provided at the end of the chapter.

Chapter One is an introduction to the study, a statement of the problem, presentation of the overarching research question, limitations, and assumptions of the study.

Chapter Two is a review of the current literature related to the research topic of transfer shock.

Chapter Three is a discussion of the methodology used in this study. It includes the number of participants, method of data collection, and data analysis.

Chapter Four is an analysis of the results of the study. It includes appropriate tables and graphs that illustrate the findings.

Chapter Five is a summary of the study, methodology, and summary data analysis. Conclusions and findings are discussed with recommendations and implications for further research presented.
Chapter Two A Review of the Literature

The ability of students to successfully complete a college degree is a point of interest for a variety of stakeholders. Students, parents, and college administrative offices all have a vested interest in seeing that students persist to graduation. According to Tinto (1987), of every 100 first-time entrants into higher education, approximately 45 will eventually earn a four-year degree. Data from the ACT (2006) showed a first to second year retention rate of 74% for four-year institutions while Carey (2004) reported a six-year graduation rate of only 53 percent. Such a low six-year graduation rate presents many challenges for institutions of higher education as limited funds demand closer scrutiny of programs and policies intended to increase retention.

Often, retention and persistence are seen as dichotomous; students either stay in school or drop out. However, students actually face three choices each term of enrollment. They can remain at their current institution, they can drop out of school completely, or they can transfer to a different institution (Porter, 2003). For students who decide to transfer, the decision is not made easily as there are multiple issues that new transfer students now face.

There is an abundance of research related to transfer students. Grubb (1991) stated that approximately 20% of technical and community college students will transfer to a four-year institution. Fredrickson (1998) reported that one-third of community college students transfer directly to a four-year institution. Data from the National Transfer Assembly (NTA) Study conducted by the Center for the Study of Community Colleges (1995) showed that the national community college transfer rate hovered around
22% with a range of 11-40% depending upon the state from which data was collected. Data from the U.S. Department of Education (2005) reported that nearly 60% of college students attended more than one institution.

There is no universal transfer student profile. Demographic data on transfer students varies from state to state and region to region. Lester (2006) suggested that many transfer students are female, Caucasian and older; moreover, they also tend to be employed and have a family. As a result of these factors, many transfer students reported a degree of dissatisfaction with the campus climate, peer relationships, and faculty engagement.

Townsend and Wilson (2006) suggested that there are varied definitions of transfer students. Most definitions concentrate on the number of credit hours transferred by the student but fail to take into consideration the types of courses taken. For example, courses leading toward a vocational or applied degree are often not considered for transfer by many four-year institutions. In this case, the student may or may not be considered as a “transfer” student based on the institution’s definition.

Different national bodies define transfer student and transfer rate differently, which further complicates the transfer issue. The Center for the Study of Community Colleges (2001) uses the following definition: “All students entering the two-year college in a given year who have no prior college experience and who complete at least 12 college credit units [at that college] within four years, divided into the number of that group who take one or more classes at an in-state, public university within four years” (p.
1). Based on their definition, the national transfer rate ranged from 21.2 to 23.7 percent between 1984 and 1989, while in 1995 the rate was reported at 25.18%.

The National Effective Transfer Consortium defines transfer counts as “the number of people who transferred to a four-year school in the fall after having been at a community college the previous semester and having completed at least six credits” (Townsend & Wilson, 2005 p. 410). Based upon their definition, the transfer rate was 25% during the 1980’s. More recent data on a national scale could not be located.

Much of the reported data is either institutional or state specific. For example, in 2006, 42% of the transfer students in Illinois left a community college to attend a four-year institution, while 38% of the students who transferred came from an out of state or foreign institution (IBHE, 2007). In the state of Washington, transfer students account for over 30% of all students who graduate with a bachelor’s degree (Whitfield, 2005). Poch and Wolverton (2006) reported that 35% of community college students in the state of Washington were enrolled in a transfer program and intended to transfer to a four-year program. Poch and Wolverton (2006) went on to report that nearly 38,000 of the 45,000 transfer-ready students attending a community college eventually transferred. When viewed this way, the sheer number of transfer students seems overwhelming.

Townsend (2008) stated that transfer students “felt like a freshman again” (p. 73). For instance, like their freshman counterparts, transfer students were frustrated learning how their new school functioned. Parking their car and advising concerns recreated these feelings of being a first term first year student.
The literature identifies different types of transfer student. Transfer students can be classified as either lateral transfers, vertical transfers or reverse transfers. A lateral transfer (also called a horizontal or parallel transfer) student is one who transfers from one community college to a different community college or from one four-year institution to a different four-year institution (Bahr, 2009). A vertical transfer student is one who transfers from the community or technical college to a four-year institution while a reverse transfer student began their study at a four-year institution then transfers to a community college (Kajstura & Keim, 1992). It is on the vertical transfer student that the bulk of the research literature focuses.

The literature also includes a number of different challenges faced by transfer students. These concerns include academic, social, environmental, and personal issues that can serve as a barrier to the transfer student’s success. One phenomenon that is often repeated in the literature is that of transfer shock or a drop in the grade point average of a transfer student in the term immediately following transfer.

The pioneering work of John Hills (1965) on transfer students opened the door to future researchers on transfer students, transfer shock, and the many issues that can impact a transfer student’s success. Hills (1965) review of transfer student research conducted between the years of 1928 through 1964 shed light on the issues transfer students might face. At the conclusion of his review, Hills posed the following:

- Transfer students should expect to experience a drop in their grade point average. It is generally accepted that this statement operationalized the concept of transfer shock.
• Transfer students can also expect to see their grades improve proportionally to the length of time they remain in school.

• Transfer students perform worse than and take longer to graduate than their native student counterparts.

Hills work laid the foundation for research into transfer students in general and into the phenomenon of transfer shock specifically. Based upon his conclusions, the study of transfer students has expanded to include multiple facets of the transfer experience.

**Schlossberg’s Transition Theory**

Transfer students are people in transition. Before continuing to address the specific needs and concerns of transfer students, Schlossberg’s theory of adult transitions will be addressed as a framework for considering the challenges facing students, and the potential coping mechanisms available.

Though typically classified as a theory of adult development, Schlossberg’s theory also has application to traditional college-aged students. These theories are not necessarily dichotomous in nature and administrators are encouraged not to create these dichotomies “when identifying theories that can be helpful in understanding and working with students” (Evans et al, 2010 p. 213).

Schlossberg emphasized that transitions require adaptation. She further stated that adaptation was influenced by three sets of variables: (1) the perception the person has of the transition (2) pre and post characteristics of the environment and (3) characteristics of the individual. These variables could include elements that could be
considered as assets or liabilities, a combination of both, or could be viewed as neutral in their influence on the person’s ability to cope with the transition (Schlossberg, 1984).

By stressing the individual’s perception of the event, Schlossberg (1984) refined her theory by stating that the meaning attached to an event by the individual is influenced by type, context, and impact. The type of transition was described as either anticipated, unanticipated or nonevent. Anticipated transitions are expected while unanticipated transitions are not expected. Nonevents are events that were expected to occur but did not.

Context refers to where the transition occurs such as at home, at work, or at school as well as the relationship the transition has to the individual; meaning, did it occur to the person or to someone else. The ways in which the transition alters the person’s daily life is regarded as how the event impacted the person. Finally, Schlossberg theorized that the way the person moves through the transition process is influenced by what is known as the 4 S’s: situation, self, support, and strategies.

Situation asks several questions. What precipitated the transition? Was the timing of the transition “good” or “bad”? How long will it last? How much control does the individual believe they have? How will my role be affected? By asking these questions, the individual begins the process of moving through the transition and begins to evaluate their ability to navigate the change.

Self relates to how the individual both views life and the psychological resources the individual has in his or her repertoire. A key component here is the individual’s
belief in his or her ability to be successful, also known as self-efficacy, and his or her level of optimism.

Support predominately refers to the individual’s social support system. Are these supports stable or likely to change as a result of the transition?

Strategies relates to the different coping skills, responses, and behaviors of the individual. These skill sets will aid the individual as he or she seeks to modify, control, or manage the stress associated with the transition.

Clearly, an individual planning to transfer to another institution is experiencing an anticipated transition. How well the person adjusts to his or her new environment, how academically successful he or she is, and the new relationships created or lost by the transfer all fall neatly into Schlossberg’s theory.

Schlossberg’s (1984) theory fits into a larger category of human development theory, referred to as psychosocial theory. Psychosocial theory involves the interaction of person-centered skills and behaviors with the social or environmental nature of humankind. These interactions are tempered and colored by the unique lens of individuals and the nature of the social situation in which they interact. These combine to help create a healthy identity for the individual. The bulk of psychosocial theory is based upon the work of Erik Erikson and his eight stages of development. These stages chronicle the development of the individual from childhood through old age. Psychosocial development can be strongly influenced by conditions affecting society. As such, the nature of transitions and the role they play in the development of the individual provide a solid foundation from which research on transfer students is based.
Transfer Student Retention

Institutions of higher education possess strong interests in retaining their students. Despite the fact that transfer students have experience in the world of higher education and the expectations associated with being a student, research shows that the retention rate for transfer students is often worse than for their native counterparts. Hoyt and Winn (2004) assert that transfer students drop out at a higher rate and have lower grade point averages than their non-transfer counterparts. These findings are supported by Best and Gehring (1993); Graham and Dallam (1986); and Graham and Hughes (1994).

Identifying which transfer students are at the highest risk of attrition has been a topic for many researchers. Multiple factors that have been identified as contributing to this high rate include grade point average and standardized test scores (Baldwin, 1994; Cejda, Rewey & Kaylor, 1998) as well as demographics such as age, gender, ethnicity and socio-economic status (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Pincus & Decamp, 1989; Townsend, McNerny & Arnold, 1993).

Non-cognitive variables such as those relating to adjustment, motivation, and student perceptions were better predictors of transfer student retention and persistence (Sedlacek, 1998). Wawrzynski and Sedlacek (2003) identified three non-cognitive themes of (a) expectations, (b) learning outcomes, and (c) academic behaviors of transfer students as having a greater impact on their persistence in higher education.

Duggan and Pickering (2007) identified in their study a non-cognitive factor they labeled as a “probation score” that was the best predictor of transfer student persistence. The probation score was obtained from student responses to a questionnaire and included
categories such as reasons for attending college, attitude about being in college, and prediction about college success.

Interestingly, Duggan and Pickering’s (2007) study found that issues such as the need to balance employment and studies, the students’ view of their own abilities and traits, confidence and academic and social integration as dominant factors influencing transfer student persistence. It is no wonder that identifying at-risk transfer students is difficult given such a wide range and variety of factors that influence their persistence and retention.

Conversely, Johnson (2005) reported no differences in the grade point average of transfer versus non-transfer students. He theorized that this finding could be attributed to (1) small class sizes which ameliorated the effects of transfer shock thereby enabling the transfer students to develop a sense of security within their new campus, and (2) the geographic location of the new institution may encourage the transfer student to become more involved especially if the new institution is more “isolated” than their previous institution. Johnson (2005) theorized that if the new institution is easily accessible to transportation, then the transfer student may elect to maintain previously established relationships, which interfere with the development of new relationships at their new institutional home. However, if the new institution is less accessible, it in some ways forces the transfer student to integrate into the new community. This could serve to lessen the impact transfer shock had on the student, which could account for a finding of no differences.
In a similar fashion, Anglin (1995) reported that in a matched population of transfer and native students, the transfer students’ graduation rate at an urban community college was equal to or even better than that of native students. Furthermore, there were no significant differences in transfer and native student grade point averages as well as no significant differences in age, gender or ethnicity. However, Anglin (1995) found a significant difference regarding the attrition of transfer and native students. He found that native students who dropped out had completed fewer hours and had lower grade point averages than transfer students who dropped out. In fact, of those transfer students who did drop out, the majority had a grade point average of a 2.0 or better. Since many early report systems are triggered when a student’s grade point average falls below a given point, it is easy to see why, at least in this study, transfer student drop out was harder to predict than that of native students. “This finding emphasizes the need to provide ongoing support services focused on transfer students throughout their academic experience” (Anglin, 1995, p. 46).

Holohan (1983) reported similar finding from a six-year longitudinal study which found that transfer students completed their degree at the same rate as non-transfer students. Similarly, he found no differences in ethnicity, transfer students were not taking an unreasonably longer period of time in which to complete their degree, and had similar grade point averages. Holohan (1983) did find differences related to gender and graduation. While male transfer students were more likely to graduate than female transfer students, the female students earned higher grade point averages.
A separate concern for administrators and transfer students alike is the time-to-degree factor; a term associated with how long it takes a student to complete a Bachelor’s degree. The time-to-degree index is generally calculated from a traditional perspective which views the direct entry student earning their baccalaureate degree in four years and a transfer student earning their baccalaureate in two years from the time of transfer to the four-year institution. However, some researchers are beginning to question whether most students actually fit into this typical pattern and suggest that time-to-degree should be measured from a five or six year time frame (Garcia, 1994). Transfer students may take longer than direct entry students for a variety of reasons including changing their major, loss of transfer credits, and credits not being able to be applied to their chosen major (Poch & Wolverton, 2006).

Townsend, McNerny and Arnold (1993) separated transfer student degree completion into three categories: (1) student-centered which focuses on academic and personal characteristics and behaviors, (2) institutional-centered which is primarily concerned with the culture and practices of the institution as well as the cooperation between institutions, and (3) societal analyses which suggest that economic and political factors have led to a reduction in the prominence of transferring from a community college.

Since community college students may comprise an increasing portion of the enrollment in courses on a four-year campus, the experiences of transfer students becomes important as it relates to student retention. Past research has supported the fact that transfer students often do not graduate at the same rate as non-transfer students even
when they have been matched on demographic and academic characteristics (Best & Gehring, 1993; Christie & Hutcheson, 2003; Glass & Harrington, 2002). Poch and Wolverton (2006) reported that transferring to a different institution added between one and two quarters to the time it took to graduation.

Much of the research literature revolves around the community college transfer student. The community college has played a significant role in the education of students and has provided the educational background necessary for students to successfully transfer to a bachelor’s degree granting institution. One of the primary functions of the community college has been the transfer function; indeed, the “American community college has as its very foundation the transfer function” (Glass & Harrington, 2002, p. 35).

The role of the community college in the education of students has been both praised and criticized. Proponents of community colleges champion their accessibility and provision of education which emphasizes the needs of the student (Carlan, 2001). Students enroll in community colleges for a variety of reasons including financial, smaller class size and reduced entrance requirements (Pennington, 2006). From the community college perspective, open-door admission allows any student access to higher education. This has provided a “right of entry into a system that has not always given admittance to all who seek access” (Kippenhan, 2004).

Critics, on the other hand, argue that the community college does nothing more than “handhold” students and that the quality of education at the community college level is severely lacking (Carlan, 2001). The open-door admission policy of community
colleges is a major concern for four-year institutions and causes them to question the academic preparation of students choosing to first enroll in a community college. Cejda (1997) stated that four-year institution faculty and administrators view the student transferring from the community college as “academically suspect.”

Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) stated, “Students seeking a bachelor’s degree who begin their college career in a two-year public institution continue to be at a disadvantage in reaching their educational goals compared with similar students entering a four-year college or university” (p. 381). This statement is borne out in the literature as studies have shown that transfer students often take longer to complete their degree (Best & Gehring, 1993; Christie & Hutcheson, 2003; Glass & Harrington, 2002) and often drop out at a higher rate (Best & Gehring, 1993; Graham & Dallam, 1986; Graham & Hughes, 1994). Add to this the social issues of adjusting to a new institution, relocating to a different geographical area, as well as learning their new institutional policies and procedures; it is not a surprise that transfer students take longer to complete their degree. Pascarella (1999) reported that for students who began their college careers at a community college, they are 20-30% more likely to not pursue a bachelor’s degree. This finding was attributed to erratic enrollment practices as well as uncertainty in career goals and motives.

Examining Transfer Shock

Grade point average decreases in the range of anywhere from -0.25 to -0.30 have been reported (Diaz, 1992). Hills (1965) suggested a grade point average drop from between -.30 to -.50 while Laanan (2001) reported that a drop of less than 0.5 may be
expected. The phenomenon of transfer shock is not central to students transferring from one public institution to another public institution. Cejda and Kaylor (1997) reported a drop of -0.09 for students transferring to a private institution while Cejda (1997) reported a grade point average decline of 0.076 for a homogeneous group of transfer students. Of note was the finding that transfers students in the academic disciplines of business, math, and science experienced transfer shock to a greater extent, which suggests there may be a discipline-specific transfer shock experience. Furthermore, Cejda (1997) suggested that simply reporting a mean transfer shock average for all transfer students may not be the most reliable method for reporting transfer shock statistics.

Rhine (2000) reported that transfer shock is primarily experienced by students transferring into majors such as business, math, and science. The opposite has been reported for student majoring in the humanities, education, fine arts, and social sciences—a finding supported by Carlan (2001). These students have reported an actual increase in their grade point average following their transfer to a four-year institution. This increase in grade point average is referred to as transfer ecstasy. “The transfer ecstasy phenomenon appears to refute the belief that all students transferring from community colleges are academically less prepared than students at four-year colleges and universities” (Rhine, 2000, p. 56). Nickens (1972) is credited with coining the term “transfer ecstasy.”

However, researchers differ on just how to measure grade transfer shock. Pennington (2006) defined grade transfer shock as “the difference between a transfer student’s first semester GPA at the four-year school and his/her cumulative GPA average
at the community college” (p. 21). Pennington (2006) further indicated that this “constitutes a gain score that measures the change in a student’s GPA at two points in time” (p. 21).

Using this definition becomes problematic in that the student may not have transferred from a community college as would be the case for a lateral transfer student. Furthermore, the previous institution may have a different grading scale compared to the receiving institution which would negate any such comparisons. This definition is further complicated in that the accumulative grade point average from the sending institution is used and only the first term grade point average of the receiving institution is used. These “pretest and posttest components of the grade transfer shock measure may constitute two different indicators of grade assessment” (Pennington, 2006, p. 21).

Faculty and administrators depend upon course descriptions and course syllabi in determining course content. These course descriptions are what determine whether specific course credit or elective course credit will be given. When the course descriptions from the sending institution do not correspond to the course description of the receiving institution, the transfer student may actually be required to take the same course again. It is no wonder that transfer students can and do experience a great deal of frustration with the transfer process.

Woosley and Johnson (2006) suggest that research on transfer students can be categorized into four major areas: (1) institutional and programmatic factors, (2) transfer student motivation and involvement, (3) social issues, and (4) academic outcomes.
It is important to look at such issues holistically by taking into account both the characteristics the student brings with them as well as institutional and environmental characteristics.

**Institutional and programmatic factors.** Research on institutional and programmatic factors focuses on the characteristics of the receiving college or university, and their relationship to student success. Specifically, how do the recruitment and orientation programs affect transfer students? In addition, how do other aspects of institutional programs and structure relate to student success? Many institutions offer special programs just for transfer students such as mentoring and support programs geared toward improving the retention of transfer students. In addition, many institutions offer separate orientations for transfer students and often allow them to register for classes before traditional freshmen are allowed to register.

Monroe (2006) reported that transfer student concerns, as they relate to their new institution, encompass several different areas. An example of this is Institutional “fit”. Institutional “fit” also applies to transfer students and aligns with the work of Tinto (1982). In addition, issues surrounding academic integration and institutional communication were also vital in a transfer student’s decision to persist or drop out of their new institutional home. Transfer students have multiple interactions with faculty, staff, and offices in their new environment. If these interactions are negative, it can lead to a disconnect developing, distancing the new transfer from integrating into their new environment.
Unlike true freshmen, transfer students bring with them the experience of having been in a college or university setting. Although they share many transitional experiences of first year students, transfer students do not wish to be treated as freshmen and have a strong desire for programs geared to their specific needs (Townsend, 2008). Similarly, Kodama (2002) reported that transfer students had few sources of on-campus support and were more likely to be marginalized than other student populations.

The matter of transfer of credits earned at the previous institution is often a cause of concern for transfer students. In most cases, not all credits will transfer and of those that do transfer, not all of them can be applied to the student’s choice of major. Different policies regarding how transfer credits are accepted create barriers for students and can extend the amount of time to graduation. Some states have developed articulation agreements that outline how the courses will transfer between public colleges and universities (Welsh & Kjorlein, 2001).

Piland (1995) suggested that transfer students who have completed the maximum number of transfer credits available at their community college are more likely to experience academic success. Many institutions of higher education have adopted what is called a transfer module or transfer guide. These guides enable students seeking to transfer greater ease in the process since all of the courses contained in the transfer guide will transfer to a different institution and will meet the new institution’s graduation requirements.

Unfortunately, these same articulation agreements do not always extend to private institutions. Many times, students transferring from a private to a public institution find
stricter guidelines on which credits will transfer. In some instances, courses with certain letter grades such as C- or lower will not be accepted at a public institution. Moreover, how the courses are evaluated often exacerbate transfer student issues.

Transfer student motivation. Research into transfer student motivation to become involved on their new campus suggests that transfer students are more focused on academics than on becoming involved in organizations (Miville & Sedlacek, 1995). Since transfer students enter their new institution as upper class students, the desire to belong and the need to become involved and/or part of a group may not be as important in the development of their own identity. This seems to contradict the work of Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) whose body of work emphasizes the role that social engagement has on grade point average and retention. Since Pascarella and Terenzini’s (2005) work tends to focus on the first year student, it seems possible that transfer students come with separate issues and therefore warrant closer study.

Fee et al. (2009) reported that transfer students found motivation to succeed at their new institutional home because they experienced failure at their previous institution. The fact that they were not academically successful at their previous institution served as a source of motivation for them and inspired them to work harder in the academic arena. Furthermore, working at more menial jobs and viewing older co-workers motivated these students to resume their academic studies.

Social issues. Social issues such as those centered on creating new friendships, joining campus organizations, and maintaining self-confidence are all impacted by the decision to transfer. Literature supports the fact that transfer students may be
marginalized and treated differently from other student subpopulations. Allen et al. (2008) reported that social connectedness had a direct effect on whether students remained in school while Ose (1997) reported that transfer students felt like outsiders at their new institutions. Woosley and Johnson (2006) reported that transfer students spent less time involved in on-campus activities than did non-transfer students. Transfer students also reported lower levels of overall involvement than their native counterparts. Furthermore, transfer students reported less satisfaction with student activities. While success behaviors of transfer students were similar to that of their non-transfer peers, transfer students reported lower levels of progress toward their degree than non-transfer students. These findings suggest that because transfer students are less involved in activities and find less satisfaction in the activities, their acclimation and integration into their new campus community could be jeopardized. Despite the fact that transfer students are just as motivated to succeed as non-transfer students, they still lag behind in degree completion.

Gardner and Barefoot (1995) noted that social concerns of transfer students often cited as barriers to a successful first term of enrollment may include relating to their new environment, involvement, and adjustment. Additional social areas of concern include finances and the transfer student’s own level of self-efficacy. Lester (2006) reported that community college transfer students often face a greater financial strain upon transferring to a four-year university. Tuition at many community colleges is based upon full-time versus part-time enrollment status and often does not include fees for services such as student health, legal services, or campus programming. Upon transferring to a university,
these students must now pay for such services. Given that many of these transfer students are non-residential, they find the requirement to pay for such services, whether they use them or not, as a barrier to their successful integration to their new institution.

**Academic outcomes.** Research on the academic outcomes of transfer students has emphasized the phenomenon of transfer shock. Diaz’s (1992) meta-analysis of 62 studies dealing with transfer shock reported that 79% of community college transfer students experienced transfer shock. Transfer shock is generally conceptualized as the drop in a transfer students grade point average immediately following the first term of enrollment at their new campus. While much of the research has focused on this aspect of transfer shock, it is important to point out that the phenomenon of transfer shock can be more encompassing and affect more than just the transfer student’s grades.

Research into ethnicity and gender differences in transfer students has yielded interesting results. African American and Asian American transfer students “had a greater interest in working with faculty on a research project and were more interested in meeting people from different cultures than their Caucasian counterparts” (Wawrzynski and Sedlacek 2003, p. 491). Furthermore, African American and Asian American students were more interested in joining student groups than Caucasian students. This contradicts studies that suggest that transfer students are not interested in partaking of social outlets and supports research suggesting that campus climate can have an impact on student retention and success (Astin, 1993; Kuh, 1991; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). In addition, African American and Asian American students engaged in more academic
behaviors such as group study, asking for help and speaking up in class than Caucasian students.

Wawrzynski and Sedlacek (2003) also reported that female students are much more likely to engage in an institution’s social activities. This supports earlier research by Ancis and Phillips (1996) which found that female students who became involved in the social climate developed better self-efficacy and career behaviors.

**Summary**

It is evident from the literature that transfer students have a unique set of needs and issues. The community college is the primary source for transfer students entering a four-year institution; however, the mere fact that they began their academic experience at a community college creates a stigma of suspicion and caution on the part of the receiving four-year institution. Transfer students want nothing more than to be treated with respect and to not be lumped into the same mold as true entering freshmen.

Transfer students face many obstacles once they decide to transfer and the literature is ripe with studies outlining obstacles such as credit transfer, integration into their new institution, and institutional barriers in the form of policies and procedures which hamper a smooth transition. Institutions of higher education need to listen and understand the perspective of the transfer student. To “walk in the shoes” of a transfer student so that they may truly appreciate the process and therefore bring about changes to the system that encourages transfer students and aids in their success rather than creating barriers to their success.
Chapter Three Methodology

In this study, I sought to understand students’ transfer experiences. Merriam (2002) asserted that qualitative research seeks to uncover the meaning and experience of individuals. Through the use of inductive research strategies and rich, thick description, the researcher seeks to aid in clarifying the experiences and lived worlds of the research participants. Given the educational community’s limited understanding of the transfer student perspective of the transfer experience, I sought to present the lived experience of a selection of transfer students, most of them having undergone academic difficulties in their transition to a large, Midwestern university.

Qualitative research includes techniques such as observations, quotations, and document analysis that paint a picture of the participants. According to Patton (2002), qualitative data describe, in rich detail, a phenomenon or process. Qualitative data take the reader “into the time and place of the observations so that we know what it was like to have been there. They capture and communicate someone else’s experience of the world in his or her words. Qualitative data tell a story” (p. 47). In this study, I sought to convey the stories of transfer students who found academic success following initial academic difficulties.

Glesne (1999) stated that qualitative research “seeks to make sense of personal stories and the ways in which they intersect” (p. 1). Bogdan and Biklen (2007) stated that qualitative research means “unlearning the social construction of ‘research’ and opening oneself to the possibility of employing a different vocabulary and way of structuring the research process” (p. 4). Merriam (2002) asserted that qualitative research seeks to find
meaning and understanding in which the researcher becomes the primary research tool. Through the use of inductive research strategies and rich, thick description, the researcher seeks to aid in clarifying the experiences and lived worlds of the research subject.

**Theoretical Basis: Interpretive Case Study**

The use of case study as a research method is frequently employed by researchers in education and the social sciences. Typically, the intent of a case study is to “gain an in-depth understanding of the situation and meaning for those involved” (Merriam, 1998, p. 19). Despite the long-standing use of the case study method, there remains some confusion regarding what constitutes a case study, how it differs from other forms of qualitative research, and the most appropriate use of the case study method. Smith (1978) contended that a major difference between the case study method and other types of qualitative research lies in the detailed descriptions and analyses derived from the study of a single unit or bounded system.

Merriam (1998) described different types of case studies based on the intent of the study. For the purposes of this research, the Interpretive Case Study method was selected. The Interpretive Case Study method is used “to develop conceptual categories or to illustrate, support, or challenge theoretical assumptions held prior to the data gathering (Merriam, p. 38). The Interpretive Case Study method offers rich, thick descriptions that go beyond the mere presentation of the phenomenon. The intention of the Interpretive Case Study becomes the analysis, interpretation, and theory development of the particular phenomenon under study with the goal of developing a typology or categorization of the phenomenon. Merriam (1998) also added that the level of
interpretation may range from merely suggesting the presence of a relationship all the way to the development of a theory associated with the phenomenon.

As qualitative researchers seek meaning in people’s stories, they bring with them particular lenses or paradigms through which they view and interpret these experiences. While this may appear as a bias, the qualitative researcher identifies and embraces his or her paradigm and uses it as an interpretive tool to better understand the experiences of the person. Research is guided by a form of paradigm or “theory” that enables the researcher to develop a framework through which the data are interpreted. Otherwise, the data simply become an amorphous collection of accounts that have very little meaning to anyone else (Merriam, 1998).

As the researcher, it was vital that I strove to understand what the transfer student experienced and to look at that experience through his or her eyes. I did not transfer from one institution to another; therefore, I had no direct experience related to the transfer experience. This lack of firsthand experience allowed me to enter into their world without any preset or preconceived ideas or thoughts on what the transfer experience is, was or should have been. Likewise, having no previous experience required that I treat what I learned as real and factual at least as how it related to that particular student.

**Researcher perspective.** In representing the stories of this study’s participants, it is appropriate that I acknowledge my own perspectives and biases. As a qualitative researcher, I must acknowledge the role that my personal experience and theoretical orientation played in the understanding and interpretation of participants’ experiences.
My particular perspective is guided by my training and education as a mental health counselor. Specifically, I employed a cognitive theoretical approach when working with individuals. Fundamental to a cognitive approach is the belief that our thoughts are directly connected to how we feel; that is, thoughts influence feelings. The focus is on the here and now, with little emphasis placed on past events. What is most important is identifying distorted thinking patterns, beliefs, or behaviors that are causing present discomforts. By identifying negative self-talk, individuals are able to change these thinking and behavioral patterns and create more positive ones. Inherent to this approach is the need to develop and nurture a collaborative relationship in which we both believed that we were working together to resolve the current issue.

What I do offer, as it relates to the transfer student experience, is several years of professional experience in academic advising and student services work with transfer students. My work experiences with transfer students have taken place in a variety of academic settings including both public and private institutions of higher education. I have worked with transfer students who transferred to a small, rural, private college as well as to a larger, research intensive university. Through this work and close contact, I have developed a sincere desire to work with transfer students and to improve the services delivered to them via the institution.

Qualitative research allows for multiple perspectives; some of which may seem in opposition to each other. This means that for this research, I assumed the perspective of the student, a counselor, college administrator, or parent. The ability to see from these multiple perspectives allowed for different insights into the transfer students’
experiences. It allowed me the ability to see connections or themes that by simply viewing the phenomenon of the transfer experience through one lens I may have missed. What is important to remember in qualitative research is that the perspective of the individual is the key; the event must be interpreted through his or her eyes which aid in understanding the event.

One of the key aspects of qualitative research is the development of empathy. “Empathy develops from personal contact with the people interviewed and observed. Empathy involves being able to take and understand the stance, position, feelings, experiences and worldview of others (Patton, 2002 p. 52). Furthermore, Patton stated, “Empathy combines cognitive understanding with affective connection.” (p. 52)

I demonstrated empathy with the transfer students I interviewed by carefully listening to what they said and by paraphrasing back to them their responses to demonstrate understanding. I worked at taking on their role as a transfer student and identifying myself as closely as I could to their situation. I strove to understand what it felt like to transfer to a new institution and to begin anew the process of acclimation and adjustment. I had to be careful to not allow my emotions to become too strong as that could cloud my judgment and cause me to lose my objectivity. Demonstrating empathy allowed the participants to see that my goal was to understand their perspective while not trying to change or challenge it.

The value of empathy arises from the doctrine of Verstehen, which means understanding. Humans are uniquely capable of making sense of their world. This
ability to empathize allowed me to enter into the participants’ worlds while at the same time not influencing their perceptions and altering their interpretation of the events.

**Evolution of the study.** For this study, the overarching question is: What are the salient academic and social experiences of students who transferred from community colleges to a Midwest research university, which is home to primarily traditional age, residential students?

I originally planned to look at the effects of transfer shock as it related to the transfer experience. However, due to a lack of students meeting my criteria, I expanded my research to include students who did not experience a drop in their grade point average. Five students who were interviewed represented situations in which transfer shock occurred. These students experienced a drop in their grade point average following their transfer to a large, research institution; however, in subsequent terms of enrollment, their grade point average improved which suggested that these students were able to compensate for the initial drop.

Four participants did not experience a drop in grade point average upon transferring. I sought to understand what happened to these students. Were there differences in the experiences of these participants that led to some of them experiencing transfer shock while others did not? How were the participants who had experienced transfer shock able to rebound from their first quarter grade point average and demonstrate subsequent successful quarters of enrollment? The study was devoted to their perceptions and experiences of the transfer experience and how it related to their transition to their new institution. A corollary question was, how did particular personal
and institutional characteristics relate to participants’ transition and subsequent academic and social adjustment.

In addition to exploring the transfer shock phenomenon, I also sought to explore how these participants were able to navigate the transition to their new institution. Because of the high proportion of transfer students who do not complete his or her degree (Dougherty, 1992; Gao et al., 2002), this study sought to explore how the experiences of transfer students contributed or detracted from his or her success. Since research into this phenomenon is nearly non-existent, qualitative research is the appropriate approach towards building a cogent theory.

**Methodology and Research Design**

This study was conducted at Ohio University, a large, rural, university in the Midwest. Ohio University is a doctoral-granting, high research university located in the rural, southeastern part of the state. The participants included include nine transfer students some of whom represented cases of transfer shock. These students were selected based on their academic performance over a period of at least three academic quarters of enrollment.

**Participant selection.** An initial review of all admitted and enrolled transfer students in the College of Arts and Sciences for the academic years of 2008, 2009, and 2010 was conducted. Students enrolled in the College of Arts and Sciences represented both a convenience sample as well as a representation of the variety of academic majors housed within the College of Arts and Sciences. From this initial list, students who had transferred from a community college, or vertical transfer students, were selected and
their grade point average from their previous institution was obtained and then compared to the grade point average earned following transfer. Since I originally intended to study transfer shock, only those students whose pre-transfer grade point average was higher than the post-transfer grade point average were selected. This initial review yielded a pool of 30 potential participants.

These students also represented purposeful sampling. They were chosen because they had the qualities I sought, were information-rich, and provided insights into the phenomenon of transfer shock. According to Patton (2002), “the logic and power of purposeful sampling derive from the emphasis on in-depth understanding. This leads to selecting information-rich cases for study in depth” (p. 46).

Participants were contacted via email and asked to participate in a semi-structured interview to discuss their perceptions of his or her transfer experience. From an initial pool of 30 participants, only five who met the criterion of experiencing transfer shock, or the drop in grade point average following transfer to a new institution, responded and agreed to be interviewed. Because so few responded, I returned to the original list of vertical transfer students and contacted them via email seeking participants willing to be interviewed regarding their transfer experience. Five students replied to this second request and four were selected to participate. The student not selected transferred from a four-year university, not a community college, so they were excluded. During the initial meeting, students were informed of the purpose of the study and given a consent form (see Appendix B) outlining confidentiality, expectations, and requirements. Participants were given pseudonyms and any personally identifying information was safeguarded.
**Interview.** Interviews are conducted so that we may understand those things we cannot directly observe. Researchers cannot observe thoughts, feelings or emotions or observe previous events. The qualitative researcher uses interviews in order to enter the other person’s perspective on an event or phenomenon. “Qualitative interviewing begins with the assumption that the perspective of others is meaningful, knowable, and able to be made explicit (Patton, 2002, p. 341).

Glesne (1999) described interviews as an occasion for the researcher and participant to engage in a meaningful dialogue with opportunities to engage the feelings of the participant. “The feelings in question are those that are involved in the researchers’ relationships with other—the matter of rapport—and those that are involved in the researchers’ reactions to what they are learning in the world of their others—the matter of subjectivity” (Glesne, 1999, p. 93).

For this study, I conducted semi-structured interviews in which a set of prepared questions were asked to each participant. The semi-structured nature of the interviews allowed for the asking of open-ended questions and probes to further elicit information regarding the experience of the participant. The semi-structured format also allowed me to explore topics or issues that were not anticipated so that their transfer experiences may be more fully understood and experienced. The goal of the interview was to allow the participants the opportunity to respond in their own words as well the chance to express their own personal perspective on the phenomenon of transfer rebound.

The interview questions were developed from a review of the literature and were directed at understanding the experiences of community college transfer students to a
primarily residential university (see Appendix A). Three questions asked for a liker-type rating of the experience. The intent was to help the participant quantify the experience, which provided an objective aspect to the interview and sought to balance the subjective nature of the questions. The questions covered four areas of exploration: (1) the reasons behind the decision to transfer, (2) the participants’ perceptions of the transfer experience, (3) the participants’ perceptions of their academic performance, and (4) the perceptions of how the participants had changed as a result of the transfer experience. This study examined the perceptions of their transfer experience and those personal and institutional characteristics that aided their transition.

These interviews took place in my office, a quiet, comfortable room thereby allowing the participant and the researcher the opportunity to engage in a meaningful dialogue with little chance of interruption. Most initial interviews lasted one hour although some were longer and conducted over a two-day period. Follow up interviews were conducted approximately three months after the initial interview and also lasted approximately one hour each. These interviews were audio taped and transcribed verbatim. In addition, I used the technique of memoing during the interviews. This process allowed me to write down thoughts, ideas, and impressions that helped propel my research on transfer perspectives and transfer shock.

A key element of qualitative research is silence. This silence is the researcher’s way of understanding what he or she is studying. I began my listening by taking in the information with the belief that the information was true. The subjective aspect of the individual’s behavior is the emphasis in qualitative research. I gained entry into the
participants’ perceptual world and attempted to find meaning in his or her everyday life. It is through the participant’s perspective that I viewed the events of transfer process and of transfer shock for those participants who experienced the phenomenon. As Patton (2002) succinctly states, “evaluators must learn how to listen when knowledgeable people are talking” (p. 341).

At the beginning of the interviews I was sensitive to the interests, backgrounds and apprehensions of the participants. I was forthcoming about the intentions of my research and questions and I demonstrated a genuine interest and caring for the participant as this allowed me to develop rapport with the participant.

**Analysis.** Qualitative analysis involves the process of arranging, organizing and searching the data collected to come up with findings. Bogdan and Biklen (2007) stated that analysis involves “working with the data, organizing them, breaking them into manageable units, coding them, synthesizing them and searching for patterns” (p. 159). For this study, via the use of participant interviews, field notes, memos and coding, I explored and worked toward understanding the lived lives of the participants and how they interpreted the events of their transfer experience.

According to Bogdan and Biklen (2007) qualitative research employs the use of in-depth interviews and participant observation to aid the researcher in understanding the lived lives of the participants. Furthermore, Bogdan and Biklen (2007) describe five predominate features of qualitative research. These are: (1) naturalistic, (2) descriptive data, (3) concern with process, (4) inductive analysis, and (5) meaning. While not every one of these features must be present, it becomes a matter of the degree in which they are
represented. In the case of this study, descriptive data, concern with process, inductive data analysis and representing participants’ meaning of the phenomenon will be particularly important.

**Descriptive Data**

By its sheer nature, qualitative data are rich with description. Rather than being represented by numbers and symbols, qualitative data paint a picture with words. In this study, I described each participant’s experience in detail, drawn from transcribed interviews, and included quotations and other prose that represented the participants’ experience and the meaning and understanding they ascribed to the event. The qualitative research approach demands that the world be examined with the assumption that nothing is trivial, that everything has the potential of being a clue that might unlock a more comprehensive understanding of what is being studied (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007, p. 5). Qualitative research takes nothing for granted.

**Concern with Process**

For qualitative researchers, the process of discovery is more important than the outcomes produced. It is the journey of understanding the event that propels the qualitative researcher to look for connections, side roads of meaning and undiscovered paths—all of which lead to a deeper meaning and insight into the lived experiences of people. I was guided by Patton (2002) who gives guidance into ensuring a rigorous process of analysis in which deep connections and meaning are derived. Such analysis depended upon my insights and conceptual capabilities as well as my ability to recognize patterns.
Inductive analysis. Qualitative researchers do not enter into their research with a pre-set theory or hypothesis they seek to prove. Rather, qualitative researchers allow the process of discovery to build their theory; in other words, the theory becomes grounded in the data. Qualitative data does not merely reconstruct a picture it already knows; instead, the picture develops as the researcher collects and analyzes the information that is gathered. By looking for alternate ways to organize the data, I looked for different possible explanations and whether these possibilities were supported by the data. I searched for the best fit for the data which required that I keep track of all alternate patterns and conclusions. By reporting such alternate methods I demonstrated a deeper intellectual integrity thereby lending more credibility to my research and findings.

**Credibility.** Ensuring credibility is an important aspect of qualitative research. One approach I used was to employ epoche, a common approach used in phenomenological research (Patton, 2002). Deriving from the Greek meaning to refrain from judgment, the qualitative researcher must avoid the common place ways of identifying or perceiving events and develop a new way of looking at them. Moustakas (1994) asserted that in epoche “the everyday understandings, judgments, and knowings are set aside, and the phenomena are revisited, visually, natively, in a wide-open sense, from the vantage point of a pure or transcendental ego” (p. 484).

Epoche involves searching inside oneself for biases, prejudices or any preconceptions about the participants and the material studied. By actively engaging in a process to identify any of these elements, I better enabled myself to explore these transfer
experiences and perceptions with a fresh, open viewpoint that was not clouded by any pre-set convictions.

The second step in analysis involved bracketing which means the data are dissected, taken apart, and the essential elements identified and analyzed. Denzin (1989) outlines the following steps in bracketing:

1. Locate within the personal experience, or self-story, key phrases and statements that speak directly to the phenomenon in question.
2. Interpret the meanings of these phrases, as an informed reader.
3. Obtain the subject’s interpretations of these phrases, if possible.
4. Inspect these meanings for what they reveal about the essential, recurring features of the phenomenon being studied.
5. Offer a tentative statement, or definition, of the phenomenon in terms of the essential recurring features identified in step 4. (p. 485-486)

Once bracketing had taken place, the data were then “spread out for examination, with all elements and perspectives having equal weight” (Patton, 2002, p. 486). The data were then clustered into meaningful groups after which I looked for recurring themes that could be expanded upon and viewed from differing perspectives. Finally, I looked for deeper meanings based upon the data and began a process of integrating these into a written account of the phenomenon.

Following the data collection and initial analysis, I performed a member check. In this study, member checking involved sharing the transcribed interviews, analytical thoughts and drafts of this study with the participants. This allowed the participants the
opportunity to see that they were being represented correctly and accurately, and to provide feedback that could result in changes (Glesne, 1999).

What emerged from this process was a depiction of the lived experiences of the participants. Patton (2002) calls this final process creative synthesis or the bringing together of the pieces into a total experience which identifies the patterns and relationships uncovered. “The purpose of this kind of disciplined analysis is to elucidate the essence of experience of a phenomenon for an individual or group” (Patton, p. 487).

**Researcher Ethics**

In approaching this research, I understood that first and foremost, I must not harm or impose any undue burden on the participants. These are transfer students who have experienced a transition and some even experienced a form of transfer shock. I worked to ensure the reliability of data through attention to the accuracy and comprehensiveness of the data I collected. Furthermore, it was important that the participant entered into the research agreement voluntarily and fully informed of the possible dangers from participation.

For the purposes of this research, each participant was informed of any possible dangers related to participating and was asked to sign a statement of understanding before they participated. I also participated in the university’s institutional review board training and submitted such proof of participation and received IRB approval before beginning the data collection process.

Bogdan and Biklen (2007) outline seven guidelines when working with human participants:
1. Avoid research sites where informants may feel coerced to participate in your research.

2. Honor your informant’s privacy.

3. There is a difference in informants’ time commitment to you when you do participant observation in public places and when they do an interview with you.

4. Protect the identities of the individuals who participate so they are not identified, embarrassed or harmed in any way.

5. Treat informants with respect and seek their cooperation in the research.

6. If a contract is negotiated with the participant, the researcher must honor and abide by the terms of the contract.

7. Be honest and tell the truth when reporting on the findings of the study (p. 49-50).

I strove to meet these guidelines and saw that no situations were created which jeopardized the students because of their participation thus ensuring that my efforts were responsible and treated each participant equally.
Chapter Four Themes and Findings

These are the stories of nine students who transferred to a four year public university, having previously attended community colleges. These are their individual, unique experiences, colored by their own particular lenses of reality and framed within their own world of understanding. I must also acknowledge that my own distinct experiences as a student, professional and researcher also provided another lens through which these experiences were interpreted. While these participants do not represent every transfer student at this university, one can gain a greater understanding of the transfer process, what factors led to their decision to transfer to a different institution, what it feels like to transfer from a community college to a four year public university, and how they viewed themselves both before and after they transferred. These nine students, John, Amy, Sharon, Joe, Simon, Doug, Alex, Jane, and Wanda each experienced personal growth and setbacks.

The participants were all considered “vertical” transfer students meaning they began their college career in a two-year institution and transferred to a four-year institution. Two of the students interviewed could be considered “swirlers” meaning they transferred multiple times between two-year and four-year institutions; however, they were included in this research because their most recent transfer was from a two-year school to a four-year school. These nine students represent those who agreed to participate.

I am deeply appreciative that these students did not have to participate but opened themselves up for the benefit of future transfer students who may be affected by this
research. I had not met most of the participants prior to the interview; yet, they took the
time and opened themselves up to the interview process. Some of them shared feelings
and details about themselves they had never shared with another individual, and I am
very grateful for their openness and willingness to share some very private, intimate
details of their lives.

Many common themes emerged from their experiences: a desire to achieve, a
drive to succeed and a sense of independence and maturity. Yet, these stories also
represent nine distinct journeys. The semi-structured interview format provided a
uniform method for asking questions. This provided richer details and required the
students to reflect on their experiences. Rapport was easily achieved which allowed free-
flowing conversations and allowed both the student and researcher to follow new paths as
they were discovered. The resulting data represent the multiple paths these students took
in the transfer process and how they have been shaped by the transfer experience.

This chapter is organized into two sections. In order to illustrate the unique
stories of each participant, I begin with a profile of each participant. This is followed by
a cross-case analysis, highlighting the common themes that represent my interpretation of
the common dynamics of this significant transitional process.

**Individual Cases**

**John.** John is a 26 year old young man who, in my opinion, embodies the word
perseverance. We met in early October after he had finished his classes for the day and
before he had to get ready for work. It was late afternoon, yet John had a large grin on
his face and seemed eager to talk about his transfer experience. He was casually dressed
in jeans, a long sleeved shirt, and light jacket as the sometimes unpredictable
Southeastern Ohio weather had just started to grow cool.

I explained the purpose for my research telling him that I was interested in the
experiences of transfer students. When I asked him his motivation for agreeing to be
interviewed, he said “I think my experience is different from a lot of kids so I thought
you might find it interesting.”

**Family and educational background.** A good student in high school, John said
that he graduated with approximately a 3.6 grade point average from Davis Senior High
School in California. When I commented that he must have been a good student, he
replied, “For that school, that’s not high. Like most of those kids get around that because
it’s a college town and that’s just how that clique was.” However, as he spoke further, he
did acknowledge that he was a good student. It is at this point that he became slightly
embarrassed and looked away appearing somewhat uncomfortable in admitting this about
himself.

John has an older half-sister and a fourteen year old brother. He did not have
much of a relationship with his sister growing up as she lived with her father in another
state. He described a rocky relationship between his sister and his parents. Though his
sister attempted to live with them briefly before they moved from California, problems
continued and she eventually married a man much older than she. They now have a good
relationship and his sister actually lives fairly close to them now in Ohio.

John smiled broadly when talking about his younger brother. “You know, he’s
just going through that stage of he’s a really good kid; like he gets good grades. He’s not
involved in sports. He doesn’t have like a lot of friends. He’s kind of more reclusive which reminds me of me at his age. He’s more into staying home.”

He is quite proud of his parents, especially his father. Neither parent has a college degree so John will be the first in the family to earn one. His father attended college for a while before dropping out, and currently serves as the postmaster in their hometown. “He worked all the way up from being like a mail clerk. Like he carried mail and he just stayed in the post office and now he’s postmaster.” John’s mother is an apartment manager. I asked him if he felt any pressure to earn his degree. “I did but not anymore because it’s like I know I got it. Yeah, it shouldn’t be a problem.”

**The music scene.** As a California native, John embraced the “California lifestyle.” By living in both northern and southern California, he became steeped in both of those cultures. Drawn to the music scene, John became involved in music while still in high school. When he was 17, his parents relocated to Ohio but he chose to remain in California because of his involvement with music. John stayed with friends while finishing high school and kept in contact with his family.

He got a job at the House of Blues and worked his way up from hosting to being able to do some managing. This kept him very busy but he feels that he learned a lot from the experience, plus it allowed him to be around the music he cared so much about. He did not attend college while in California, opting instead to focus on the music and his job. He remained in California for three years, until age 20, before moving to Ohio in order to be closer to his parents.
Ohio, the band, and community college. John's move to Ohio led to his involvement with a band. He is a drummer and vocalist and was playing with the band full time. One thing that I began to observe about John was that he seemed to be a rather introspective and quiet young man, which seems antithetical to playing in a band and being on stage. When I told him my observation he readily agreed. “I totally am. That’s something I’ve never understood about myself.” Though he does not like to draw attention to himself because he feels that it is “prideful,” he also enjoyed the attention he receives from being on stage, “Like I don’t like being like I’m great, you know…but I think the band may have been an outlet for that but I’ve never understood why.”

John began attending college simply because he had always seen school as a possibility, “Like my whole life I always had the idea like when you’re done with high school you have to go to college.” It was difficult for him to consider going to college while still in California because of his involvement with music and the fact that finances were tight.

It was still a different atmosphere as far as finances. Like, I did not have the finances and my parents still don’t have the finances to send me to college. I didn’t really want to look into it and was poor anyways so when I got here I applied to a community college because it was like cheaper and, you know, I can do it while I’m doing other things.

He discovered that he enjoyed school. His first term of enrollment at his local community college was in the winter quarter of 2006 and he took just one course, English composition. He earned a B for the course. “I was in school like not full time though. I
was part time in school while I did it (the band) so I completed a lot of my class work
while I was doing that. So yeah, that’s why I’m older and still in college.” He summed up
his decision to begin at a community college by stating, “It just seemed like an easy thing
to do.”

He took classes mostly during the day although he did try to take all night courses
one quarter because he thought it would allow him to work during the day. Unfortunately
he found night courses depressing:

For whatever reason night classes really depressed me. …to me it just feels like
go to work, go to school, go home, go to sleep and then do it all over again the
next day and that depresses me when my entire day is gone basically.

He told a story about one of his instructors ridiculing the class for taking a course
at 8:00 P.M. He felt like the instructor should not have been saying anything
demoralizing to the students in the class; rather, he felt that the instructor should have
been more encouraging of them and acknowledge that many of them were working full-
time jobs during the day and taking classes at night.

John chose a community college because of the financial aspect and because of
the location. Attending a community college allowed him to start on his own terms and
at his own pace. By enrolling in a four-year university he felt that he would be
sacrificing this freedom and would instead have to conform to the expectations of the
university experience. In addition, he did not go to school full time because music was
still most important in his life. He continued to take courses in order to keep up with
school but he continued to feel pulled from different directions.
I always made sure I was there. I didn’t want to like drop out. But I was always taking classes in some form or another but it was hard because we did like travel a lot and I would miss class because of something with the band and yeah it was tough but I kept up with it.

A review of his community college transcript shows that John was enrolled for a total of 13 quarters beginning winter term in 2006 and ending spring term of 2009. Most quarters he took at least two courses although for his last six terms of enrollment he took just one course. His cumulative grade point average at the time of his transfer was a 2.667.

**The transfer experience.** Transferring had always been a goal for John. He recounted a radio show called *Love Line* and how one of the guys on the show always ridiculed community college students who would call into the show, “he would always make fun of like community college students. He would be like, oh yeah; you guys are all there just wasting your time. You know you’re never going to actually get out.” These comments resonated with him and seemed to encourage him to transfer out. “It’s funny because I always thought like I need to get out. I must transfer out.”

By the end of his last few quarters of enrollment at his community college, John began thinking more seriously about transferring to a four-year university. “It was at a specific point where I was still in Sinclair and I was like, well, you know I’m almost done here. I’m ready to go to a new place.” Even though he was working a good job at a publishing company, he felt that the move would be a good one for him. He had been in the Dayton area for four years and he felt that it was time to try something new. He saw
the transfer as both an opportunity and a challenge. Coincidentally, he had a friend who had also decided to transfer from Sinclair.

The decision to transfer and the events that followed transpired quickly for John. It was in August of 2009 when he made the drive to Athens and met with the Admission staff. Once he applied, he was surprised at how quickly he was accepted and able to register for classes. He quickly found a job with a local internet provider service. “It was the first job I applied to and I got it. I was just like that makes me feel a lot better so moving down here wasn’t all that stressful.”

A self-described planner and worrier, finding a job and housing were major sources of stress for him. While he feels the university was very helpful and easy to work with, it was finding a place to live and a job that created most of his stress during his transfer and subsequent move to Athens.

It was not that the school wasn’t, you know, accommodating or anything like that. But as far as the housing and money and everything like that as a transfer student and being older like I don’t just come here into a dorm and everything is kind of given to me for the first two years. I had to get here and like set myself up.

For John, actually attending classes was a bright spot in the transfer process. “The classes were actually refreshing compared to all that.”

Although he appreciates the opportunity the community college gave him, he always knew that he planned to transfer to a four-year university. He described the physical structure of the community college like this, “It’s just a building on a square and so it doesn’t feel like college. It feels more like you’re going to an office building.” For
John, it was this feeling of not actually being in college that he seems to remember and feel the most.

It was this same emotional connection that he felt when he first came to this campus. He felt like he was actually going to be attending college because, for him, it looked and felt like a college campus. “It was good because I was like, wow; this actually feels like a real college.”

I asked him to rate his transfer experience on a scale from one to five with one being the worst and five being the best. He rated it a 3.5 mostly because of the issues he faced with housing and a job.

I feel that the school did a great job getting me in, transferring my courses and everything like that. I just wasn’t prepared, really, for Athens. But I would never discourage anybody from transferring here because I think it definitely was a smooth experience as far as the school is concerned.

There are some things he would do differently such as applying for admission and looking for housing earlier in the year. While he chose not to participate in the campus tour, he did say that he now wishes he had known where all of the academic buildings were located. He was also not prepared for the larger class sizes.

**The first quarter.** John registered for a total of 16 credit hours for his first term of enrollment at Ohio University. He did not feel the coursework was any more difficult than what he experienced at the community college. In fact, he felt that because of his age and previous schooling that he was at an advantage to the other students beginning
their first term at Ohio University. I noted that what he was describing was that he felt more mature than many of the other students to which he replied, “Oh, yeah.”

John completed the first term with a 2.5 grade point average which was a drop from his 2.667 grade point average at the time of his transfer. While not a significant drop, it is still a drop in his grade point average which is defined as transfer shock (Hills, 1965; Diaz, 1992). Since John did not find the coursework to be any more rigorous than what he had previously encountered, he attributed the drop to social and personal issues of adjustment to a new institution. John believed that his old study habits would be enough to earn the grades he wanted to earn. He was comfortable with the grades he earned and his overall study habits. While he describes himself as not the type of student to spend multiple hours in the library studying, he has adopted a realistic view of his study and work time commitments. He went on to say that he has a lot to do between work and school and that while school does not take a “backseat” he does admit that it gets rushed more than he would like.

Because he is a planner, he wanted to make sure he had enough money to pay his bills,

Before I got down here I made sure I was going to have a certain amount of money coming through financial aid and I was going to be able to find housing that I could afford so that was it’s always difficult like juggling bills while doing school and work. And then you know of course meeting people that’s always fun. But I really wouldn’t say that the coursework was the most daunting thing it’s just being in a new place.
Finding the balance. Learning new policy and procedures or “the ropes” was perhaps John’s biggest challenge. While he felt prepared for the academic requirements, he feels that the social challenges were by far greater. “I mean I don’t feel like I can say there was much that the school threw at me that I wasn’t expecting; it was more the city.” The social challenges were intimidating for John plus he had the added responsibility of working to pay his bills.

John works between 26 and 35 hours per week at a local internet provider service. Studying there is not possible because of the work load and while he admits to being a procrastinator, he also knows how he needs to balance his academic and workloads. For example, when interviewed he was taking 12 hours of coursework and working approximately 26 hours per week. “I am doing fine as far as attendance and all that stuff goes like I don’t feel like I’m behind or anything.”

I asked John to use a one to five rating scale with one being the worst and five being the best to rate his perceptions of his first quarter of enrollment at Ohio University. He rated it as a four, “I love it like I was really happy to be at OU.”

Independence

John described independence as one of his most prominent traits. He valued his ability to figure out on his own what he needs to do and to then do it. He never really utilized his academic adviser to help him schedule classes nor does he ask for help understanding his degree requirements. “If I know how to do it I don’t want help for it.” He believes that one key to success is having some independence and the ability to make decisions for yourself without relying on others too much.
Because of his independence, he never really utilized many campus resources. Other than typical resources such as the library, he never found the need to seek out assistance from other offices that provide academic advising, tutoring or other self-help programs. He has very much depended upon himself to learn what he needed to do and to then do it.

**Describing self.** I asked John to pick three adjectives he would use to describe himself before he transferred and then to pick three adjectives he would use to describe himself after he transferred. Before he transferred he said he would definitely be described as a procrastinator but he also used the words dedicated and hopeful to describe himself. John said that while he does procrastinate, he does not allow himself to get to the point where he does not do work. He gets his work done, studies for exams, but will sometimes be writing papers the night before they are due. “I don’t think there is any doubt that if I just put more time into doing something it will only get better. If I’m waiting until the last minute of course it’s going to suffer a little bit.” John’s decision to use the word dedicated is appropriate given the amount of time he has spent in college; however, he is excited to know that he will graduate this summer. Finally, he chose the word optimistic, “I always try to force myself to see like the silver lining like get past it, get it done because there’s good things coming.”

He chose anxious, accomplished and optimistic for his three adjectives to describe himself after his transfer to Ohio University. With graduation looming, he was understandably anxious about his future and his job prospects. As an English major, he was hopeful that his ability to communicate will serve as an asset in his job search. His
choice of the word optimistic probably best sums up John and his approach to life; he viewed his glass as always half full.

**Summary.** John is an engaging young man who spent the last six year of his life pursuing a four-year college degree. He began taking courses at his local community college, sometimes just one course per term, but persisted to the point that he expected to graduate at the end of the academic year.

John has not had it easy in terms of finances and he has had to work part-time during his entire time at Ohio University. While he readily admits that the quality of his work sometimes suffered as a result of the number of work hours he must put in, he was still pleased with his overall academic performance. His perseverance and tenacity are evident in the fact that he would graduate soon.

Despite the fact that he must work many hours, he is able to attend most of his classes and get his work handed in on time. He summed up his attitude and beliefs about an education when he stated, “I think what class does or an education does is just show people that you have drive and that you can do something. That you are disciplined enough to stick to it.”

**Amy.** As an immigrant originally from Siberia, Amy is hoping to live the American dream. At 24 years of age, she is about to complete her degree in Wildlife and Conservation Biology with plans to attend graduate school following her graduation in the spring. Amy would be considered a “swirler,” meaning a student who has transferred to more than one institution. Amy could also be considered both a vertical transfer as well as a lateral transfer student. She began her college career at a two year community
college then transferred to a four-year institution; a vertical transfer. She then transferred from one four-year school to another four-year school or what is considered a lateral transfer. When we met for the first time, she was casually dressed and looked every bit of the typical college coed; however, her slight Russian accent and background story helped me to discover that typical would not be a word that could be used to describe her.

**Family and educational background.** Born in Omsk, Siberia, Amy lived in Ukraine, Argentina, Chile and the United States. She and her family immigrated to the United States when she was twelve years old and settled in Ohio because they had family in the area. Her immediate family consists of her parents and her thirteen year old brother. Amy describes her parents as hard workers who have moved so many times in the hope of making a better life for themselves and their children.

Amy’s father had a degree in electrical engineering but, because his degree is not recognized in the United States, the best job he could find was as a technician at the Cleveland Clinic. Her mother graduated from Cuyahoga Community College and was also employed at the Cleveland Clinic as an EEG technician giving MRI scans. She had a good relationship with her brother and described him as very different from herself by saying that he is “very loud” but “very sweet.” They are eligible for citizenship next year and are applying to become U.S. citizens.

When Amy moved to Ohio she knew very little English and had to spend a lot of time catching up to her classmates. After graduating from high school she took a year off before beginning her college career at her local community college in order to earn enough money for tuition.
Community college experience. Because finances were tight, she took time to work and save money. Amy chose to attend a community college because it was close by, she could live at home and, most importantly, she could afford the tuition. She described her initial impressions of her community college as disappointing. "I felt like I was in high school. It was easy and the professors weren’t challenging at all.” She viewed the community college and the students who were attending as ones who had not been successful at a four-year school. She assumed that they were there because they had nothing better to do. Since the entire college is comprised of commuter students, Amy found it difficult to make friends. Amy wanted a community of learners but she also wanted to make friends and have a social life.

Amy’s attitude towards the community college and the students who attended was very negative. She found herself very frustrated and disappointed with her community college experience. “I didn’t really like enjoy it. You know? I was there for two years and I mainly just worked and paid attention. School was just a thing that I had to do.” She feels that many of the people attending that community college viewed school as just something that must be endured; conversely, for her, she wanted more. Amy wanted to be challenged and interested in what she was studying.

Ultimately, she felt that she was on a dead end with little promise of moving forward. Unfortunately, because of her status, she was ineligible for any state or federal aid. Because she did not have a choice, the community college was her only option. “I didn’t really have a choice at the time because of my status in the United States."
(Community College) was my only option at the time so I knew that it was not a learning experience. It was just a thing.”

Amy knew that she was a good student and that she did not really have to work hard to achieve good grades in either high school or the community college. Amy’s grades at the community college were good. When she transferred, her grade point average was 3.55. Amy mistakenly believed that she had earned her Associate’s degree. “I think I have both of the degrees they offered just because I have so many credits. It’s like by default almost.” A review of her transcript, however, showed that a degree was never awarded. This confusion appeared to be a common theme for Amy during her college career. Her perception of higher education and what it means to attend college collided with the reality of attending college.

The decision to transfer. Amy knew that the community college was not going to provide her with the degree she wanted, so transferring was necessary in order for her to feel that she was progressing towards her goals. Since she did not feel the community college afforded her many opportunities to learn and grow, she began to look into transferring to a four-year university. This is where her lack of information on the transfer process created some problems. In addition, Amy had no idea on how to begin the process of selecting which university to attend.

My parents didn’t really guide me very much because they didn’t know anything either, you know? They came to the United States and they had to deal with their stuff, so no one really guided me about all these schools. Look at what they offer. Look at how much money they are going to give you. No one told me about that.
Amy did know that she wanted to be challenged academically. She wanted to be around students and faculty who cared about what they were learning. She wanted to be inspired and she wanted to be involved in academics. A family friend suggested she apply to a very selective private institution because of the reputation the school has for academics. She was told that the school would give her a lot of money to attend so she decided to visit. Amy fell in love with the school because it was so different from the community college. “It was like a real school. I was like this is what I want. This is what I always wanted; a real place.”

Amy admitted that she got caught up in the reputation of the school and the fact that she wanted the full college student experience. She wanted to live in a residence hall, to eat dining hall food and to meet people. While at the community college, she did not get to meet people since most of the students had jobs, families and other responsibilities; they came to campus, took classes, and then quickly left. Amy wanted more from her experience. Looking back on her decision now, Amy realizes that she made a hasty decision.

**Life at a selective, private institution.** Amy’s decision to transfer and, ultimately, her choice of a school to attend were made on an emotional basis. She found that there were a lot of questions that she should have asked. “It was just like I saw this environment that I wanted and I said this is right for me. This is what I want. This is what I want without knowing, really, what it involved.” Amy found the actual process of applying and gaining admission to be easy. Amy completed most of the process through email. She was participating in an internship during the summer before she transferred;
therefore, she was not able to meet face-to-face with anyone from this institution. She now realizes that by meeting in person with offices such as academic advising, residential life, and financial aid she would have had the opportunity to ask questions which would have helped her in her transition.

One reason she did not ask the questions she needed to was because she felt she could figure out everything she needed to know on her own. She did not take advantage of services offered because she felt like she did not need the help or “hand holding” as she described it.

I’ve always been very independent, you know. I didn’t really go through that whole people telling me this is what the university is like, like they give you for freshmen. They tell them where to sleep. I can figure that out. I guess I just took everything upon myself.

In hindsight, she wished she had participated in the orientation activities and information sessions. However, she still maintained that she would not have benefitted from some of the more basic information that these programs provide. What she would have preferred is more “guidance.” Amy feels that because she was a transfer student, the staff assumed she knew more about services, opportunities, and options than she really knew. She also believed that while she did know what to do, that the institution did not do a good job of communicating its services and options for students to take advantage of very well.

In comparing herself to the other students attending this selective private institution, she believed that she did not receive the right guidance from others, especially
her parents. She felt that the students who attended this university already have their futures figured out. Because many students there are high achieving, motivated students, they were at an advantage when it comes to using services. She had an idealized idea of what university life would be like.

I didn’t know that like, when I imagine in my head the university, it would be an environment where people are learning and discovering things and researching. I had a different idea in my mind and when I came to (this institution) it was like this is where I want to be but then, over time, I just realized (that) everyone expects you to know everything.

Amy was overwhelmed by the options available to her. The course offerings at the community college were good, but not nearly as expansive as they were at the private institution. In addition, options regarding financial aid, housing options and meal plans were all new experiences for her. She began to feel that she was expected to know a lot of things that she never had to consider before her transfer. She even described the atmosphere as not helpful. Amy began to find that the stress level and demands of a highly rigorous academic program were more than she wanted.

While at the community college she had convinced herself that she was around people that just were not interested in academics in the same way that she was interested in them. She truly felt that the students at the community college were not there to learn but were there just for the hopes of finding a job once they had completed their degree requirements. What Amy felt happened to her was that she went from an environment in which no one cared about their academics into an environment that was highly stressful
and intense. She had viewed the community college students as losers—as people who could not handle the demands of a university experience. She now began to view the students as students who only studied and had no social life. She said that they were “outcasts and outsiders” in high school that did not know how to socialize and spent any free time they had studying. “They are not going to college to have fun and they don’t really know how to socialize and make friends or they are not interested in gatherings or like relaxing or like maybe having some drinks.” While Amy thought that she wanted the high academic rigor, she found that she needed a balance between her academic life and her social life.

**Isolation and the decision to transfer.** Amy felt like she was in a bubble during her two years at the private institution. She found it difficult to find students who, like herself, wanted and needed a balance of an academic life and a social life. She also began to question her ability as a student. “The entire time, the entire two years, I felt like I was not good enough.” Part of this feeling came from the fact that while she was studying Biology, it was not focused on the environmental aspect that she was looking for in her degree. Because Amy wanted a more ecological or environmental aspect to her studies, she encountered a lot of resistance in her research. She found that the focus of their Biology program was more biomedical research oriented and, as such, felt that people dismissed her research interests. “People come from all over the world to go to (this institution), you know? Why are you bothering? Are you some kind of hippie?” Amy felt that she was being disregarded and that both she and her area of interest were not as important as the other research being conducted. Unlike the other students who
were full time students, who conducted independent research, and worked a part time job, she was overwhelmed with the work load alone and could not keep up.

Despite her unhappiness, all she was told was to “stick it out.” She was taking courses in which she was not really interested. Her motivation to complete her degree kept fading away but she kept thinking that she could finish since having a degree from a very selective private institution “is like a really big deal.” Amy also felt that even though she would have a degree in Biology, it would not be in the area in which she was most interested. She felt that even though she would have a degree, she would still be unskilled. In addition, she was accumulating a large student loan debt. All of these factors combined to the point that she decided to transfer again despite the fact that she was about one semester away from graduating.

Amy earned a total of 94 semester hours while at this institution and had an accumulative grade point average of 3.077. When asked to rate her transfer experience from the community college, she gave it a two on a five point scale because of what she believed was a lack of communication. She did not find the staff helpful and felt that she had to find out information on her own. In all fairness, Amy was aware that she did not ask a lot of questions and believed that she did not need to participate in any of the orientation meetings. In some respects, her naïve expectations of both herself and the university set her up for much of the difficulty she experienced.

**Realizations.** Amy now believes that she chose to attend the “wrong” school for her; however, it did help her realize what she was looking for in a college major as well as help her identify her need for a more balanced life. She also discovered that she did
not know how to study. She never developed good study skills in high school and the study habits she did not develop went with her when she began at the community college. Amy believed she would just learn what she wanted to learn but she also came to understand that she needed to practice consistency in class attendance, textbook reading and organization.

I didn’t have to study. I never studied in high school. I don’t remember studying to be honest with you. Who studies for exams in high school? Not me. Never did care about high school. I just knew that I didn’t care (but) that’s fine. Then (at the) community college I was like, I studied before exams but I didn’t really study. I mean, literally, the morning before it. Then I come to (this institution) and everybody (is) successful, knows everything about everything and I don’t. I suddenly have to study and manage my time. They’re going to be doctors and cure cancer and, I’m like, I can’t even deal with this genetics class.

**Transferring to OU and her Ohio University experience.** After conducting her research on colleges, she chose to attend Ohio University. Despite the fact that Amy considered Ohio University as a “step down” from the very selective, private institution she was attending since, as she put it, “the reputations of the schools are not similar at all,” she applied and was accepted. She found that she was, once again, participating in an internship out of state and needing to meet face to face with staff to work through her transfer and transition. This time her experience was different. Even though she still did not participate in person, she communicated via emails. She was already excited about
attending Ohio University but was surprised at the personal attention she felt she was given.

They just showed me everything in detail; everything that was transferred; everything that was not transferred. My gosh! This is everything that was done for me? It was just like all things were, wow, this is really helpful. It was really helpful.

Amy rated her transfer experience to Ohio University as a four on a five point scale. She found the lines of communication were better and she did not have to ask as many questions in order to obtain information she needed. She is particularly pleased with her academic adviser and the interest he has taken in her. “I didn’t expect advising to be helpful.” She initially believed that advising was nothing more than getting someone’s opinion and had a negative attitude towards her advisers. Because of her self-reliance, she believed that she would have to find out information on her own. However, she now realizes that her faculty adviser has a background in the field and knows the courses that are needed in order to complete her degree requirements.

One of the most important things Amy believes she accomplished was developing effective study skills. She attributed this to the environment. She felt more comfortable and found it easier to ask questions. Amy did not sense the same level of competition among students and, because she did not feel the high levels of stress, she was better able to study. She liked the fact that she was in charge of her learning and was the one responsible for the work. Amy was better able to organize and analyze information and
learned how to focus on the more important aspects of the material and did not feel as if she needed to learn everything.

I asked Amy to describe herself before she transferred to Ohio University. She first described herself as “lacking.” By this she meant that she came in lacking in some of the necessary skills and information that were required for her major. I used the word “driven” to describe her because she displayed the characteristics of someone who zealously pursued goals. Even though she sometimes does not know some of the questions to ask or the resources available to her, she still does not see those as barriers which prohibit her from accomplishing her goals.

Amy also used “confident.” She used her experiences to her advantage. She spends a lot of time in the library and just prior to the interview, had been hired as a tutor. She described going directly to her faculty if she had a question and valued the relationships she was able to form with them. Amy indicated that her independence helped her to become more successful. She developed the ability to know what needed to be done and could take the steps necessary to complete her work.

**Challenges and recommendations.** For Amy, learning the policies and resources has been the most difficult aspect of her transfer. Transfer students do not know the people or resources available so they must take the initiative and find out what is offered. Amy believes that this sometimes leaves the transfer student left out. “I feel like there is a lot of hidden (information). There are a lot of resources that I don’t know about because I’m so used to just doing it on my own. I’ll figure it out on my own. I tend to rely less on other people helping me.”
While this independent trait has its advantages, Amy admitted that it also put her at a disadvantage because she has been hesitant, in the past, to ask for help. This may have also affected her adjustment to college life. Amy assumed that she would adjust by just experiencing things. She also believed that because she had some previous experience at another college, she would not have a need for many of the resources available to students. She tends to see these as primarily geared for first year students and not transfer students. She does wish that her parents had been more helpful but because they did not have their own college experience they were unable to talk to her about resources and the multiple aspects of adjusting to college life.

Amy did have some recommendations regarding orientation for transfer students. Despite the fact that she never attended an orientation, she believes that the information that is presented should be more specific. Rather than simply saying this is the library, tell the students about the services the library provides. Because transfer students often believe that they know what to expect simply because they have had previous experience at college does not mean that they understand the services available to them.

If they say you have to come to orientation because you need to do required documents or ID’s or things like that, then I’m like, ok, I have to go. I’m just saying this would be one reason instead of giving me a tour. I guess, as a transfer student, I feel like I don’t need that because I’ve already been out of high school. I’ve already had a college experience but I need more like the details of the working of this college.
Summary. Amy has a very strong independent streak that has been both beneficial and detrimental. On one hand, Amy’s independence has helped her navigate two transfers. She has finally found a major she enjoys and has achieved a balance between her academic life and her social life. Conversely, her independence has made it more difficult, at times, to find out about resources available to her. She tends to shy away from asking questions and has had to find out information on her own which has led to feelings of frustration and isolation.

Amy has faced many challenges in her life. Her immigration to the United States has opened many doors that would have otherwise not been an option for her. She has worked hard to take advantage of these opportunities and is poised to complete her degree. Although she has the support of her family, they firmly believe in the value of higher education, she also feels that their ignorance of the American higher education system was detrimental to her understanding the nuances of navigating the system.

Sharon. Ever since she was as young girl, Sharon knew that she wanted to work with children. Her dream was to be an elementary school teacher; however, because of her transfer and the number of earned credit hours, that dream has now changed. Because her transfer experiences have been different and difficult, she wanted to participate in this research so she could, hopefully, make things better for future transfer students.

Family and educational background. Originally from northwest Ohio, Sharon is the youngest in her family having an older brother and sister. Her parents have been married for almost 36 years and she considers them to be huge supports for her both at
home and in school. She has some health problems which create somewhat of a burden for her and her family. Her need to have medical insurance has been a driving factor in many of her life decisions.

Sharon began her college career by enrolling at a public institution in the northwestern part of Ohio in the fall of 2005. Her plan was to major in early childhood education.

From about fourth or fifth grade on I wanted to do teaching. I was hitched on that for what I was going to do. Nobody was going to talk me out of it. I didn’t care about the drawbacks. I was going to teach.

Sharon chose her first institution because of the degree offered and because the school had a good reputation. Her experiences there were not those of the typical first year student. Because home was only one hour away, she went home frequently. This hindered her ability to make a lot of friends. In addition, she lived in an upper class residence hall so most of the friendships she did make were with older students. When she returned for her sophomore year, most of her friends had either graduated or moved off campus so she had to start over with making friendships. Because she felt socially isolated, her trips home became more frequent creating a cycle of increasing isolation and frustration. Unfortunately, Sharon is also an introvert by nature so putting herself out there to make friends and meet new people was hard. This cycle continued for her next two years.

At the point she was ready to begin her senior year, she still had not been accepted into the education program because of her low grade point average. She needed
a 3.2 grade point average and she had a 2.9. She was told that in order to be admitted to
the education program, she would need to spend an additional two years retaking classes
in order to achieve the grade point for admission. Because she had neither the time nor
money for three additional years at this public institution, she decided to transfer to a
local community college.

**Community college experience.** Sharon chose to enroll in her local community
college because it was close to her home. She could live at home and commute to school
and work. She compared her experience at the community college as like being in high
school.

They’re way too involved in your life. Like the teachers there wanted to know
everything you were doing. If you weren’t in class they were calling you and I
felt like it was high school all over again; like they had to keep tabs on me.

Sharon liked the autonomy and personal freedom she had acquired while at her
first university. She felt that the faculty and staff at the community college were too
intrusive.

My view of going away to college was this is my freedom, but I’m paying to go to
classes. If I choose to go, it’s my prerogative. I don’t really want that parental
figure calling me saying, “Hey, why aren’t you in class.” (If) you were sitting in
class (and) you got up to leave the classroom they sent somebody to see where
you were going. I was like, “I’m just going to the bathroom. I’m ok.”

According to Sharon, this happened to her on more than one occasion. At 22
years of age, she neither needed nor wanted the control that the community college kept
inserting into her life. She had developed a sense of autonomy and independence and did not like the questions and intrusive nature of her interactions with the faculty and staff.

Despite spending two years at her community college, Sharon did not earn her Associate’s degree. In order to complete her degree, she needed to complete a preschool practicum experience. Because she was working a full time job at the local Wal-Mart in addition to working two part-time jobs, she found it too difficult to schedule and complete the practicum hours. Instead, work became her priority. The money she was making was not being used to pay for her education or even for living expenses. School was paid for through grants and loans and her parents were paying her car insurance and other bills. “It was basically just for me because I wasn’t paying any kind of bills or anything. The only thing I had to pay for was gas in my car and for anything I wanted to spend my money on basically.”

Even though school and her degree were important to her, working and earning money was more important to Sharon. It was also around this same time that she began dating her boyfriend, and spending time with him competed with school. Ultimately, she decided that her relationship was more important than finishing her degree. As a result of these decisions and distractions, her grades suffered. Sharon readily admitted that at first she tried very hard but that working and other choices interfered and took a toll on her academic performance.

**Her Ohio University transfer.** At this point, Sharon had been taking college classes for six years and had no degree to show for her work. Her boyfriend had attended Ohio University and had decided that he wanted to return to school and this influenced
her decision to transfer one more time. “I knew I wanted a Bachelor’s degree. By the
time I finished my schooling there, I felt like I had it.” Sharon and her boyfriend decide
to move in together and that they would both attend Ohio University.

Sharon’s transfer to OU was difficult. She had trouble obtaining her transcripts
and did not find out that she had been accepted until just before classes began.

I found out the Friday before classes started that I was finally accepted here. And
that was only through calling and being transferred here and being transferred
there and finally being told that I was accepted. Because of the lack of advisors,
they could only meet with me on the Sunday before classes start.

Sharon found the entire process frustrating. In fact, as she talked about her
experience she became visibly upset. It was as if just talking about her experience
brought back all the frustration she had endured. She also found out that she could not be
accepted into the Early Childhood program because she had earned too many credit
hours.

Sharon was particularly upset with what she considered to be poor
communication from the Admission office. “I applied, I think, in May and by this time it
was almost September with fall quarter getting ready to start and I still hadn’t heard
anything. By that point I had already moved here, you know. I was relying on (the fact)
that I was accepted.”

**First quarter perceptions.** Because her admission came so late, her transfer
credits had not been evaluated so neither she nor her academic adviser knew what
requirements she had already completed. By the time she was able to meet with an
adviser, many courses were already closed so she ended up being placed in general education courses; many of which she felt like she had already taken. Sharon felt that there were both good and bad points from that first term of enrollment. While she felt that, for the most part, the term was a waste, she did believe that it gave her a chance to get better acquainted with the university, her instructors and the campus. It also gave her a chance to get courses in which she was not going to struggle academically which allowed her to finish the term with a 3.7 grade point average.

Sharon’s greatest frustration came from the fact that she had never met with her academic adviser. “I have yet to meet my adviser. I have emailed him. I have called him. I have went (sic) to his office when he is supposed to be having office hours and I’ve never gotten a response.” Her inability to connect with her adviser led her to meet with the Dean of her college so that she could be reassigned to a new adviser. Even though she had yet to meet with her new adviser, it was someone that she had as an instructor and was also someone who helped her register for classes before. Because of these prior experiences, she was comfortable with this person.

When asked to rate her transfer experience to Ohio University, Sharon rated it as a 3.4 on a 5 point scale. “I would rate it a 3.4 only because of the uncertainty of not knowing if I was admitted for the longest time.” For Sharon, the communication issues that she experienced were frustrating and hurt her overall first impression and opinion of Ohio University. She went on to say that despite the trouble she initially experienced, she would rate her last few terms as a 4.5 out of five. “I’ve had wonderful teachers. A
lot of the teachers are really willing to help and do everything they can. I’ve heard stories of teachers that wouldn’t, but I’ve never experienced anything like that.”

**Impacts on grade point average.** Despite her good experiences, Sharon’s grades continued to drop. Her first term GPA was a 3.7; she followed that with a 3.0, then a 2.8. Sharon continues to work at least 32 hours per week at Wal-Mart. This is necessary in order to be considered a full-time employee and keep her health insurance. Since she had completed most of her general education courses, she was left taking courses in her major. At the time of the interview, she was taking courses in which she was learning new material and expressed a need to contend with learning and understanding this new material. Even though she was enjoying her courses, the issue that had the greatest impact on her academic performance was her personal life.

When she and her boyfriend first moved to the area, they were sharing a home with his two sisters. Sharon experienced a lot of stress over her living situation. She said that if she and her boyfriend get into a fight, that it turns into his family against her. They all side with him on any disagreement and are always telling her that she is wrong and is the one who needs to change her priorities or fix whatever the problem happens to be.

It’s hard. They’re so close it’s ridiculous. I mean which it’s great for a family, but when you’re the outsider living with that family it kind of pushes me out further; whereas no matter who’s in the wrong, they always sided with him because that’s their brother. Not only were we dealing with that but then they were calling home to his mom and dad and turning them against me. So to say the living situation was stressful is definitely an understatement.
She now shares this same home with his sisters and her boyfriend’s parents. She says that the stress has eased up some now that they are all living together but readily admits that there is still stress and some tension.

**Resources.** Sharon described herself as a hard-core procrastinator going so far as to say that there had been times when she had a paper of significant length to write and she would not start on it until the day before it was due. This created a lot of stress for her and the other people around her so she now manages her time better. Since transferring to Ohio University, she has relied heavily on her sister for guidance. Her sister is a sixth year student but is the one that has helped her understand her requirements and helped her find her classrooms. Other than using the library, she has not used campus resources infrequently and was even unaware of some of the resources available to her.

Independent is a characteristic that could be used to describe Sharon. She tends to rely on herself and a few trusted individuals for help rather than utilize campus resources such as tutoring or the Academic Advancement Center. Even with her steady drop in her grade point average, Sharon believed that transferring has been a positive experience. She is particularly appreciative of her faculty. “The teachers are wonderful. There’s so much to do and it’s so much more relaxed that I don’t feel like I just need to come to campus to go to class. I can come and just hang out on campus.”

**Discovering self.** I asked Sharon to think about how she would describe herself before she transferred to Ohio University and how she would describe herself now that she has completed almost four terms of enrollment. It did not take her long to come up
with the words “immature” and “spoiled.” Sharon readily admits that her parents took care of almost all of her needs.

I’m daddy’s little girl. I was living at home and only had to pay for the gas in my car and the only reason I had to pay for that was because I was running back and forth to see my boyfriend or to go out. My parents were just like we’re not funding that but they paid for all of the maintenance on my car, they paid for my car, and they paid for the insurance. I lived with them and they brought food in the house, and they paid all the bills. I didn’t help with anything.

When she was enrolled at a public university in the northwest, she went home almost every weekend and relied on her parents for a lot of support. Even though she was paying for college on her own, she still felt like she owed her parents; she felt like she was “under their thumb.” She went on to say that “I just didn’t want to be there. I was only there because my friends were making me be there.” Sharon also felt controlled when she attended the community college. She was there simply because she had to be a student in order to maintain her health insurance. She considers her time at the community college to be a “waste of money” and has nothing to show for the time she spent there.

Sharon went on to say that she took a lot of things for granted and that she was selfish.

I mean, I got to the point where I just expected that of them. I have one niece. She’s the only granddaughter on both sides so when she came along that was like a big wake up call. You know, I was really jealous of her.
As a student at the university, she indicated that she did not go home to her parents whenever she wanted to. She believed that she was aware of her needs and is better able to manage her time so that she gets her class work done. In essence, Sharon now feels more responsible. She is more aware of her financial resources and works hard to work within her monthly budget. She also described herself as much more thankful for her parents. Even though they still help out financially, Sharon said that it is only in “have to situations” that she will call her parents and ask for money.

**Summary.** Sharon is a 24 year old young woman pursuing a degree in Child and Family Studies. She hopes to one day work with children and their families, especially children dealing with a major health issue like diabetes. Sharon wants to be a resource for these children and their families so they do not have to experience the same difficulties she had to endure growing up.

She has transferred to three different institutions and has plans to complete her degree within the next two years. Sharon has had to overcome some significant obstacles in her life such as living with diabetes and family issues with her current boyfriend. Despite these difficulties, she is motivated to reach her goals; however, her grades have shown a consistent drop since her first term of enrollment. Although she is in good academic standing, Sharon will need to be careful to maintain her grades.

Work and family issues present the biggest barriers at present in Sharon’s life. She must work at least 32 hours per week in order to keep her health insurance. Arguments with her boyfriend and a lack of support from his family create tension and serve as a distraction for Sharon and her studies. She works hard to maintain a balance
but knows that she must take care of herself and make sure that she is meeting her own needs. Sharon tends to put others ahead of herself and she will need to learn how to prioritize demands on her time if she wants to be successful and graduate with a degree.

**Simon.** In my opinion, if there was an award for the student least likely to attend college, then Simon would have won. For Simon, high school was a painful experience; one in which he felt like an outsider who had the reputation of a kid headed not for college but for rehab. As it turned out, he is a determined young man who had finally figured out a direction for himself and his life.

Simon’s family and educational background is littered with many obstacles. His parents never married and he bounced between living with his mother, his father, and his grandmother. His father earned a four year college degree and his mother has taken some community college courses, but did not complete a degree. He has younger twin sisters who are not currently attending college but he has hopes that they will enroll at some point in the future. To say that Simon struggled as a student is an understatement.

Me and high school, that is just not how my brain works, you know? I can’t just sit there in one building for seven hours, raise my hand to go to the bathroom, you know? Learn stuff that other people tell me I need to learn. I need to do things my own way to be really productive.

Simon was often getting into trouble as a teenager, his school attendance was poor and he was actively taking drugs. Simon told about the time he overdosed on what he thought was Klonopin while in class. It turns out he had overdosed on Seroquel and had to be transported to the hospital. “I was all into that shit and, you know, like just did
really stupid stuff. I probably missed twenty of the first twenty-five days of my junior year. I was that kid in high school.” As Simon was talking about this incident, his face and expression changed. This was obviously difficult for him to talk about and he expressed a combination of regret and embarrassment about this but also had a sense of satisfaction that, despite his past choices, he was now proving to himself and to everyone else who had dismissed him, that their opinions of him were wrong.

What Simon now realized was that his learning style, and rebellious attitudes, clashed with the expectations of his high school teachers. He liked to do things his own way and needed to prioritize for himself what he learns and not just do and learn what others believe to be important. Simon does not believe that the educational system was set up for him to excel.

I didn’t understand that back then so I didn’t think of things that way. I thought, you know, if people tell me this is the way it’s supposed to be done, that’s the way I’m supposed to do it. Now I realize that things don’t work the same way for everyone so I’m glad that I could do that bad and then show them that I can do good in my own way, without their way, so I’m proud that I was able to come back from it.

Simon went on to talk about what he considers the “conformers.” These are the high school students who do what they are told to do, are able to meet the expectations of teachers, and kept on the “straight and narrow.” However, for Simon, this is all they did. For him, they played the game.
You know, I wish I would have in high school in a sense because I would have liked to, really. The thing that I regret about high school is that maybe I could have developed good study habits and maybe even got a scholarship; maybe even done something with sports because I was pretty good. But I feel with the things that I did, I had to learn to do things. I had to learn that determination to get over big obstacles and get things back. I had to learn to do things on my own.

Simon clearly “walks to the beat of his own drum” and it is evident that, for him, “walking to his own beat” works. Simon’s independence also caused problems at home with his dad. This is one reason that he moved out his senior year of high school and moved in with a friend. He had been living in the Dayton area but moved to the Athens area.

Me and my dad, that’s one of the reasons I moved here because me and my dad we never got along. I was kind of an ass, really. I started realizing that I could just tell him to go to hell and walk out the door. I can go hang out with my friends instead of staying here all night. Even if it’s not always good for me, I like to learn things but now me and my dad are great. I feel so bad. I was such as asshole to him. I feel awful and he’s helped me out; the things he did for me back then after the way I kept treating him. He’s a great guy.

**Community college experience.** Because Simon’s grades were so poor, because of affordability, and because he knew that he would not be admitted to a four year school, he enrolled in his local community college after graduation. At that point, he was still very directionless and had no idea what he wanted to do, what he wanted to choose as a
major, and had only just begun to develop an interest in school. He went to the community college to get some of his general education requirements out of the way with the intention of transferring once he had a good grade point average. It was while taking these general education classes that he discovered an interest in Biology.

He still found it difficult to study and to keep motivated and interested. He considered the community college as a “step up” from high school. He was living in Athens and had no reliable transportation and had to rely on the generosity of his girlfriend’s parents to loan him the use of a car. He did not find the coursework particularly challenging and his lack of direction and purpose were difficult obstacles to overcome. Because of these multiple issues, his grades at the community college were not high; mostly grades of C. He spent four quarters there before he transferred to Ohio University in the fall of 2010.

Transfer Experience

Simon was accepted as a transfer student and enrolled at Ohio University in the fall of 2010. I asked him to rate his transfer experience on a scale of one to five with one being the worst and five being the best. He rated his experience as a four even though he encountered difficulties.

He had positive experiences with the orientation and with the academic advisers he met with who helped him register for classes. He learned “the ropes” as he called them by asking lots of questions and learning where he needed to go to get the answers he needed.
It can be a little overwhelming because the work is a little harder and the teachers are really helping you. They’re always available. I really didn’t see the transfer experience as too bad of an experience. I don’t think I would have had much trouble with it except that I’ve not yet developed good study habits so I wasn’t ready for serious school.

Simon discovered that he did not have good study skills. He also realized that his expectations of the amount of study time he would need to spend outside of the classroom in order to be successful were grossly underestimated. Even though he believed that he had an idea of what was expected, he found that adjusting and getting the work done was harder than he anticipated. “I wish I would have really known that I was going to have to go hours outside of class.”

I asked Simon to reflect on his transfer experience and to pretend that he had been given a magic wand that would allow him to change anything he wanted to about the experience and asked him what he would change, if anything. He suggested a “mock class” in which the students were actually taught a small, generalized lesson on college classes.

Just teach them, actually sit down for a class period and teach them what they really need to do. Make them take notes on it; try to show them by example.

Make them do it as you’re teaching them what you need to do.

He also thought that something related to time management would be good to present to incoming transfer students which would also include the importance of maintaining a good schedule including eating and sleeping at regular times.
A rough first quarter. Simon was required to live in the residence hall and he described his first quarter as “horrible.” He described himself as a “mess” and unable to concentrate on school. This is when he confessed that a long term relationship had ended during the term and that he did not handle it very well.

The breakup of the relationship had a profound effect on Simon. He described the relationship like this. “It was just really intense. Like the kind of thing where we literally spent every free second together. That’s what I knew for two years so I never saw it (the breakup) coming.” Simon said that he “shut down” and dealt with the pain of the breakup by walking. “Walking from about sunup to sundown; could not sit in one place. Could not be up; if I was in my dorm for one half hour those three feet I had to pace.” Though he still attended classes, he was not able to concentrate on the material and completed the term with an extremely low 0.2680 grade point average. When I reminded him of his GPA, he became very embarrassed; his face turned red and he just shook his head in disbelief. “Oh God! Was it? Wow. That is awful. Jeez, I knew it was horrible but that is awful.”

Because he had such a hard time rebounding from the breakup, he decided to participate in counseling but he did not find it beneficial at all. “I just kind of figured out that I can’t sit down with somebody and talk about something and then feel better about it. I’ve got to think about it in a different way than that.” In addition, he engaged in some risky behaviors.

I wasn’t really causing a problem, but I was doing stuff that, you know, I’m not supposed to do. I was carrying an open beer; smoking some weed in the dorm
room. You know, stupid stuff but I just wasn’t thinking about it. Just thinking more like, oh, I want to do this. I’m sad. I’m going to do this. Screw them. I wasn’t doing anything that I wouldn’t do normally. It’s just to the point that I was doing them and what I was doing while I was doing them.

Simon’s drug and alcohol use caused him to be arrested twice during the first quarter. He ended the term on academic probation and was in trouble judicially with the city of Athens and, since he lived in the residence halls, with Ohio University. He returned for his second quarter determined to do better in all areas of his life. “I was just kind of determined that I wasn’t going to let all that stuff affect school even though it was still bugging me a lot. I just really wanted to do well in school.”

He did well academically and earned close to a 3.0 grade point average; however, he was also arrested for the third time which led to a two term suspension from Ohio University. “The third time I got arrested, I was carrying that beer down the street.” Because he knew that he was being suspended at the end of the term, he used it as motivation to bring up his grades.

I knew I was getting suspended so I was really just trying to leave off with good grades so I could come back with a good foundation to build on. I was putting the whole being suspended out of my mind. All the trouble I got in just trying to focus on getting those (grades) so I could come back with not looking back and be like ‘oh, I did horrible that whole time.’ It was good to be able to be like, all right, yeah, fall quarter sucked but did good winter quarter; had to leave; now let’s come back after and put it on winter quarter and do even better.
Time to reflect. Simon sat out the spring and summer terms and was allowed to re-enroll for the fall, 2011 term. During his time off, he spent a lot of time reading and thinking about what he had been doing.

I just really needed something to go right because everything had gone wrong. I’m finally at the point where I’m kind of over the whole depression. Over the whole thing so now I’m just ready for everything else. I’m excited for everything, really; for another day, what’s going to happen, new experiences. I’m excited for everything I can and may do. I just want to make the most of it.

Discovering self. I asked Simon to use three adjectives he would use to describe himself before he transferred to Ohio University. His first word choice was “lazy.” Because he had done little work while in high school and because he was not challenged academically while at the community college, he had not developed any solid study skills. His grades were acceptable, mostly B’s and C’s; so, considering that he did not put out much effort and still earned respectable grades, Simon thought he could continue to use the same skills.

He next used the word “distracted” to describe himself. He was involved in a long-term relationship and spent any free time he had with her. She was more important than school so he devoted most of his time and energy into the relationship. He also referred to himself as “determined.” He felt that the words distracted and determined did not go well together but when he was reminded that they did not have to, he went on to say that because he was “fresh out of high school, I was ready to see what was coming and just deal with it and try to do some things. I was excited about the future.”
I then asked him to use three adjectives to describe himself after he transferred to Ohio University. He quickly used the word “excited.” Simon felt that he had recovered from the breakup and resulting spiraling mood and self-destructive behaviors. He had chosen Biology as his major was looking forward to what he can do with the major and where it would take him in the future. “I’m excited for everything I can and may do. I just want to make the most of it.”

He next used the words “resolute” and said that he wished he could use the word studious but he could not because he does not feel that he is yet reaching his full potential. Simon is no longer willing to settle for just good enough. He realized that he has potential and wants to see just how far this will take him. I want to take it as far as I can, definitely. That’s why I need a 3.0 because I just won’t be satisfied if I don’t go to grad school. I don’t care how long I have to work at it. I just won’t be satisfied if all I get is a Bachelor’s degree. That’s not good enough.

This comment represents a dramatic shift in Simon’s outlook and perspective on school, on himself, and on his future. Simon now views himself very differently. While he regrets some of his past choices, he also realizes that these experiences have helped mold him into the person he is now becoming. As a self-professed “non-conformist,” Simon embraces his philosophy. He does not buy into what he calls all of the “social constructs” of society. He felt that people who have differing viewpoints than the majority of people are often viewed as rebels who just want to go their own way. What happens is that these people continue to get “beat down” or “hammered” with comments
that they are not good enough or that they are wrong until they get to the point where they give up and allow their thoughts and actions to fall in line with the majority.

Simon is proud that he did not “cop out” and give in. Even though he made a lot of self-destructive choices, he can at least own the choices as the ones he made; his decisions were not based upon what others wanted him to do. A lot of people say that I don’t conform. They are like, “Oh, he’s trying to be a rebel.” But I just feel like I don’t agree with most of the things like the social constructs that we just live by. I just don’t agree with it. It’s not that I’m just out to rebel, it’s just not the way my brain works, you know. I feel like I have to be true to myself and the way that I’m programmed.

Summary. To look at Simon, his background, academic preparation, personal choices, and first year in college, one would wonder how he ever made it as far as he has. A classic under-achiever in high school, Simon has discovered that, for him to be happy, he must walk to his own drummer and not listen to the voices of others chiding him to change.

Simon’s disastrous first year of enrollment at Ohio University was a mixture of personal and academic lows from which other students would have found it impossible to rebound. Rather than succumb to his poor decisions, Simon found the internal motivation to return to school with an improved outlook and better academic skills. He is utilizing institutional resources more often and is taking advantage of services such as tutoring and supplemental instruction. However, Simon’s greatest area of growth has
been in his internal perspective and approach to life. He has made a lot of personal changes in the way he views not only himself but also his education.

As I concluded my interview with Simon, I found myself moved not only by his story, but also by the confident outlook he now has about himself and his life. He is determined to overcome his past and to create a bright, positive future for himself. He is making better use of his time and is truly excited about where his future is headed. At just 20 years of age, Simon has only just begun his journey.

**Joe.** Joe grew up in northeastern Ohio and lived with his parents, older sister and a menagerie of pets which included a chinchilla, a turtle and two rats. Joe laughedingly said that his parents were “collectors” of animals that other people no longer wanted. Neither parent has a college degree so he is a first generation college student and will be the first to earn a Bachelor’s degree. His mother works for a law firm as a technical assistant and his father owns his own business. His older sister has earned an Associate’s degree in Nursing but is currently attending a community college learning how to become an historical re-enactor. “I don’t really know what she’s doing. No one does.”

Joe did not have fond memories of his elementary and high school years. He believes he graduated from high school with a 1.9 grade point average. He said that he always had other things he was more interested in doing instead of schoolwork.

You know, I had video games to play, chicks to talk to…I just didn’t care. I knew I wasn’t going to go to a four-year school right away so I guess there was no point. I never had the ambition to go to college. I was kind of a, I mean, I was a
bad student and actually I was in special education in high school. That’s what really brought me down.

Joe went on to say that while in elementary school he was taken out of his regular classroom and placed in a special education class.

I really don’t know. It started in first grade. I remember I was just like sitting there, we were writing like essays and stuff and they came in and just put me in some room with a bunch of people. Then they started teaching us in there. I really didn’t know what was up with it at the time.

He remained in special education all through high school including, and up to his graduation. Joe was “mainstreamed” into regular classes but was always taken out of the classroom for exams. He received extended time and a reader for all exams. He was treated like a “slow learner” and had an IEP (Individual Education Plan) for his entire elementary and high school years. Joe said that he tried to “fight” the accommodations but was unable to convince his teachers that he did not need the additional help. “It was demoralizing. You would be in a class with all the other students and they come and take you out for a test and read it to you even though I know how to read the test.” Joe said that he remembered taking an IQ test but that he was never given a specific diagnosis nor was he ever told the reason or reasons why he was placed in special education. Despite the accommodations, Joe’s grades were poor. Joe frankly stated that he “just didn’t care.”

Deciding on college. After graduation, Joe, at his mother’s urging, decided to enroll in the local community college. He never took an ACT or SAT test and, even with
his poor high school grades, was admitted. The fact that he was admitted to college served to support his belief in the fact that standardized testing and high school preparation have very little to do with success in college.

He was enrolled at the community college for a total of five semesters. He completed a full-time course load only twice; however, at the time of his transfer he had earned a total of 47 credit hours and had an accumulative grade point average of 3.4. Joe also worked approximately 22 hours a week at a local Goodwill Industries workshop. Even though he was following the Ohio Transfer Module, Joe took only those classes he was interested in taking.

He found the academics easy. “Too easy. There were a lot of unmotivated people there so if I tried just a little harder than them it was like no problem.” He did not find the work challenging and further said that he could remember really studying only one time. He felt like the work was just a step up from high school and used this as a motivator in his decision to transfer to a four-year university. Joe described it as “mind numbing.” He said, “I didn’t study at all at Lorain County Community College. I just went in and took the exams and just used my brain. That worked well for me.” Knowing that he always had plans to transfer, he began looking at different four-year schools.

Transfer Experience

Joe originally wanted to attend a private university. However, because he had never taken an ACT or SAT test, he could not be admitted. This prompted his decision to look more closely into public universities. He decided to attend Ohio University because he already had friends attending. He found the transfer experience very easy. He
applied, was accepted, had his transfer credits evaluated, and then registered for classes. Joe feels that the process was easy for him and he said that he had no real concerns about transferring. “I was in school my whole life. I figure it’s just another. That’s how I looked at it. Same thing as high school; I just had to try.”

Joe did participate in the orientation program for transfer students but found it useless. His opinion of the program may be colored by the fact that he had been out partying with his friends the night before the program.

The night before I went out and had fun with my friends. So my mom drove me down here and I just, you know, I just felt like crap and I come here and I have to sit through seminars on like computers or whatever they were feeding us. That was horrible. Then I went to schedule my classes and I was just so tired. It took me like four hours.

I asked him to rate his perceptions of the orientation program on a scale of one to five with five being the best and one being the worst. Joe rated the experience as a two and described the orientation as “dumb.” He would make the experience more personal and compared the process as like “herding cattle.”

If I could just come down here on my own accord and, you know, meet with my adviser and schedule my classes and get to know that person; that would make it more personal. Explaining how the DARS (Degree Audit Report System) work. I really didn’t understand that at all. I scheduled for classes and the guy is like, “That’s a weird schedule.” I still don’t know why, to this day, it was a weird schedule.
I asked Joe what advice he had for incoming transfer students and he encouraged new students to get to know the faculty and to not be afraid to talk with them. “I mean, it’s different at a community college. I didn’t talk to any of my professors at the community college but here I’m like friends with all of them.” He described his experiences in many of his History courses in which the faculty met with the students in small discussion groups. Joe found the interaction exciting and allowed him to see his faculty with a different perspective. He found the faculty approachable, knowledgeable and eager to engage him and his fellow students in a meaningful conversation. He especially enjoyed his first quarter classes.

A lot of the classes, like the History class, had a lot more interaction with the students. Professors would never really cross that line in community college because the guy would just be up there lecturing and if we asked any questions he wouldn’t like actually discuss them.

Although he was already 21 years old, Joe was required to live in a predominately freshman residence hall during his first year at Ohio University. He found this experience to have both benefits and drawbacks. For instance, he had a large single room, “I would ride my bike around in there; it was fun.” He also appreciated the convenience of the meal plan and not having additional bills to pay such as rent and utilities. He did not have a lot of interaction with the other residents and did not appreciate people watching him; otherwise, he found the experience as just something he had to endure.
Resources. Joe had utilized some campus resources such as the library but said that he really had no need to use any other types of academic resources. He is doing well academically, knows how to study for exams and frequently offers to serve as a tutor for other students who are struggling with the material.

Joe tends to rely upon personal resources such as his time management skills; he will generally begin working on a paper or project once it is assigned. He said that he does not procrastinate to the extent that he believes that other students do, but will, on occasion, put assignments off.

Discovering self. I asked Joe to use three adjectives to describe himself before he transferred. While he did not think he had changed too much, he did say that he would have considered himself irresponsible, less confident and friendly. Joe said that he was not very confident in his writing ability but that his time at Ohio University has really improved his skills in this area and he now feels very confident in his writing.

I then asked Joe what three adjectives he would use to describe himself after his transfer and he quickly used confident, motivated and rational.

In (the) community college, I thought I was like a bad writer, and I kind of was. I took an English class there and the guy really helped me out a lot. He told me about commas and stuff. I didn’t pay attention in high school so I didn’t obtain any of that knowledge. I just started reading more when I decided to study History. If I had a problem with something I’d look it up online and grammar, I’ve always been good at grammar. That’s how I’ve grown more confident. I know I’ll do well if I put in the time. I’m never nervous about tests.
**First quarter impressions.** Joe attributed his successful first quarter at the university to his hard work and the time he spent studying. Because Joe had been able to refine his writing skills, develop study and test-taking skills and gain confidence in his ability as a student, he found that he could achieve similar, if not better, academic success at a four-year institution than he did at his community college. Joe knows that it took a lot of initiative on his part. “I studied harder. I studied during the week. I had fun during the weekend so I had something to work towards; a goal.” He was putting forth more effort in his studies and was realizing academic success at his new institution; he was reaping benefits from his efforts and found that he really liked how it felt to do well and to have done it on his own.

Joe also found his studies to be more challenging. He no longer felt like he was one step removed from high school but was actually in college. I asked Joe to rate his perceptions of his first quarter of enrollment with one being the worst and five being the best; he rated it as a five.

**Summary.** As a student who completed his entire elementary and secondary schooling as a student in special education, Joe has proven to himself, and others, that he is a very capable college student. Even though he had never seriously considered attending college, his acceptance, enrollment, and academic success have demonstrated that he is a competent and accomplished student.

Joe has no need of support services such as those offered by the Office of Student Accessibility or even the Academic Advancement Center. In fact, Joe has become a tutor for other students needing help. His success confirms what he long believed; that he did
not need special education services. Despite a jaded impression of higher education considering he did not meet any “traditional” entrance requirements, Joe has taken advantage of the opportunities he has been given and found academic success and acceptance by faculty. Having never truly experienced either while growing up, Joe’s confidence in himself is, in my opinion, truly remarkable.

As a twenty-three year old young man, Joe is just beginning to discover his many talents. His passion for History and his desire to prove to his elementary and high school teachers that they were wrong about his academic abilities have served as motivators for his success. Joe is fortunate that he has turned his early struggles into such a positive experience. His relatively smooth transition from a community college to a four-year university speaks to his positive attitude and can-do personality.

**Jane.** As a self-described “strong headed” individual, Jane readily acknowledged that friends were more important to her than school. Due to her father’s job, they relocated frequently which led Jane to value friendships over academics and created considerable tension between her and her parents. Despite a disdain for school, very poor grades, and issues with depression and anxiety, Jane turned these past negatives into positives and used these to motivate herself to achieve more than she imagined during her college career.

**Family and educational background.** As the youngest of three children, and the only girl, Jane faced several adversities in her life. Her parents had a rocky marriage and the problems this created caused Jane to develop a very close, protective relationship with her mother while her relationship with her father became distant. Her oldest brother is
seven years older than she, so by the time she moved to Ohio at age 11, he was headed off to college. There are just three years between her and her next brother and they developed a close relationship. “But then my middle brother, we were close. I don’t know, not too protective, I guess. We each had our own problems. He had a lot of problems in high school. He was real sick.” Her brother was diagnosed with Crohn’s Disease and this caused him to miss a lot of school. In fact, even though there are three years between them, they were just two years apart in high school.

Jane’s parents each have Bachelor’s degrees. Her father works in management while her mother has a degree in education. Jane related that her parent’s marriage was filled with problems which included her father being hospitalized, frequent job changes and infidelity on the part of her father which caused Jane to become a very angry person. I was a very angry teenager. Even though we (her brother) were like three years apart and we both struggled with high school. I remember one year my mom didn’t want to celebrate Mother’s Day. That was the worst because we both were just being awful. My mom does not look back on those years fondly. Neither do I, really. My brother didn’t graduate on time. He had to take summer classes and then he eventually graduated but he never walked. I magically graduated on time and did walk. (However), I failed my first semester of my classes my senior year.

Jane went on to say that despite all of these life issues, the real reason she did so poorly in high school was simply because she never did her homework. “I just didn’t do any school work. I never studied. I never did any homework.” Jane elaborated by stating that she never really learned how to study or effective study skills, “I never
learned to be a good student. Which is so funny because my mom is a teacher and she would give us book reports over the summer.”

In addition to never developing study skills, she equated doing well academically with being intelligent. She stated that she would talk about her friends who earned good grades and how amazing they were and that her mother would try to tell her that she, too, was intelligent but Jane’s self-esteem and focus on friendships diminished her ability to hear and understand what her mother was saying to her.

Jane further described her high school years as being filled with bouts of depression and anxiety. Her parents tried taking her to counseling but she did not find it helpful. She was angry, depressed and just not willing to talk to anyone about her problems. Jane felt that most of her anger issues arose from her father’s problems and the effects they had on her mother. She could not understand why her mother would continue to stay with him despite everything he had done to her and her family. Fortunately, she now knows what triggers her feelings of anxiety and depression and feels much more in control of herself and has turned these past negatives into a source of motivation for her to succeed.

I’m a lot more in control of it and I’m happier. I’ve become a lot happier.

Because I have my own anxieties and I just have a lot of fear of going back to that place of terrible, terrible student is why I overachieve, I think. I try to do a lot.

**Considering higher education.** As previously stated, Jane moved a lot during her early childhood years and finally settled in Ohio around age 12. Because of all of the
myriad difficulties she had in school she was not sure she would even graduate and the thoughts of going to college were distant and remote at best.

I wasn’t going to college. I graduated with like a 1.2 or 1.4 or something really terribly low; something just enough to get me to graduate, really. Clearly I had no plans. I had no money. My parents weren’t going to help me out at first but then for a graduation present they decided to pay for my first semester of college. I had been working as well but the school had a really great payment program so I could just work and pay by cash like every month. So I was able to go to school.

Jane decided to attend the local community college near Toledo, Ohio. However, her lack of study skills and apathetic attitude towards any type of education only continued during her time at the community college. She was undecided about a major or career path and had to work close to thirty hours a week just to be able to pay for school and meet her other expenses. In addition, she did not find any faculty or majors that were particularly interesting or challenging for her.

Looking back on her time there, she described it as much easier than before she transferred, but was still there for three years before she had the 2.0 GPA necessary to transfer which meant that her last year there was spent retaking courses. She described her time at the community college like this, “It was necessary. The fact was that I wasn’t at all ready to go to college. In a way I wasn’t on my own. I mean I was still doing the same habits like I was when I was in high school. I still wasn’t doing anything much, just working.”
Jane participated in a tech prep program, nurse’s aide, in high school and originally intended to continue her studies in nursing; however, it was a few psychology faculty members who inspired her to continue her studies and change her major to psychology.

I took this psychology class and really liked it. The instructor was really good. I had actually known him; he was a customer at the restaurant that I worked at. I was familiar with him through that and he was willing to meet with me and talk with me. I had no idea of the difference between what a Bachelor’s and Master’s (degree) was. I didn’t know what was what; so he just kind of talked to me about what I could do with psychology.

**Decision to transfer.** Because of her newfound major, she knew she would have to transfer to complete her degree. She had been traveling to Athens to visit friends and fell in love with the area. “I would come down here at least once a month and we would go hiking and I had never even been to the campus. I really moved down here just for Athens and the view.” She was encouraged by her parents to move and to chase the “big dreams” she had while growing up. She said that she did not have a lot of concerns about transferring to a new university but had questions about herself. She had never really lived on her own but once the transfer process started she allowed herself to just “go with it.”

She recalled driving down and being left at the residence hall as taking a “leap of faith” and just diving into a new experience and new school. Jane found it difficult to
leave her friends, move into a primarily freshman residence hall and, in many respects, start her life over. She described herself as “excited.”

I was excited to prove myself, you know? I had never done anything, not anything worth talking about, I guess, before in school. My parents had a lot of doubts about me. My mom and me got into an argument before I left and was telling me that I was going to drop out the first quarter; you’re not going to do well in school. I don’t think how determined I was to prove my mom wrong. I worked really hard that first quarter toward my grades and getting good grades. I had never felt pride in myself before.

Hearing that her parents doubted her was disconcerting.

I think it was because she (mom) was expecting it. I had let my parents down so much in school for so many years. All I kept saying was, ‘I’m going to do better.’ ‘It will be fine.’ I had told my parents that and hearing my dad tell me like you always say that, you always say that, you always say things are better and they never were.

Despite Jane’s fears about transferring, perhaps one of the best outcomes was an improved relationship with her father. She described him as very involved in the transfer process and also very supportive and encouraging. She discovered that she inherited some good qualities from her dad like organizational skills and the tenacity to keep looking until she finds answers to her questions. Even though she does not believe that she will ever have the same close relationship with her father that she does with her mother, she credits him with helping her through the transfer process.
Revelations. Jane’s first term of enrollment at Ohio University went well. She earned a grade point average of 3.4 and she is very proud of that; however, it was not learning study skills or time management skills that she found most difficult, she found living with a roommate to be the most challenging part of her first term.

Living with someone, that was really hard. Sharing my space? I found out (that) I am not good at that. I mean, I was very aware of the fact that I was territorial with my stuff. I was living with one of my very best friends and it ended up not working out. She moved out winter quarter. So, like finding out that I’m kind of on my own and I do like a lot of alone time. I like having my own space. I need that. I depend on my friendships but it’s necessary for me to kind of be able to draw back.

This discovery, that she needed her friends but perhaps not as much as she originally thought, was a turning point in Jane’s growth both academically and personally. She experienced pride in her academic accomplishments for the first time in her life. “I remember calling my mom and just being like this is the first time I’ve ever been proud of myself and she couldn’t believe I said that. It’s really true. I really didn’t have much going for me back home.” Jane realized that she needed to focus on her schoolwork and not her friendships and that, when she did that, the results were more than she ever dreamed possible.

Despite Jane’s previous difficulties with focusing on academics, she completed her first quarter of enrollment with a 3.4 grade point average and a new sense of self-discovery. In the past, she had relied on her friends and her relationships to provide some
meaning and structure to her life; now, she had discovered a purpose, a “passion,” as she described it. She also began to find her voice.

Jane began working in the Psychology lab as a tutor. Rather than needing a tutor, she now found herself in the role as tutor. She also began having problems with her roommate and discovering her boundaries.

I was just being more realistic with myself and being more honest. I don’t necessarily get along with other people. I am very territorial and I can be irrational about that type of thing. It’s not like she was an awful or terrible person; we were just very different. Really completely different and I had to learn to speak my mind and understand that if I don’t talk, then it’s just going to get worse.

Jane was also exploring her past motivations for what went wrong before when she was in high school and her first years at the community college. Why did she keep lying to people about her grades? Why did she keep telling people that things would get better? Why did she keep repeating her old behavior patterns? Jane was beginning to discover that it was ok to have boundaries. It was acceptable to say “no” and that she now had to define what she was willing to do and not willing to do for the sake of a friendship.

I asked Jane to describe herself after transferring. She still liked to think of herself as hard-working; but even more so now. “I am very passionate. I am very determined. I’m very grateful.”
Discovering self. I asked Jane to use three adjectives to describe herself before she transferred. She first chose hard working. She elaborated by saying that she had always considered herself a hard worker but because she had been focused on things unrelated to academics, her grades did not reflect any hard work. Once she realized that she needed to focus on her academics more than on other things, her grades improved.

Jane also used the word unfocused as a descriptor. She said that she had not really found her passion before she transferred and now that she has discovered her love of psychology, she felt like she had a direction and purpose. Lastly, she chose caring. A recurrent theme in Jane’s life was that of putting the needs of other people ahead of her own. This often led to feelings of frustration and of being taken advantage of by others. Jane felt that in order to make and keep friends, she had to sacrifice her own needs just so she could make the friendship work. She believed that by watching her mother do this for her and her brother, she learned that sacrificing her needs for the needs of others was the only way to maintain her friendships.

Transfer experience. I asked Jane to rate her transfer experience on a scale of one to five with one being the worst and five being the best. She rated her experience as a four, “I had no idea what I was getting myself into but everything was new to me so everything was exciting.” Jane did attend the transfer student orientation and felt that, overall, the experience was beneficial mostly because she was able to schedule her classes.

She would have liked the opportunity to break off into smaller groups and get more one-on-one time with her academic advisor. A smaller group would have given her
the chance to ask more questions and to not feel intimidated by such a large group when asking a question. She would have also liked more of an explanation of the Tier system and what these entailed so that she would have left feeling less confused.

Jane went on to say that she felt that an assumption was made about transfer students and their needs. She said that administrators make assumptions about transfer students which tend to lump them into a monolithic group. She compared herself to the first year students with whom she lived. First year students are involved in learning communities and other events that ease their transition to higher education making it less stressful. Unfortunately, similar programs for transfer students are not generally available. Jane felt that there was no sense of community in the residence hall in which she resided. Because there was an eclectic grouping of students including first year students, international students, graduate students, and transfer students, it was difficult for any type of community to form due to the myriad interests and backgrounds of the residents.

I still believe that they (freshmen) had it better. I always say that I never had a freshman year. I never had that first year of living on my own. I had to make friends my own way. I didn’t have that good of friends my first year because I would just hang out with anyone that was convenient for me. Then I had to branch out and learn how to really meet people and then realize that these are people I want to hang out with and then make an effort to form friendships and all of that.
Jane stated that because colleges and universities do not provide intentional programmatic events targeted to transfer students, that transfer students are then forced to find out institutional resources such as academic advising and student success resources on their own. In addition, transfer students must forge new friendships and navigate social structures already in place on their own without the benefit of participating in programs such as learning communities and clustered residential formats. For Jane, something as simple as going to meals in the dining hall was difficult because she did not know anyone and often had to eat alone.

Jane would also have liked more direct academic advising. By this she meant advising that was more individualized conducted by a professional who not only understood the particular needs of transfer students but who would also be forthcoming about that student’s needs and situation. She would have liked someone to have told her about how long it would take her to graduate instead of finding out, on her own, that she was quite far behind in her studies and credit hours. Jane said that transfer students need more individualized academic advising and also need someone to talk to that can help them navigate difficult social situations. Even though many transfer students consider themselves to be fairly independent, there is still a level of support that needs to occur. “I didn’t want my hand held for certain things because I can do that on my own. I’m very resourceful so I didn’t need my hand held throughout the entire thing, but, then again, there are also some things that I really had no idea about.”

**Summary.** Jane is a student who has come full circle in her academic career. She began her college career as a weak student with very little confidence in herself or
her abilities as a student. While she always had the ability, she did not possess the confidence in herself as a student and her grades and attitude towards schoolwork and studying were negatively impacted by this self-belief.

At the time of our interview, Jane had gone from needing a tutor to serving as a tutor. She had gone from a student who had always performed poorly and hid that fact to one who did well. She went from a student who was ashamed of her academic performance to one who was proud of her accomplishments. She had transformed from a person who was very other centered and focused on other people’s needs to a more self-focused person; one who better understood her needs and the direction she needed to take to meet those needs.

Jane summed up her transfer experience like this.

I definitely would say that my transfer couldn’t have turned out any better. I mean I am very happy with my time here. I’m doing things that I would never have even thought about doing. The idea that I can be working toward my Ph.D. is so crazy to me. I still have a lot of reservations because I was so opposite of what I am now. I still have doubts in myself in the back of my head that I don’t know if they will ever go away because I know that I can do that bad. I know that I can easily just not do any of that. I need a lot of reassurance but the reason why I am so happy with everything is because I’m not a transfer student that came from another university or that was a good high school student. The reason I am the way I am now is because I am so grateful for this experience.
Alex. As a non-traditional transfer student, Alex’s Journey to completing his degree has taken a long time. A self-described “slacker” in high school and his English teacher’s “most brilliant C student,” Alex found that having the right mindset towards college was both his greatest handicap and motivator. With his sense of humor and come-what-may attitude, Alex has always tried to make the best of his life situation while, at the same time, never giving up on his dream of a college degree.

Family and educational background. A native of north eastern Ohio, Alex developed what he called “senioritis” by his sophomore year of high school and admitted that he did not care about academics. As an introvert, he found high school challenging and his minimal involvement in activities made attending school all the more difficult for him. His parents earned technical certificates; his mother works as a lab technician while his father has a background in drafting. Because of their educational backgrounds, Alex’s parents always encouraged higher education.

First attempt at higher education. Alex graduated from high school in 1999 and decided to enroll at the local branch campus of a public institution. He was very undecided about a major or career path but registered to take some general education courses that could be applied to any major. The semester did not go very well for him. Because of his poor grades, Alex decided to not return for spring semester and worked full time as a way to not only make some money but also to find himself and a direction for his life.

That was what I described as my learning semester because what I learned was [that] things you did in high school don’t cut it at the college level. I was still not
really terribly academic. If I took all my letter grades and put them together into one word it would be pronounced “dff.”

Second attempt at higher education. After working for a number of years, and with encouragement from his parents and girlfriend, he decided to try college again. This time he enrolled in the local community college. His grades were better, approximately a 2.7, but he still did not have any idea of what he wanted his major to be or what career path he wanted to pursue. He took a Social Work course, which he enjoyed, and has been pursuing a degree in Social Work for the past 10 years. He completed all the courses he could take at the community college but did not graduate with an Associate’s Degree; instead, he transferred to the University of Akron.

Third attempt at higher education. He was enrolled at the University of Akron for a year but did not like the program or the atmosphere at Akron. It is an urban campus and because he commuted, he found it difficult to become engaged in the university. Now married and with bills to pay, he again dropped out of college.

Since we had a house that we went ahead and put a down payment on, I was mostly just working. I was taking a break from school with the argument in the back of my mind [that] I’ll go back. Looking back now I see that’s a lot harder than it sounds.

It was at this point that Alex began working full time in a local group home for troubled youth. He worked there for almost five years, working his way up to shift supervisor, but found himself burned out on the daily grind and problems associated with the group home. Life problems mounted and he found himself in debt which resulted in
filing for bankruptcy. Alex went on to say that all of these events had created a great deal of strain on his marriage so finally, in early 2009, he and his wife filed for divorce. “I spent the summer thinking, Ok, I’m starting over now; this is your chance to start over.” This thinking, along with some encouragement from his parents, caused Alex to decide to go back to school and to try to finish his degree.

**Fourth attempt at higher education.** Alex decided to attend Ohio University because it offered a Social Work major and because of the time he spent there as a member of the high school band. He attended summer band camps at OU and, because of that familiarity, he decided to enroll. He described the transfer process as smooth and had no problems being accepted for admission. I asked him to describe himself before he transferred using three adjectives. Alex said that it was difficult for him to pick just three adjectives because he had been through so much that describing himself was really dependent upon the time frame and what he was experiencing at the time. Alex described himself like this:

I’m like, I don’t know what I’m doing. I had lost my Job so I was, you know emasculated from that. Becoming divorced, losing my identity as a married man becoming a student at OU was really a reinvention of myself almost. I’ve taken up a role. I never lived on campus before, I was always a commuter, but now I’m living in Athens, off campus in an apartment. Nonetheless, it’s still adopting the student role more wholly; more than when I was a commuter.

Becoming a more intentional, purposeful student was important to Alex. He found himself at a point in his life where he needed to take control and make some
decisions for himself rather than allowing circumstances and situations to determine his path.

Something that has always been a part of who I am, is I am very “go with the flow,” daoistic, if you will. Where if something happens I’m like, Ok, I’ll just go ahead and go with this, this is fine and I’m adaptable to that. Once my comfortable little pattern was disrupted, then it took a little prodding, but, finally, I get to pick my direction this time rather than just float on because where I was floating before, I wasn’t floating anywhere. I wasn’t even treading water. So I had to take a path. So, even now, I’ve noticed that I’m just doing what classes I need to do to get into the major but even though I’m kind of going with the flow, I’m doing it in a direction that I chose.

**Transfer experience.** I asked Alex to rate his transfer experience on a scale of one to five with one being the worst and five being the best. He rated his experience as a three. He would have liked more one-on-one time with an advisor who understood transfer student issues. In addition, since his chosen major was a selective admission program, he was not sure how all of his courses would transfer. The larger issue for Alex was the logistics of moving, finding an apartment and setting himself up in a new location. The stress of this was only heightened since he was recently divorced and living on his own for the first time in several years.

At the time of Alex’s transfer from his community college, his grade point average was a 2.78. His first term grade point average at OU was a 2.22. Alex attributed this to his lack of confidence in himself as a student. He said that as he has become more
confident and comfortable as a student, his grades have steadily improved. Secondary to this, was Alex’s statement, “I’ve never been an overachiever.” Alex had a hard time motivating himself for courses that he did not feel were necessary in order to enter the Social Work major. Even though he understands and appreciates the need for general studies type courses, he has a difficult time putting in the time and effort to do more than pass the course.

Alex believed that he was a capable student; however, he did not feel challenged by some of the required courses. By drawing upon his own personal areas of interest, Alex has found it easier to do well academically in courses he wanted to take while struggling to motivate himself for courses he deemed “required” but “uninteresting.” Alex also procrastinates: “I wear the mantle proudly.” However, he did not believe that procrastination harmed his academic performance. He believed that the pressure to perform is beneficial for him and he uses the pressure to motivate himself to complete assignments.

**Institutional resources.** Alex is grateful for the academic advising he has received. He did say that there is a “learning curve” as a transfer student and explained it like this.

It’s a little different. It’s not so much there’s an adjustment but it’s not like at 18 years old, what am I going to be when I grow up, what’s it like to have a roommate kind of thing. It is learning new ropes and learning new requirements, expectations. There’s a little maturity that’s already there.
I asked Alex to rate his overall perception of transferring, including how he was currently doing, on a scale of one to five with one being the worst and five being the best and Alex rated himself as a 4. I then asked him what was keeping him from rating his experience as a five to which replied that the bureaucracy of higher education can be frustrating.

**Discovering self.** I asked Alex to use three adjectives to describe himself after his transfer to Ohio University. He began by saying that he felt a lot more confident as a student; more motivated and able to manage himself. He also said that he felt more driven and focused on what he believes.

I am much stronger as a theorist. I’m much more focused in what I believe, so going through that has made me more comfortable. I’m also a lot more happier with where I am at now in my life. I’m also forced to acknowledge that I’m out of time. That at this point in my life most of my cohorts are well into their career, married, children. I can leave the children and maybe even the marriage after the first one but nonetheless, if I went to a high school reunion, how uncomfortable would I be telling people what I’m doing?

**Summary.** As a student, Alex experienced many setbacks and frustrations. Life just seemed to have gotten in the way at times and Alex had been forced to find ways around these obstacles. I found Alex to be quite articulate with a great sense of humor. His story is compelling and is one that resonates with many students; what is encouraging, however, is Alex’s sense of purpose and direction. Perhaps, for the first time in his life, he is doing what he wants to do for himself and not for someone else.
Doug. Doug is a bright, highly articulate, and driven young man that was just beginning to tap into his potential as a student. A study in dichotomy, Doug was the kid who was permanently kicked out of study hall while in high school; now, he serves in a leadership role in the Ohio University Student Senate. Once opposed to accepting any form of authority, he was enjoying his leadership role and had made plans to pursue public service as a career. This driven young man was finding that hard work and motivation could pay dividends.

Family and educational background. Doug grew up in the Dayton, Ohio area as part of a blended family. His parents divorced when he was very young. Doug lived with his father for the most part but spent time living with his mother as a teenager and a short period of time living with a friend. He described a difficult living situation at home and a great dislike for the fact that he had to go to school.

I kind of resented the fact that I had to go there every day. I didn’t have a home life that was conducive to sitting down and doing homework anyway. I was always very hostile toward my step-mother and my father was rarely home so I didn’t spend much time at home so homework never really got done.

Authority issues. Doug was not someone who responded well to authority. He never respected his step-mother’s attempts at authority. “I always knew I was smarter than her so I never took her directives seriously. A lot of times I would tell her why they were stupid and that is why there was so much tension there.” He did say that he respected his father because he felt that his father had “earned it.” He respected his mother’s authority “to some extent” and work authority “because I get paid by them.”
According to Doug, authority for the sake of authority was never something he was comfortable with or respected.

This lack of respect is but one aspect that Doug finds a dichotomy in his life. As someone who had a disdain for authority, yet to find himself in an elected position with some authority, he found it “kind of funny that I have had such a problem with authority but I have been relatively good at putting myself in positions with some measure of authority.”

Part of what Doug was talking about was related to the jobs he held while in high school. He began working while in high school to earn money and quickly worked his way into managerial positions at the pizza shop and later the restaurant in which he worked. He elaborated on his problems with authority by saying that, in general, he believed that people who had trouble with authority usually do so because they think they can do the job better. For Doug, it was a control issue. He did not want someone to control him, especially when he believed he could do things better.

He related his aversion to control to his problems with school. He resented the control and had neither the motivation nor structure in order to be successful with his studies. He grades continuously slipped throughout high school to the point that during his senior year he just didn’t even try. Ironically, during his junior year he took the ACT earning a composite score of 32. His high academic ability may have contributed to his dislike of school. Could he have been bored because he was not being challenged academically? Doug may never know if that was the case for him; however, he did say that he now wished he had taken everyone more seriously about the importance of
school. “I kind of thought that they were just saying that just to keep me from misbehaving. Little did I know that they were actually saying that because they knew I had potential.”

**Deciding on higher education.** Because Doug had never shown himself to be a serious student, the decision to attend college became more of an opportunity for him to prove to himself, and to others, that he was able to be successful in college. That is why he decided to enroll in a local community college. Doug was fortunate to receive a public speaking scholarship and parlayed his public speaking skills into the political arena where he was able to be introduced to several influential members of the Ohio government. If he could prove himself at a local community college, then he could transfer to a four-year university. Doug saw this as a challenge. “I wanted to prove to myself (that I was capable), but I knew I could do it. More than anything I can honestly say I wanted to prove it to my dad.”

**Community college experience.** Doug’s time at his community college had both high and low points. Academically, he did well achieving an accumulative grade point average above a 3.0; however, he did incur some legal trouble. A night of partying led to Doug becoming intoxicated and being charged with trespassing. Due to multiple court appearances, his grades suffered resulting in more than one term of enrollment with poor grades. He is proud of the fact that once his legal problems were resolved, his grades rebounded. In addition to school, Doug worked several hours a week at a local pizza shop and began assuming some managerial responsibilities. His interest in politics was emerging and he found himself networking with local and state level politicians. He
knew that a four-year degree would be necessary for him to pursue his chosen career path so the decision to transfer was easy for him.

**Discovering self.** I asked Doug to describe himself using three adjective as to how he saw himself before he transferred. He started by saying that his time at the community college was transformative. He elaborated by stating, “My expectations have definitely gone up, my expectations of myself have definitely gone up and I would say that Sinclair was enlightening. I would say that my scope, if my scope from Vandalia Butler High School, I could see 15 percent of what was going on. At Sinclair I could probably see 25 percent of what was going on.”

He also used the word “maturing” to describe himself. His legal issues alone caused Doug to look at his choices in a completely different light. He realized that there were consequences, sometimes serious consequences, of his decisions and if he were to attain his goals of public service, then he would need to make better, wiser decisions. He finally used the word enlightening. He believed that his time at his community college allowed him to begin to realize his potential.

**Decision to transfer.** Doug had always planned to transfer and used his time at the community college to prepare himself academically.

I had always planned on it. At first I thought maybe I’d go to Sinclair for a year and transfer out, then after a year I had a lot of connections. The professors at Sinclair, I mean it’s a community college, the professors there at Sinclair were, for the most part, awesome. They were amazing. They were the kind of people that would invite you to their office for no particular reason than to just sit down
and chat with you. I just knew I was going to need a four-year degree so it came down to transferring.

Doug did not anticipate making the connections he made to the faculty and the doors these connections would open for him. While it was clear that he appreciated his time at the community college, Doug also had to be realistic about his career and future; that made the decision to transfer easier. What university to transfer to became a harder decision for him to make.

Doug began looking at various public institutions in Ohio and decided to transfer to Ohio University not because of the academic reputation but because of the campus and the architecture of the buildings. Doug had always had an interest in architecture but knew that a career in the field was not possible. He decision to transfer to Ohio University was made as he approached campus from the highway.

I came to OU, and again, I had an interest in architecture, and before I even got off of the highway I was like these buildings are awesome. I want to live here. So I came here and saw these awesome buildings, saw Cutler Hall, and was really impressed by that. So the architecture was really what decided it for me.

Transfer experience. Doug’s transfer experience was smooth. He was easily admitted and attended the transfer student orientation. His grades were good for his first term of enrollment, a 3.0 grade point average, which was a slight decline from his grade point average at the community college. Doug attributed the decline to “getting the feel of what was going on here.” He felt that he knew what to expect from the faculty at the community college and had relied on his communication skills and personality to work in
his favor. He did not know the OU faculty so he lost that key component to his previous academic success. He found some faculty more approachable than others. He also realized that there were some differences in the faculty between the two schools. “It was weird. At Sinclair I was being taught political science by politicians; here I was being taught political science by academics. The teachers I was being taught by it wasn’t as easy to get like on a personal level with them.”

I asked Doug to rate his transfer experience on a scale of one to five with one being the worst and five being the best. He rated his experience as a four. Doug’s only complaint about his first quarter of enrollment was that his housing situation was not ideal. He also struggled, somewhat, socially. He really did not know anyone on campus and because he is such a social person and surrounded himself with friends, his lack of established relationships was something he had not anticipated. In order to establish those relationships, Doug became involved in a number of campus activities and organizations. In fact, he became overly involved which led to several disastrous quarters academically. In Doug’s words, “I got hyper involved.”

He was still working at a local restaurant and, in addition, he was becoming increasingly involved in student senate and political campaigns. He was involved in his own campaign for a student senate seat as well as actively campaigning for candidates he supported. As a result, he missed a lot of class and his grades fell from a 3.0 term grade point average to a 1.77 during his subsequent term of enrollment. He was placed on academic probation at the end of winter quarter and his term grade point average actually
dropped to a 1.665 for the spring quarter. Doug was suspended, appealed the suspension and was readmitted on academic probation for the next fall quarter.

Doug had underestimated the time demanded of him by attending at a four-year institution. He relied on his social skills and ability to anticipate what his faculty would want while at the community college and he quickly found those skills would not work at Ohio University. He described himself as overconfident.

It was definitely a bit of overconfidence. I think it was overconfident in what I could pull off. But I think my priorities were definitely off because I wanted to get ultra-involved politically and that wasn’t going to do me any good without the four-year degree that I wanted to start with in the first place.

Over the next few quarters, Doug’s grades steadily improved and he was removed from academic probation. He realized that he would have to do more than just the “minimum” if he ever wanted to graduate. “I was humbled by the fact that I couldn’t just keep doing it. I couldn’t just do the minimum and still get by any more like I had in high school; like I had even for some time at Sinclair. I couldn’t do the minimum anymore.”

Doug went on to say that he had always said that he wanted to do great things and that, even though he believed in himself and his abilities, it was other people that he would have to prove this to. Doug had given himself permission not to do his best work and he had to change that mindset if he ever wanted to achieve the goals he had established for himself.

**Institutional versus personal resources.** For many students in Doug’s position, they begin to reach out and tap into campus resources that will assist them to do better
academically. As a student on academic probation, Doug was required to participate in a campus-sponsored program for students who were academically dropped from the university and then re-instated. Doug never participated in this program. He remembered being told that he needed to participate but he was “too busy” so he never took advantage of the help. “It was one of those things [that] it didn’t really hit home when they told me I was on probation.”

Instead, Doug’s primary resource came from a personal sense of responsibility and an ability to do the work that needed to be completed. This did not mean that he was motivated. Just the opposite is true. Doug considered himself to be a chronic procrastinator. He was not motivated by grades and he found his procrastination frustrating. In fact, he described himself as motivated but the motivation was directed towards things that he does not necessarily want to do at that moment. An example would be homework. He would much rather be doing other things, but he realized that he could not put off things he did not want to do and only concentrate on those things he found enjoyable. Doug always created excuses for why his work was late or a paper was not turned in on time.

I’m getting a little bit better about doing the stuff I need to do and not trying to find something else to blame it on. I always knew that it was my fault but, in the real time, sometimes I like to find other things to blame.

**After transfer.** I asked Doug to describe himself after his transfer to Ohio University. He described himself like this:
At OU, I would say [that] one of the first things I noticed when I got here was I really came into my own. I was transformed at Sinclair from being a kind of kid. I was a kid that was still more mature than most of the kids I knew. I had still been through a lot of stuff that most of them hadn’t gone through. From a kid with a bad attitude to a kid that was ready to, you know, at least look at the options and listen to people. At OU I’ve really come into my own. I tend to pollute my time with things that are not necessarily academically constructive, but they are very constructive to me. They are still good things for me, they just don’t necessarily do well for my academics.

As a fifth year senior, Doug can now see the “light at the end of the tunnel.” His advice for future transfer students? Get involved, but not overly involved.

Grow into every role that you have because when you’re trying to grow into three or four different roles at the same time, nothing gets the justice they deserve. I wish I had been told to pick a role, grow into it, and then see what you can do other places. My biggest advice to myself would be in the extracurricular scene because if I hadn’t done so many extracurriculars, I’m confident I would have spent a little more time on my studies.

**Summary.** Doug is a very confident, personable young man who is determined to make public service his life. Despite his problems academically, he has rebounded and has learned that, to be successful, he must prioritize what he needs to do. As a high school student who lacked guidance and structure, Doug has been forced, in many respects, to create this structure. He, admittedly, did not know how to study effectively
and had to learn basic study skills. Despite these obstacles, Doug has persevered and will graduate with a degree in Political Science. Engaging, articulate and graced with some political savvy, I am convinced that I will one day see Doug participating in a televised debate for political office. As he confidently stated at the end of our conversation, “you will be seeing me again. I’m not going away.”

**Wanda.** If I had to describe Wanda using three adjectives, I would use affable, outspoken, and anxious. As a student she is bright and capable yet questions herself and her decisions. Always demanding and with high expectations, she is probably her worst critic. She is a young woman torn between what she feels she should do and what she wants to do. The anxiety she experiences as she wrestles with decisions that will impact her life are a result of her desire to be responsible but to not become trapped in a career, or life, which is unpleasant and monotonous.

**Family and educational background.** Wanda grew up in eastern Pennsylvania with her parents and older brother. Many of her early memories are of feeling angry and jealous of her brother for monopolizing her parent’s time and energy. He brother was diagnosed as bi-polar and his frequent hospitalizations and behavioral problems dominated their lives. She knows that her parents were not intentionally ignoring her; however, it was difficult to understand this as a young child. These early issues created tension between her and her brother to the point that they now do not get along at all. She feels badly about their relationship but keeps getting pulled into frequent fights with him and finds that she now does not have the time, energy, or motivation to work on improving their relationship at this point.
Her parents are both college graduates; her father is a family practitioner and her mother has a degree in theatre although she currently manages her husband’s medical practice office. Wanda remembered her early grade school years fondly. She attended a small, private school before transferring to a large, academically rigorous public high school. She described her high school as a “mix of things.”

The school was really weird. Like ghettoish. Like, you know, metal detectors when you walk in. Things like that. You saw drug deals in the hallway and fights, security guards. Then there’s the other half [that] is very rigorous. You had a bunch of people going to ivy leagues and getting scholarships.

The rigor and competition created a lot of stress for Wanda. The school required students to take an IQ test before they could enroll in any advanced studies or AP courses. Wanda was taking these advanced courses and had to work very hard to maintain the expected grades. Despite her parent’s reassurances that she did not have to go to college if she did not want to, she believed that she really had no other options but to do her best, get good grades, and planned to attend college. She knew that higher education was important to her family, especially her father. Originally from Holland, her father worked very hard to complete college and immigrate to the United States to complete his medical residency. Wanda knew that her father had high expectations.

**College experience.** Wanda applied to several colleges and had them identified as primary and secondary options depending upon what offers she received. Her anxieties over admission weighed on her. “At that time, I was like the queen of getting deferred or waitlisted; like it was just my luck.” She was not admitted to many of the
schools to which she applied because her ACT scores were not good. Even though she took advanced classes in high school and had a good GPA, she found that her scores did not make her competitive at the more selective universities.

She was accepted and decided to enroll in a selective private institution and confessed that a large part of her decision was because she found the campus attractive. She enjoyed everything about this institution except for the social aspect. She found the students to be “very cliquey, very snobbish. You would never see anyone out for class in sweatpants. It was very uppity and very snobby.” She did not like the attitudes the students had towards money and possessions. “I didn’t think that the way the people were acting was acceptable. Like the way that people kind of like treated how much money grew on trees. Like everyone drove a BMW and, oh daddy will buy that for me.” Because of these attitudes and her general unhappiness with the social scene, Wanda decided to return home in the middle of her second semester.

**Community college experience.** Wanda enrolled in her local community college near Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. She had no intentions of staying there to earn an Associate’s degree and used it as just filler until she was accepted to a different university. It was a commuter campus and Wanda did not like the atmosphere.

All of my best friends were away at school. Once you have like a taste of like going away and like living the college like, you kind of like miss it. Miss your independence. Like not having to call your parents every 10 seconds or like not having to tell your parents like where you’re going every five minutes.
Wanda thought that by applying as a transfer student, she would be accepted with no problems. “You know the notion that you can get in anywhere as a transfer student is completely false. It’s like going into it I thought like, oh, a transfer student can get in anywhere. It’s not true at all.” She applied to three different schools and was admitted to Ohio University. She was definitely not excited about attending Ohio University. OU had never been on her “radar” as a viable school for her. It was not a school that she had ever envisioned herself attending. “I never really saw it as like a challenging place. Like all the people in my high school that didn’t do well in school at all came here.” It was a place where anybody was accepted. Wanda had visited and had only bad memories of her trip. The southeastern Ohio region is very rural and the fact that the escalator that was installed in the new Baker Center was Athens’ first escalator in the county was almost more than she could stand. The area felt dirty to her; however, since she had no other options, she decided to enroll and make the best of it.

**Discovering self.** I asked Wanda to provide three adjectives as to how she saw herself before she transferred to Ohio University. This proved difficult. Even when pressed, Wanda was unable to come up with any words to describe herself.

That’s a really hard question to ask. You can’t like describe yourself, I guess. I think it’s really hard to describe yourself. The only thing I can say about transferring is that it’s the thing immediately afterward like I would never wish a transfer on like my worst enemy.

**Transfer experience.** I then asked her to explain her statement. Wanda said that it was a difficult process for her. Having to deal with multiple offices and take different
forms to different offices was a hassle. She believed that applying as a freshman was much easier and that applying as a transfer student constituted double the paperwork, double the stress and frustration, and more work on her part since high schools will send out transcripts and recommendations. By applying as a transfer student, she was required to obtain all the needed information on her own. In addition, Wanda transferred during the middle of the term. Relationships had already been formed and she had to navigate the entire social scene all over again.

I asked Wanda what went smoothly for her and she replied, “not a lot of things.” She went on to describe her experience like this.

Not a lot of things go smoothly when you’re alone and don’t know that many people. Like I only knew a handful of people. But, you know, I just can’t think of any right now. I can really remember only like the things that didn’t go smooth. She had to keep asking people for directions because she was not familiar with campus. She was unfamiliar with the local terms for places so she had no idea what people were talking about when they referred to specific places by colloquial names. Making new friends was difficult for her; so, for Wanda, her transfer was like experiencing her freshman year of college all over again without the benefit of any type of orientation.

I asked Wanda to rate her transfer experience on a scale of one to five with one being the worst and five being the best. She rated her experience at a 3.5. “Nothing is going to go perfectly. It doesn’t matter if you’re an incoming freshman as a senior in high school; it’s just not going to be perfect. If anyone says that it is they are lying to
you.” Wanda noted that she was helped by meeting with a transfer advisor who was able to explain how her credits transferred and helped her understand her remaining requirements.

Wanda felt that the orientation she attended was worthless. The orientation included students who were true freshmen so the information that was presented was geared more for first time students than for transfer students. The orientation was likened to a one room school house where there are a wide range of students, not just in age, but in experience level. Having an orientation targeted to just transfer students would have been more helpful for Wanda. While many transfer students value their independence (Wanda included), she did believe that this aura of independence blurs during the transfer process. No matter how independent students believed they were, they needed some hand-holding; they needed to learn the ropes and they had to allow some dependence on others to form so that they had a resource, or a base from which they could operate, so that they could get their questions answered.

**Transfer shock.** Wanda has always been a good student. Her grade point average when she transferred from the community college was a decent 3.5 and her first term grade point average at Ohio University was a 3.33. She believed that the drop was expected and went on to say that by transferring from a community college to a four-year university, the rigor of the courses increased. In addition, she was again living independently from her parents so she had to manage her time and resources. When she attended the community college she focused on her schoolwork. She did not have to work a job, fix meals, or worry about a social life.
Wanda also had trouble adjusting to a quarter system when she was accustomed to a semester system.

I think the reason my grades weren’t like as high as they possibly could be was like I was still like learning the quarter system. I just remember being in shock that like it was only 10 weeks. They [faculty] try to cram everything that they have into it [quarter system] and you don’t learn everything that you can learn. If you do learn it, it’s just memorization and then as soon as you’re done, it’s gone. In quarters, every class I go to is a high stress situation.

She was looking forward to the transition back to a semester grading system for the next academic year. She believed that a semester system would be a less stressful and traumatic adjustment for transfer students. Wanda compared her transition to that of learning a new language. The compacted and condensed nature of the quarter system demanded that students budget their time and resources carefully since it is so easy to fall behind in their studies.

**Personal characteristics contributed to success.** I asked Wanda what personal traits or characteristics contributed to her success in her transfer to Ohio University. She indicated that her independence was a significant contributing factor. Her roommate went home every weekend, which gave her some much-needed time alone to think and relax. She was also confident in herself since she had transferred once already; she knew that if she were patient and preserved, then she would make it through another transition.

She also considers herself a “realist.” She knew what she needed to do, the amount of time and effort she needed to put into her work, and knew she would not put
any more effort into the task than necessary. She described herself as a procrastinator but also as someone who is realistic about her strengths and weaknesses regarding her academics. Wanda expected a lot out of herself; however, she also knew that she was not the type of student who would get all A’s. While other people, including her mother, called her a pessimist; she disagreed.

I’m not a negative person. I’m just realistic; like that’s how I look at it. I’m not going to be that student that’s going to get A’s in all of my classes. I’m not going to get like A’s in my classes without having to try and I’m not going to get it in things that I’m not good in, like Chemistry. I mean, I’m going to work hard, but I’m not going to like kill myself over it just because I know it’s not going to get me anywhere.

Wanda wants to have a life outside of school and academics. She wants to maintain a balance. She knew she could do well and did not have to put forth a lot of effort in some courses and she was content with that. Her self-worth is not tied to her grades. Wanda wants to experience college and does not want the stress or burden that worrying about grades would bring to her.

**Institutional resources.** During Wanda’s second quarter of enrollment, her grade point average improved to a 3.6. She attributed this improvement to her involvement with her sorority. The sense of belonging and membership she gained from this group helped her focus. The sorority is really the only institutional resource she has tapped into. She visited Career Services and found them lacking in helpfulness. She has used
the library, but found it rather plain and uninviting. She was also surprised that the library actually closed instead of being open 24 hours.

**What she wished she had known.** I asked Wanda what she knew now that she wished she had known before she transferred. “It gets easier.” The process of applying, writing essays and doing everything necessary to go to college is worth the hassles. She also said that for a long time, she felt that she was the only person that transferred. She believed that many students go to college with an idealized picture in their minds of what college is going to be like and, sometimes, that picture and reality do not coincide. “For a long time, I’m so weird, like why am I transferring? You’re supposed to go to college and just love it automatically and it’s not true at all.”

I asked Wanda to rate herself now on a scale of one to five with one being the worst and five being the best and she gave herself a 4.5 which was a whole point higher than her initial rating. For Wanda, she now felt more confident and comfortable. “I’ve definitely gotten into the swing of things and found a routine.”

**Summary.** Wanda’s transfer process was not easy. She encountered many obstacles and disappointments in her experiences with college. She initially adopted a jaded perspective of her higher education experience. Despite her misgivings about transferring and the disappointments of not being accepted to her first choice of schools, she is thriving and doing well socially and academically. Her involvement in her sorority and the friendships she made has helped her transition to Ohio University. This independent, maybe even stubborn, young woman is engaging and easy to talk to.
Opinionated and not afraid to speak her mind, Wanda will be able to make her mark on the world.

**Cross Case Analysis**

Examining data across cases is another important aspect of qualitative research. Cross case analysis attempts to identify common themes and elements of the individual cases and make connections that are meaningful. According to Yin (1994), cross case analysis attempts “to build a general explanation that fits each of the individual cases (p. 112).

The decision to transfer from one institution to another is not an easy decision to make. As supported in the literature (Allen et al, 2008; Duggan & Pickering, 1998; Miville & Sedlacek, 1995; Ose, 1997; Sedlacek, 1998; and Townsend, 2008), the present study found there are many factors that come into play in the decision-making process and each of these factors plays a part in the decision. Transfer students face the added burden of “starting over” at their new institution by needing to learn new rules, policies, procedures, and develop new friendships. In addition, transfer students are comparing the culture and experiences of their first institution with that of their new institution. Transfer students question how they are going to fit in. Moreover, they often find that they use the statement, “That’s not how it was done before” as a way to navigate this new system.

In this study, I asked participants to discuss their reasons for transferring as well as their overall impressions of the transfer process. From their responses, motivation to transfer, factors influencing their decision to transfer, and the transfer experience were
identified as primary themes. This section will discuss each of these factors as well as other issues participants identified as important in their decision to transfer and their adjustment to their new institution. I begin this section with a review of the community college experience.

Preparing the way: The community college experience. There is little question that the community college environment differs significantly from the university environment. A variety of opportunities for academic and social engagement creates distinctive experiences for students and foster diverse academic goals. Since an associate’s degree was not an educational goal for any of the participants, transferring to a four-year institution was necessary for them to achieve their final goal of earning a bachelor’s degree.

Five of the nine participants had poor grades in high school, which initially limited their options for higher education. Alex, Simon, Joe Jane, and Doug were all considered poor students who would not have been considered for admission to a four-year institution. Wanda and Sharon each had good grades in high school and initially attended a four-year institution. John’s high school grades were good; however, he chose to attend a community college because of his commitment to his music and Amy had to take a year off before she could enroll in a community college for financial reasons.

The community college experience helped most participants realize they were capable of college-level work and that earning a Bachelor’s degree was a real possibility for them. Alex, Jane, Joe, and Doug excelled in their community college experiences that prompted them to want more. Conversely, Jane and Simon continued to struggle with
motivation and other outside distractions that resulted in poor grades and a continuation of low expectations of themselves and their ability to be successful in a collegiate setting.

Similarly, Sharon transferred to save money and because she would have to spend additional time at the institution just to be accepted into the teacher education program. Unfortunately, she perceived the faculty at the community college to be overly involved in her life, and too intrusive, so she transferred as a way to try again to earn the degree she sought.

Amy disliked just about everything associated with her community college experience; she believed that the work load was easy, the faculty were close minded, and perceived other students to be boring and uninterested in an education.

Wanda’s community college experience was based on necessity rather than desire. Since she had withdrawn from her previous institution, taking classes during the summer at her local community college was a way for her to earn credits and make up for those she lost by leaving in the middle of the semester.

Many students consider attending a community college and then transferring to a four-year institution as an acceptable path towards their educational goal. While this holds true for a few of the participants in this study, the community college experience was unpleasant for some. It is generally accepted that students and faculty at community colleges often have the opportunity to develop closer relationships than are often possible at a four-year university. As evidenced by the experiences of these participants, this closer relationship was beneficial for some, (e.g. Doug) and gave them confidence and motivation to pursue a Bachelor’s degree. Other participants, (e.g. Sharon and Amy),
found the experience to be difficult. In both situations, the end result was the same—a decision to transfer to a four-year institution.

**Academically underprepared.** Because community colleges have an open enrollment admissions process, many students who are academically weak choose to enroll as a way to improve their academic ability. As their academic ability improves often their confidence does as well. These participants all expressed a desire for higher education, but believed it was beyond their reach. Too many setbacks, poor high school grades, dysfunctional home settings, underdeveloped study skills, and a general lack of confidence all served as barriers and attending a four-year college or university seemed unrealistic. They seemed to believe the best they could hope for was to be admitted to a community college.

Simon, Jane, Joe, John, Alex and Doug considered themselves to be lucky they were admitted to their respective community colleges. In high school, they each struggled academically and socially. In addition, their home lives were difficult and they experienced frequent arguments and disruptions to their routines.

For example, Jane’s bouts with depression and acceptance were major factors in her poor academic performance in high school, “In high school, [I was] depressed and my parents tried taking me to counselors. I just didn’t want to talk to anyone. I just had breakdowns and anxiety attacks.”

Additionally, Simon focused on athletics and drug use in high school so college was never seriously discussed; however, he did have a desire to attend college. “I
thought I knew that I did want to go to college, and I always did want to even as bad as I
did in high school.”

Similarly, Alex never cared much about school. His introverted nature prevented
him from engaging in activities at high school. As is fairly typical, Alex had no idea
what he wanted to do once he graduated from high school. “I didn’t know what I wanted
to do, but I knew I pretty much had to go to college.” His lackadaisical attitude towards
school persisted into college and was reflected in low grades and, ultimately led to his
decision to pursue employment.

Joe found girls and video games much more attractive than grades in high school.
As a student involved in special education classes, Joe never considered college possible,
especially attending a four-year college. “I never had the ambition to go to college. I
was a bad student.”

Finally, Doug’s resistance towards authority, especially his high school teachers,
caused him not to take high school seriously. He spent little time doing homework and
his grades continually dropped.

I kind of resented the fact that I had to go there every day. [I] didn’t really have a
home life that was conducive to sitting down and doing homework anyway. I was
always very hostile toward my step mother and my father was rarely home. I
didn’t spend much time at home so homework never really got done. The further
I got in high school, the worse my grades became.

These five participants were not academically strong. They had multiple
personal, behavioral, and environmental obstacles that inhibited their opportunities for
success. Perhaps, most importantly, they did not believe in their abilities to be successful.

**Motivation to transfer.** Students have a variety of reasons for attending college. For many students, the prospect of greater financial gain and job stability are primary motivators to attend college and earn a degree. Attending college represents a significant milestone in people’s lives as well as a substantial commitment of time, energy, and finances. For transfer students, completing their degree in a timely manner is often a key concern especially in light of credit transfer issues and course prerequisite requirements (Laanan, 2001).

College is often viewed as the initial step to obtaining a lifelong vocation or career (Kuh, 1991) and a college degree is often considered a key to open new doors. Often, students establish goals they wish to pursue and see higher education as a way to obtain these goals. For some, these personal goals are more tangible in nature such as finding a better paying job so that they can earn more money. As tangible goals, they can be quantified.

However, other goals are intangible. For some participants, like Joe and John, they will be the first member of their family to graduate from college. Sue, Alex, and Doug wanted to feel a sense of pride that comes from earning a college degree. For others, like Wanda, attending and graduating from college was an expectation and she did not wish to disappoint her family. It is difficult to quantify intangible motivators as they do not fit neatly into a table or chart. A person cannot “see” how it feels to earn a degree.
Whatever the motivation, tangible or intangible, participants in this study used their individual goals as motivators to transfer and complete their degree.

   Joe will be the first in his family to graduate from college and he is quite proud of this fact. John and Alex will also be the first in their family to graduate from college. It was the fact that his parents did not have a college degree, and their encouragement, that spurred Joe to complete his degree. “My mom wanted me to go to college and I thought it was a good idea, too.”

   Wanda stated she always knew she would attend college. Since both of her parents have college degrees, her biggest hurdle was not if, but where she would go. Likewise, Sharon always knew that she wanted to go to college to become a teacher. Simon viewed college as an opportunity to find himself and to help him decide on a direction for his life. Since he spent most of his high school years in a drug-induced haze, he was now hoping that he would find his path. “I don’t want to amount to what other people think I should amount to. I feel like I can pretty much do whatever I want.” Doug saw higher education as an opportunity to prove himself and as a way to make up for his poor grades and attitude in high school.

   Finances and low grades left Jane believing that college was beyond her reach and it was only because her parents said they would pay for her first semester in college that she even decided to enroll. Her situation was very similar to that of Simon’s in that she was directionless when she graduated from high school and was hoping college would provide some answers.
Amy cited finances as an issue. Because of her immigration status in the United States, she was limited in her options for college. In addition, Amy did not want to have the same experience as her parents since her parents’ degrees from their home country were not recognized which severely limited their employability.

It is interesting to note that none of these nine students ever identified an associate’s degree as their final educational goal. In fact, even though each attended a two year community college at some point in their academic career, none of them earned an associate’s degree which was intriguing. If an opportunity to earn a two-year degree was present, why not take advantage of such an opportunity? In reflecting on my own experience, I was focused on earning a four-year degree, not a two-year degree. It was neither my plan nor focus to earn an associate’s degree. I wanted a bachelor’s degree which was similar to these participants. Their goal was a four-year degree and attending a community college was merely the first step in that process.

Amy and Joe had more than enough credits but never completed all the requirements to earn an associate’s degree. Wanda, Joe, and Sharon initially enrolled in a four year public university then transferred to a community college while the other six participants began their academic careers at a two year institution. John was motivated to transfer because he felt he had accomplished all he could at the community college. His view of a community college student was jaded and he did not want to be someone who never “got out” of the community college or “made it” at a university. He saw transferring as an “opportunity and challenge” to see what he was capable of doing.
This negative view of the community college and the community college student was echoed by other participants as well. Amy, John, Sharon, and Doug each felt they did not “belong” at a community college. As such, they never really felt integrated into the community college culture and never established many friendships with other students.

Joe stated the academics were “Too easy. There were a lot of unmotivated people there so if I tried just a little harder than them it was like no problem.” Wanda did not like the atmosphere, “All of my best friends were away at school. Once you have like a taste of like going away and like living the college life, you kind of like miss it. Miss your independence.”

Amy and Sharon both considered attending a community college as a “step up from high school.” According to Amy, “it was easy. The professors weren’t challenging at all.” Sharon echoed this sentiment,

They’re way too involved in your life. Like the teachers there wanted to know everything you were doing. If you weren’t in class they were calling you and I felt like it was high school all over again; like they had to keep tabs on me.

Earning a Bachelor’s degree was the ultimate goal for these participants and the community college was but a stepping stone to obtaining that goal. For the nine participants, a Bachelor’s degree was necessary to meet both internal and external expectations. Maslow’s (1948) hierarchy of needs posits that humans are motivated to fulfill their needs. Esteem needs such as the need for respect and competence can be fulfilled by obtaining an education which could be considered a motivator for these
participants. As they sought to fulfill these needs, it became necessary to transfer from the community college to a four-year university so they could achieve their goals.

**Institutional and personal characteristics create “fit”**. Colleges and universities are quite varied. Two year community colleges, four-year public universities and four-year private universities share many of the same characteristics yet they are also quite different. Rural, urban, or metropolitan schools will look very different and will attract different students.

The participants in this study cited two distinct qualities that were important to them in the transfer process. Material or physical qualities (tangibles) such as housing options, affordability, academic majors offered, and location were important to them. Some participants had relationships with currently enrolled students or had been to the University campus before, which created a sense of familiarity with the area. For the purpose of this study, I consider these institutional characteristics, which are specific to this University and do not exist in the exact form on any other campus.

Friendships influenced Joe and Jane’s decision to transfer. Both had friends that already attended University which made their decision to transfer easier and, they believed, would help with their transition. Alex cited his familiarity with the campus as a factor. Since he had been to campus for band camp as a high school student, his familiarity with the area was comforting.

These tangible characteristics are sometimes overshadowed by intangible characteristics, which in this study, are considered as personal characteristics. Participants referred to this as how the college “feels.” This feeling of belonging or of
not belonging on a campus is part of determining institutional fit and frequently influences whether a student chooses to apply and matriculate should they be accepted.

The nine participants in this study all cited some form of institutional “fit” as part of their reason to transfer. Joe and Doug both acknowledged that a major factor in their decision to transfer was the initial feeling they experienced when they came to campus the first time. As Joe describes, “I was like, wow, this actually feels like a real college campus.” Doug expressed a similar sentiment, “The architecture was really what decided it for me.” John described his community college campus as, “It’s just a building on a square and so it doesn’t feel like college. It feels more like you’re going to an office building.”

Amy never felt like she fit in with the students at the community college. Because of her limited options, she had to attend a community college which resulted in no actual “fit” other than convenience and access. Amy made an emotional decision to transfer and, in hindsight, wished she had asked more questions and obtained more information about the private institution before she transferred there. Her decision to transfer to the current university was also based on her dislike for the environment at the other institution. “It was really the wrong school but maybe I needed to see that I need balance.”

Wanda had a difficult time making a decision about which college to attend. Even though her first choice did not work out, she still chose a college that, for her, seemed right. Sharon also cited convenience and access as reasons she attended college; however, she considered her community college experience to only be a step above high
school as she found the staff to be too involved in the lives of students and did not like their intrusive style.

Jane wanted to “prove herself” to both her and her parents, “I had never done anything, not anything worth talking about, I guess, before in school. My parents had a lot of doubts about me.”

Intangible characteristics such as the feelings evoked from stepping onto campus the first time, a desire to prove one’s worth, or feeling disconnected to the community college environment were factors for these participants. Though difficult to quantify, intangible characteristics are often more powerful for students in determining a course of action.

**Making the transition.** Each participant was asked to rate the transfer experience on a scale of one to five with one being the worst and five being the best. Using a Likert-type scale provided a subjective rating indicating how the participants felt about their transfer experience to the University. Five participants, Amy, Jane, Joe, Simon, and Doug all rated their experience as a four. Doug cited the classes he took and the multiple opportunities for involvement in his rating. “There were so many opportunities to get involved that I couldn’t take advantage of them all.”

Despite Simon’s myriad problems that led to his suspension, he too rated his transfer experience as a four on a five point scale. “I really didn’t see the transfer experience as too bad of an experience. I don’t think I would have had much trouble with it except that I had not yet developed good study habits so I wasn’t ready for serious school.” Next, Jane was excited about transferring. “I had no idea what I was getting
myself into but everything was new to me so everything was exciting for me.” The hardest issue these students had to deal with was their living situation. Each of them was required to live in a residence hall their first year at the university.

Sharon rated her experience as a 3.4. She cited poor communication from the university and difficulty meeting with her academic advisor as primary reasons for the low rating. Alex gave his experience a three, the lowest rating of all participants. Because he did not live in a residence hall, Alex had to find his own housing, food and job; all of which contributed to the stress of moving and changing schools. He also indicated he had more issues with his transfer credits.

I didn’t feel lost at any point. On the other hand, I was a commuter so I dealt with getting an apartment, living with people, dealing with the logistics of picking up and moving which is not an experience that happens very often.

**Living at the university.** Moving from their “comfort zone” of home to a college town created some anxiety for the participants. All nine were living at home with family or friends at the time they decided to transfer. Residential options in were limited; either live on campus in a residence hall or find an off-campus apartment. Both options had positive and negative characteristics. By living on campus in a residence hall, students had the amenities of home; meals, a bed, study space, and proximity to classes were easily met with this option. However, campus rules and regulations and having a roommate were viewed as negative aspects.

Off campus housing offered more freedom and flexibility. Students could cook their own meals, set their own hours, and not worry about violating quiet hours. On the
negative side, having to commute and the hassles of parking can be frustrating.
Shopping, preparing meals, employment, and the responsibility of living on one’s own also possess some undesirable attributes.

The residential environment was a problem for Simon. The freedom he found, as well as his own inability to stay away from alcohol, directly contributed to legal problems which culminated in his dismissal from the university. Jane lived with someone whom she described as “a really different type of person than myself so living in a dorm thing was really difficult for me. I had been living at home with my parents and I was doing whatever I wanted whenever I wanted.”

Joe was required to live in the residence hall despite already being 21 years old when he transferred. “I had a very big single. I would actually ride my bike around in there. It was fun.” He went on to say that he never had any problems living in a predominately freshman residence hall and that he did not feel like any type of big brother to the other residents.

Doug expressed similar problems his first quarter in the residence hall. He, too, was one of the oldest individuals living in a freshman hall. At first he was annoyed. “It started out as oh my gosh, you guys are irritating the crap out of me.” In the long run, he felt that the residential experience was a positive for him and that he actually became a positive influence on them. “A lot of the guys probably just thought I was kind of square, but they knew me, knew that, first of all I wasn’t square, I was a pretty good time but the stuff they were doing I’d done three years ago.”
Relationships—the Good, the Bad, and the Ugly

Creating new relationships and maintaining existing ones are often challenging for anyone. Add to this the stress of transferring and students often find themselves in dangerous territory. These relationships can prove to be beneficial or detrimental to students’ successful transitions and success in their new institution. Supportive relationships such as those with parents and significant others, tend to encourage students’ in their transfer process. However, when previously supportive relationships end or become strained, students are often thrown off-stride with a resulting impact on academic performance. For these nine participants, relationships came in both the beneficial and detrimental variety.

**Family.** Relationships with family played an important role in the transition for all nine participants. Families were both supportive and detrimental to their success once they transferred. Three participants had poor relationships with their parents which caused them to be suspicious of others and to question their own abilities. Their questions had a negative impact not only of their own perceptions of self, but also on their perceptions on their abilities as students. Jane, for instance, always had a difficult relationship with her father as she considered his infidelity unforgivable. The resulting anger she felt toward him spilled over into her academic life and caused her academic performance to suffer. Her need to have friendships overshadowed her desire to do well academically so her grades suffered.

Likewise, Simon had problems at home. He treated his father poorly, with little respect, and never really tried to get along with him, “I was kind of an ass, really.”
Simon moved out of the house and lived with friends just so he could attend a different high school and play ball. Though Simon said that he and his father now have a good relationship, they spent many years fighting.

Doug had little respect for his step mother despite the fact that she was very involved in his life. His parents divorced when he was two years old and both parents remarried resulting in step parents, step siblings, half-siblings and full-siblings. Frequent fights with his parents led him to move out and live with friends for a while. He developed a strong dislike for any type of authority which led to poor grades in high school.

For these three participants, their negative relationships created an additional burden that hindered their academic success. Because they spent valuable time dealing with the effects of these poor relationships, they had less time, energy and motivation to focus on school and their academic requirements.

Conversely, Joe had a good relationship with his parents growing up. They were supportive and encouraging; however, his grades were still very poor. It was not family that distracted him but girls.

Wanda had supportive parents who challenged her and created high expectations. While she usually rose to the challenge, she still felt overlooked by her parents due to the mental health needs of her brother. “It was not easy growing up. If he was in the hospital or something like that, I was like my parents are spending more time with him, they like him better.”
Alex’s parents were also supportive but it was their lack of college degrees that spurred him to attend college. His mother made it clear to him that he would not settle for a certificate while his father’s job in tool and dye was constantly in flux with frequent fears that he would lose his job because it was being outsourced overseas.

John’s relationship with his family was strong enough that the family could move across country and leave him in California to finish high school. John is very proud of his parents, especially his father, who worked his way up to postmaster of their hometown. Neither parent has a college degree so John would be the first in his family to graduate from college.

Amy is proud of her parents because they decided to leave Russia in order to make better lives for themselves and their children. Both parents have college degrees; however, her father, an engineer by training, has never been able to use his education in the United States because his degree does not qualify him for engineering jobs in the U.S.

Sharon readily admitted that she was “daddy’s little girl” and that she was very spoiled. Because of her close relationship with her parents, during her first three years as a residential student, she went home most weekends which hampered her ability to form good relationships with her peers. Her lack of peer relationships created social problems for and she felt isolated and alone for much of the time.

Even though these participants cited positive relationships with their families, their initial academic performance upon transfer still resulted in a lower grade point average. These participants did not cite poor relationships as the reason they did not do well academically in their first term of enrollment. However, for these participants, their
initial academic performance may have had more to do with environmental factors than with relationship issues and concerns.

**Relationships with others.** One significant aspect of maturation in college students is the process of forming relationships with others; especially relationships accompanied by dating and intimacy. Balancing the demands of school and a relationship can be difficult. For Wanda, John, Amy, and Joe, intimate relationships did not distract them from school. Admittedly, they each had their own set of personal issues to address; however, for these four participants, the added responsibility of a relationship with a significant other was not a factor in their academic performance.

On the other hand, relationship issues played a role in the lives of the other five participants. After dropping out after his first semester at a public institution, Alex began working full time at a local K-Mart and got married. He was married for five years but low wage jobs, debt and stress resulted in a divorce. It was the divorce that actually encouraged Alex to return to school to earn a degree.

Jane always valued relationships more than school or even her family. Her need for acceptance drove her to constantly seek relationships and her sense of purpose was consumed by these relationships. She described it as, “I always wanted friends and I thought in order to make friendships I had to, you know, put them first.” She took solace in the fact that even though she did not do well in school, she at least had friendships.

Sharon experienced a lot of turmoil in her relationship with her live-in boyfriend. She lived with him, his parents and his sisters so she was always the odd woman out whenever they had a fight. She often felt ganged up on by his family and rarely believed
she had any privacy. “No matter who was in the wrong, they always sided with him. [I am] the one who needs to change or who needs fixed. [I am] the one who needs to prioritize or who has to correct something.” Adding to this stress was the need to work full time at Walmart. This left her tired and drained to the point that schoolwork was often left undone.

Simon was probably affected the most of all by the breakup of a relationship. Simon became depressed and self-destructive. He drank often and a lot and engaged in risky behaviors and spent hours pacing in an attempt to soothe himself. His grades were poor and after his third alcohol violation, he was dismissed for disciplinary reasons.

Doug’s issue with relationships was not one that involved another person but his relationship with activities. Doug threw himself into social and political activities that kept him from attending class regularly. He actively pursued involvement in student government and political campaigns and used this as an excuse for his continually dropping grades. Doug was placed on academic probation and then dismissed from the university for his poor academic performance. Even after he was readmitted, he did not see how his over-involvement was creating problems for him until a conversation with his father helped him realize that he needed to focus his time and attention on school and not on activities. For Doug, his overconfidence became his undoing.

Obviously, relationships matter. It was through interpersonal connections that these participants were able to balance relationships and academic demands that influenced their grades. For these participants, it cannot be determined that positive relationships resulted in better grades since all nine participants experienced a drop in
their grade point average. However, an environmental factor, relationships cannot wholly explain the reason for their initial academic performance.

**Faculty relationships and influence.** Many participants cited positive relationships with faculty as a significant reason for both their transfer and their success within their chosen major. Most participants entered college with no strong idea of a major or career path, however, they found a faculty member with whom they connected or encouraged them to pursue their goals or to broaden their academic focus.

Amy’s transfer to the university was eased by the help and guidance she received from a Biology faculty member.

I got an email from [my advisor] and he was like this is what you need to do, this is what you need, and, by the way, this is what I know about you. Tell me more about yourself. It was just like all things were wow, this is really helpful. Amy had never experienced this level of concern and involvement from any of her previous faculty. It made her feel excited and cared about; that she mattered and was not just another student.

Alex also experienced helpful faculty. As a transfer student, he found that he did not have a prerequisite for a course. His advisor noticed this and worked with his department chair to make sure the course was offered so that Alex could stay on track. Doug cited faculty at both the community college and at the university that encouraged him. Because of his relationship with faculty, he was introduced to influential state politicians and was able to become more involved in state politics. Similarly, Jane and Joe were influenced by faculty.
Overall, participants were pleased with the help they received. They felt the faculty genuinely cared about them and their success which made their transition to the university more smooth and relaxed. Even though some of participants ended up on academic probation, none of them cited a lack of concern by their faculty as a reason.

**Finding Academic Success and Facing Challenge**

The stress and challenges of transferring often manifest as lower grades and grade point average. The very definition of transfer shock posits a drop in students’ GPA in the first term of enrollment at the receiving institution which held true for five of the nine participants.

John transferred from his community college with a cumulative GPA of 2.64. In his first term of enrollment at the university, his GPA was 2.50. John attributed this drop to the adjustment to a university from a community college. Work and housing also contributed to the drop in his grade point average, yet John was pleased with himself, his grades, and his adjustment.

Amy transferred from a community college with a cumulative GPA of 3.55. In her first term of enrollment at the university, she earned a 3.23. Amy, too, attributed the drop to adjusting to a new environment and to different instructional methods. She was relieved to be out of the stressful academic environment she experienced and was beginning her search for the balance she desired in her academic and social life.

Alex transferred from a community college with a cumulative GPA of 2.78. In his first term of enrollment at the university he earned a 2.22 GPA. Alex may have had the most difficult adjustment of all participants. He was recently divorced and had
moved many hours away from his family and support system. He needed to find a job and secure housing since he was too old to live in a residence hall. Alex’s “comfortable little pattern” was disrupted and he was forced to make many changes in a short amount of time.

Wanda transferred from a community college with a cumulative GPA of 3.85. In her first term of enrollment at the university she earned a 3.33. Wanda attributed her GPA drop to the adjustment of a new environment, new living situation, and to difficulty learning the “lingo” of the university. She felt out of place and “stupid” when she would hear other students talk about things such as going “uptown” when she had no idea of what they were talking about. This general unease with her new surroundings created some anxiety and self-doubt on Wanda’s part. She actually began to question her decision to transfer and even considered returning home.

Simon transferred from a community college with a cumulative GPA of 2.10. In his first term of enrollment at the university he earned a 0.47. Simon’s world collapsed when he broke up with his girlfriend. Alcohol and poor decision making created an untenable situation for Simon and he was not able to recover until he was dismissed and allowed to return. In retrospect, Simon believed that it was good for him to experience such a low; he is proud of his recovery and ability to bounce back from such a terrible beginning.

Doug transferred from a community college with a cumulative GPA of 2.96. In his first term of enrollment at the university he earned a 3.00. This rise in his GPA was deceptive because the very next term he earned a 1.77. Doug’s first term was an
adjustment period and he seemed to manage the transition well. However, he allowed his involvement in extracurricular activities to take priority and his grades suffered as a result. Doug’s over commitment to these activities and over confidence in his academic ability proved a harmful combination. Unlike some of the other participants, Doug was not able to balance his academic and social life.

Sharon transferred from a community college with a cumulative GPA of 2.7. In her first term of enrollment at the university she earned a 3.72. Sharon said that most of the courses she took this first term were retakes of courses that did not transfer in as course specific from the community college. She really did not consider the courses difficult since she had already been exposed to the material. A further review of her academic record revealed that her grade point average continued to drop over the subsequent terms as she began taking courses in which novel material was presented. In addition, she worked at least 30 hours a week which did not leave a lot of extra time for studying.

Two students actually experienced a rise in grade point average. This rise in the GPA following the first term of enrollment has been termed transfer ecstasy (Rhine, 2000). Jane and Joe improved their grade point average. Joe transferred from a community college with a cumulative GPA of 3.40. In his first term of enrollment at the university he earned a 3.66. Joe put in a lot of time studying by stating that he would spend 11 or 12 hours a day studying and in class.

Jane, too, saw an improvement in her grade point average. She transferred from the community college with a cumulative GPA of 2.22. In her first term of enrollment at
the university she earned a 3.41. This was the best she had ever done academically and realized that she had a lot of passion for what she was studying. She also felt she worked very hard for the grades she earned and that her initial grades did not reflect the passion she has for learning and for her major.

Summary

For these nine participants, the transfer process was relatively smooth, they found classes they needed, and began the task of adjusting to their new environment. For the five participants that saw a drop in grade point average, the phenomenon of transfer shock was not only attributed to adjusting to a new academic environment with new expectations and rules inherent to a change in educational setting but also to the nuanced social climate they had to navigate. Relationships had a large impact on many of these participants as did the demands of balancing school, work, and outside responsibilities.

The participants that saw an improvement in their GPA also attributed the rise to a new environment and to an expanded social scene. For Sharon, this initial rise was due to retaking courses and familiarity with course content since her subsequent terms of enrollment showed a steady drop in her grade point average. Jane and John were the only participants to go on to demonstrate that the initial improvement was not a fluke but representative of their ability and commitment to their education.
Chapter Five Discussion

The transition to a new university is both exciting and frustrating. Barriers to a smooth transfer lurk around every corner. Transfer students must learn how to identify such barriers and develop skills and plans to overcome them. It can be done. Clearly, these nine participants represented transfer students who were successful in their transition. Some of these participants had an easier time than others; however, each has persisted and seven of the nine have graduated with a bachelor’s degree.

No two transfer students look the same. They vary in the credits they bring with them, in their experiences at their previous institution, and in their ability to overcome obstacles. Five participants in this study experienced transfer shock, which is defined as a drop in grade point average during their first term of enrollment at Ohio University. Two experienced transfer ecstasy or the rise in grade point average during the first term of enrollment. Two were dismissed after their third term of enrollment because they did not meet academic standards; however, they were later re-instated.

John Hills’ (1965) pioneering work on transfer students opened the door to future research on transfer students, transfer shock, and the many issues that could impact a transfer student’s success. Hills’ (1965) review of transfer student research conducted between the years of 1928 through 1964 shed light on the issues transfer students might face. At the conclusion of his review, Hills asserted the following:

1. Transfer students should expect to experience a drop in their grade point average. It is generally accepted that this statement operationalized the concept of transfer shock.
2. Transfer students can also expect to see their grades improve proportionally to the length of time they remain in school.

Woosley and Johnson (2006) suggested that research on transfer students can be categorized into four major areas: (a) Institutional and programmatic factors, (b) Transfer student motivation and involvement, (c) Social issues, and (d) Academic outcomes. This study examined the perceptions of nine transfer students, some of whom experienced transfer shock, in an attempt to better understand their unique perceptions of the transfer experience, the personal and institutional characteristics that impacted their academic performance, and their perceptions of their adjustment to Ohio University.

According to Eggleston and Laanan (2001), transfer students face issues related to academic environment and social integration; both of which have been associated with transfer shock. These transitions often result in the transfer student performing academically more poorly than their “native” peers. Diaz (1992) reported that community college transfer students, on average, experience a grade point average drop from between 0.25 to 0.30 at the end of their first semester. Given that the literature supports the phenomenon of transfer shock, this study hoped to provide insight into transfer students’ perceptions of their transfer experience, including five that experienced transfer shock. In addition, it sought to identify ways to improve the transfer experience for future transfer students. Continued research is necessary to better understand students’ perception of and experience with transfer shock.

This study examined the phenomenon of the transfer experience with the overarching question: What are the salient academic and social experiences of students
who transferred from community colleges to a Midwest research university, which is home to primarily traditional age, residential students? A corollary question is: How did particular personal and institutional characteristics relate to participants’ transfer experiences and subsequent academic and social adjustment? Both personal characteristics and institutional programmatic characteristics were identified and examined within the context of the participants’ initial term grade point average, subsequent term grade point average, and general social adjustment. Factors, both positively and negatively associated with their grade point average, were explored.

A qualitative case study method of research was used for this study. “A qualitative case study is an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a bounded phenomenon such as a program, an institution, a person, a process, or a social unit” (Merriam, 1998, p. xiii). A case study design allowed me to gain an in-depth understanding of the situation and the meaning it held for the participants involved (Merriam, 1998). Qualitative research was most appropriate in this situation since it was imperative to understand the phenomenon from the participants’ perspective and not that of the researcher (Merriam, 1998).

Eliciting participants’ stories allowed for in-depth study of the transfer experience and an exploration of personal and institutional factors that contributed to the drop in their grade point average as well as their ability to adjust academically and socially over successive terms of enrollment. An initial pool of potential participants was contacted via email with a request to participate in an interview regarding their transfer experience. From this initial pool, only five students responded and agreed to participate. Since I did
not have enough responses that met my criteria, I returned to the original pool and contacted them again regarding participation in the study. Five students responded to this second request and four were selected to participate. The fifth student was a lateral transfer student and did not meet my criterion of vertical transfer. The additional students did not have the experience of transfer shock; however, their perceptions of the transfer experience were vital in forming a more holistic view of the transfer experience.

I conducted interviews during the fall of 2011. All interviews were conducted face to face and followed the methods outlined in Chapter Three. Interviews were conducted using a semi-structured format. The conversations were recorded and transcribed for further analysis. Data analysis began by reviewing each participant’s story. Notes were written both during the interview and during the case analysis. Coding was used to identify common themes or elements of the participant’s story that highlighted a pattern or significant aspect present in each participant’s narrative. Common themes that emerged created the foundation for further analysis and interpretation thereby forming the core of this study.

Two additional types of analysis were then used on the participants’ narratives: case analysis and cross case analysis. As Merriam (1998) pointed out, case study and analysis is rich with descriptive details that allowed the reader to vicariously experience being there with the participant. Each participant’s narrative was rigorously analyzed and completed before moving on to the next story. Once this was accomplished, cross case analysis was used on each case to identify common themes or patterns. The purpose of
cross case analysis is to build a “general explanation that fits each of the individual cases, even though the cases will vary in their details” (Yin, 1994, p. 112).

The results of this cross case analysis cannot be generalized to all transfer students. Furthermore, they cannot be generalized to transfer students at Ohio University. No attempt was made to obtain a representative sample of all transfer students. These nine participants represented a variety of majors housed within the College of Arts and Sciences at Ohio University. There were five males and four females in this study. All of the participants were Caucasian.

This study investigated the ways in which transfer students perceived their transfer experience and, for those who experienced a drop in their grade point average, their perceptions of transfer shock. It sought to specifically identify factors that impacted their grade point average within that first term of enrollment and to identify factors that impacted their subsequent academic and social integration to their new institution.

**Research Question**

The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of transfer students as it related to their academic success and general transfer experience. I specifically hoped to discover answers to the following question: What are the salient academic and social experiences of students who transferred from community colleges to a Midwest research university, which is home to primarily traditional age, residential students? A corollary question asked, how did particular personal and institutional characteristics relate to participants’ transfer experiences and subsequent academic and social adjustment? Through these questions I attempted to identify those factors that both helped and
hindered these participants’ academic progress and social adjustment following their transfer to a four-year institution.

A synopsis of these participants’ experiences indicated that most of their concerns related to “fitting in” from both a social and academic perspective. An additional concern was navigating a new administrative and academic structure while trying to avoid inevitable comparisons between their previous institution and that of Ohio University. A brief synopsis of each participant’s concerns follows.

John, a “worrier and planner” by nature, was most concerned about housing and work. He enjoyed going to class and found it to be a bright spot in his day. He attributed his grade point average drop to the adjustment to a new environment.

Amy sought a balance between academics and her social life. Of all the participants, she had the most difficulty avoiding comparisons between institutions and tended to question processes. Amy also attributed her grade point average drop to her adjustment to a new environment.

Sharon struggled to balance her work and academic obligations. Her first term GPA was good but her grades continued to drop as she found it increasingly difficult to balance her work schedule and still find time to study. She expressed the most dissatisfaction with her transfer experience and cited poor communication as the reason for her dissatisfaction.

Simon’s preoccupation with a failed relationship and his dependence on alcohol culminated in his suspension from Ohio University. He also represented the participant who, in my opinion, demonstrated the most personal growth as a result of his
experiences. He considered his breakup and poor coping skills as primary reasons for his grade point average drop.

Joe was focused on completing his degree and ending his college career. He had little interaction with other students and tended to spend most of his time studying. He enjoyed the opportunities to interact with faculty and appreciated their openness to engaging in discussion of topics they both found interesting. His improvement in his grade point average was due to increased study time.

Jane discovered that she had a “passion” for learning. As her need for social relationships was replaced by a joy for learning, she experienced a jump in her GPA and in her self-confidence.

Alex, who was recently divorced, had been working on his degree for many years. He was most concerned with finding a job and housing and in “getting on with his life.” As the oldest participant in this study, Alex’s concerns about housing and work contributed to his grade point average drop.

Doug, the budding politician, allowed himself to become overly involved in extracurricular activities, which resulted in being academically dismissed from Ohio University. Once he decided that he had to complete his degree in order to obtain a job, he was able to balance school with his involvement in politics.

Wanda seemed to experience the most anxiety of all the participants. Her tendency to question herself and her decisions placed an undue burden on herself and her ability to enjoy her college experience. Her grade point average drop was the result of these anxieties and her social adjustment.
Further analysis sought to identify those common themes that emerged across cases. Some themes were found to exist across cases while some were specific to only a few participants. Those personal characteristics are explored first with institutional characteristics to follow which are discussed in context of the research question.

**Personal Characteristics**

**Emerging independence and confidence.** One characteristic that emerged among all participants was a strong sense of independence. While developing a greater sense of independence is common to most college students, not just transfer students, these participants expressed a sense of independence and confidence in their ability to navigate new systems and structures. Most participants had the support of their families, and even though many of their parents accompanied them during their initial visits, the final decision to transfer was completely their decision to make.

John valued his independence and his ability to figure out on his own what he needed to do before being told that he needed to do something. “If I know how to do it I don’t want help for it.” Similarly, Simon valued his independence; however, his need for independence stemmed more from a disregard for other people’s input into what he should do than in a valuation of their opinion. For Simon, his independence was born more from stubbornness than an ability to make decisions on his own.

Amy described herself as independent and believed that her confidence and drive aided in her success, “I’ve always been very independent, you know. I didn’t really go through that whole people telling me this is what the university is like, like they give you
for freshmen. They tell them where to sleep. I can figure that out. I guess I just took
everything upon myself.”

However, it is possible that this independence and confidence became
overconfidence. Since five participants experienced a drop in their transfer grade point
average, they may have been too confident in their abilities, which resulted in the drop in
their first term GPA. Since they had experienced academic success at their previous
institution, and since they had been able to study and get grades good enough to allow
them to transfer, perhaps they were lulled into a false sense of security.

Academic success is influenced by many factors. Personal goals, confidence in
one’s abilities, motivation, and a solid support system all contribute to a student’s
academic success. Just as confidence, or overconfidence, in their study habits and their
ability to adjust to a new environment contributed to a lower grade point average after
their first term of enrollment, confidence was also a factor in these participants’ ability to
improve their grade point average in subsequent terms of enrollment.

These participants used words like confident, hopeful, driven, responsible, and
determined to describe themselves. Each of these participants expressed a level of
confidence and competence in their ability to handle college-level work. Joe and Jane,
in particular, expressed a new-found sense of confidence in their academic abilities. In
fact, Jane progressed from being a student who needed tutoring to becoming a tutor in
several of her classes.

These nine participants were able to successfully navigate a new system. In the
time period since their initial interviews were conducted, seven participants have
graduated with their Bachelor’s Degree. Simon is still enrolled at Ohio University pursuing his degree and Sharon is currently not enrolled. Obviously, these participants had what it took to be successful academically and socially.

**Re-Evaluating personal goals and expectations.** Similar to what was previously stated regarding personal goals as a motivator to transfer, personal goals also motivated these participants to either maintain or improve their grade point average after their first term of enrollment. These participants had established a range or expectation for their grade point average and as long as their grade point average fell within this established range, they were satisfied. None of the participants expressed a great deal of concern that their grade point average dropped during their first term of enrollment. Interestingly, most participants seemed to expect their grades would not be as good as they were before they transferred. These participants expected their grade point average to drop since they were enrolling in a four-year university. Many stated that the level of work and expectations from the community college were a “step above high school.” They were expecting the academic rigor to increase and, as a result, their grades to drop.

John stated that he was happy with his grades. He attributed the initial grade point average drop to the adjustment to a new academic and social environment. He was comfortable with his study skills and the amount of time he spent studying. Furthermore, he was satisfied with his grades and felt that as long as his grade point average remained within a self-defined range, he was not going to make any significant changes.

Amy was actually relieved that she did not have to study as much now. Because one of her personal goals was a more balanced life, she was pleased that she was able to
go out and have some fun without feeling guilty about it. She was willing to trade a lower grade point average for the feeling of being free to socialize and make friends.

Despite doing well her first term, Sharon’s grade point average continued to drop. She attributed this to her work schedule and to problems with her boyfriend’s family. She had already been forced to alter her initial goal of becoming a teacher and was struggling to identify and accept a change in her major and the new direction for her life that this brought.

Simon considered himself just lucky to have made it through his first term despite his unacceptable grade point average. Once he worked through this dark period in his life, Simon was able to reflect on his goals and was able to bounce back with a new attitude towards school, grades, and how he would deal with adversity. Probably more than any of the other participants, Simon’s goals underwent a significant change in focus and direction. He emerged from these challenges stronger and with a more determined direction.

Joe developed more confidence in himself as a student. He became more outgoing and appreciated the opportunity to interact with faculty. Becoming more confident was not one of his original goals; he just wanted to earn a degree. It seems as though his improved confidence was a by-product of his academic success. In some ways, he was forced to see himself in a different light which helped him alter his goals.

Similar to Joe, Jane found a new confidence in herself. Her grade point average actually improved from that of her transfer grade point average. Her discovery of a “passion for learning” spurred her to re-evaluate her career goals. Rather than
completing her Bachelor’s degree, Jane’s success and newfound passion encouraged her
to plan on attending graduate school.

Wanda found adjusting to her new environment difficult. Her tendency to
question herself and her decisions created a great deal of anxiety for her. This anxiety
then impacted her ability to do well creating a frustrating loop that, at times, threatened
her focus and determination.

Alex was plagued by an indifferent attitude towards education. Despite this, he
continued to persevere in his goal of a college degree. Because he began his college
career multiple times, Alex’s determination to complete his degree overcame this
indifference. Encouraged by his family and by supportive faculty, Alex did not give up
on his pursuit of a degree.

Doug’s over-commitment to extracurricular activities and to his budding political
aspirations contributed to his academic dismissal. Achieving a balance between these
activities and schoolwork proved difficult for him. However, he was able to re-channel
his energies into completing his work and improving his grade point average so that he
could be removed from academic probation.

Establishing some personal goals was important to each participant’s success and
adjustment to their new environment. Many of these participants re-evaluated their initial
goals which allowed them the opportunity to grow in unexpected ways. This re-
evaluation is also reflected in their confidence as many participants used this word to
describe themselves after their transfer experience.
The very nature of transferring creates unique experiences and needs for students. These nine participants represented a variety of needs and challenges that influenced their academic and social adjustment. Academic success is comprised of many components. The student’s motivation level and innate ability play important roles. The supportive role played by family, friends, faculty, and advisors are additional resources that allow students to build a foundation for success. All participants experienced academic success at their previous institutions; therefore, it can be concluded that they possessed the ability to succeed academically. They all successfully navigated the sometimes ambiguous nature of the transfer process and they all completed multiple terms of enrollment.

These participants identified several factors that contributed to their first term grade point average: (a) Independence, (b) Motivation, (c) Relationships, (d) Work responsibilities, (e) Amount of time spent studying, and (f) Knowledge of institutional resources. No single characteristic can be cited as a primary reason for their grade point average. Multiple issues, attributes, and qualities all combined to influence these participants’ first term grade point average; some more negatively than others. What is important to note is that these students persisted and were retained by the university so that they could pursue their chosen degrees.

**Procrastination.** The act or “art” of procrastination is something that most people experience. Procrastinating has a tendency to manifest itself in college students due to the myriad of activities and extracurricular events that vie for their attention. For these participants, procrastination, or some form of procrastination was cited as a problem. When asked to describe themselves, participants used words such as
procrastinator, lazy, lacking, immature, distracted, irresponsible and unfocused as ways to describe how they viewed themselves both before and after they transferred.

John described himself as a procrastinator, but also said that he did not procrastinate to the point that he did not get his work done. While he acknowledged that he could probably put more time into his work, he was still satisfied with the effort and results he achieved. He did not attribute his procrastination as a direct result of his academic performance.

Sharon’s use of descriptor words such as immature and spoiled reflected her attitude toward herself and her relationship with her family. Because of this, Sharon’s academic performance was impacted both at her previous institution and at Ohio University. Her close relationship with her family and with her boyfriend resulted in most of her free time being spent with them rather than on studying and her academics. Her inability to balance her work schedule, family, and academics resulted in the steady drop of her grade point average.

Simon described himself as lazy because he never put forth much effort in high school or in his time at the community college. He earned what he considered acceptable grades and believed that he could continue with those same patterns once he transferred to Ohio University. Simon’s lack of study skills coupled with the breakup of his relationship and subsequent use of drugs and alcohol created a “perfect storm” which resulted in his poor academic performance.

Even though John saw an improvement in his grade point average, he still used the words irresponsible and less confident to describe himself before he transferred. Joe's
involvement with special education classes created in him a belief that he was not capable. Even though he did well academically, he still doubted his abilities and was unsure of himself.

Doug described himself as a chronic procrastinator which directly impacted his grades. He was very unmotivated to do anything related to his academics and, instead, focused his time and energy on extracurricular activities.

For these participants, procrastination played a role in their academic performance. Finding the motivation to complete assignments, do assigned readings, and study for exams proved difficult and their grades reflected the amount of time they did or did not spend studying. The ability of students to overcome this inertia is directly related to their academic success. These participants had to develop the skills and behaviors to successfully overcome their lack of motivation to study, attend classes, and do the work necessary to earn grades good enough to not be placed on academic probation.

This next section addresses the role institutional characteristics and resources played in both their grade point average and academic and social adjustment.

Participants did not take advantage of support services such as tutoring and many did not meet with their academic advisor on a consistent basis which may be a reflection on their perception that they did not need any assistance.

**Institutional Characteristics and Resources**

Policies and procedures, programs, academic rigor, and institutional resources are but a few of the multiple factors that contribute to a transfer student’s initial adjustment and success at their new institution. In addition, how students register for classes, if and
when they must meet with their academic advisor, availability of library resources, and extracurricular activities all contribute to a student’s adjustment to college-level expectations.

For transfer students, navigating a change in these institutionally-specific details creates a level of stress and anxiety. Understanding and adapting to these changes was cited by these participants as important and critical to their success. One of the first steps in learning to navigate these new structures was participating in an orientation program.

Orientation program perceptions. The importance and value of participating in an orientation program is well documented. Orientation programs combine aspects of both the social and academic components of the college experience. Ideally, students should not only leave the program excited for the year to begin and feel more confident in their decision to transfer, but also leave with an understanding the resources available to them.

All nine participants attended a transfer student orientation program. The program consisted of a one day event in which they attended information sessions, met with an academic advisor and registered for classes. Each participant was asked to rate their overall perception of this program by using a Likert scale ranging from one to five with one being the worst and five being the best. The scores ranged from a low of 2 to a high of 4 with an average score of 3.48. The use of a Likert-type tool allowed the participants to add an objective dimension to the subjective aspect of their perspective. Each participant had a specific memory or detail they remembered about their orientation experience and they each had at least one recommendation for improvement.
Joe was particularly critical of his experience and gave a score of 2 for his experience. “It was like herding cattle.” He then went on to add that he found the program to be “dumb” and “useless”. One of his recommendations was to make the orientation more personal and to provide more one-on-one advising. Sharon, Jane, and Alex all echoed Joe’s comment and cited more one-on-one advising as a way to improve the transfer experience for future transfer students.

Wanda cited the issues of dealing with multiple offices which she found confusing and frustrating. She rated the program as a 3.5. She felt that a more centralized office that dealt with all of a transfer student’s questions would be beneficial. This “one stop shop” would allow transfer students to interact with one office and set of staff instead of multiple offices and staff. This would improve communication and ease the students’ transition to their new institution.

Amy would have benefitted from an opportunity to ask more questions. She felt that policies and resources were not well identified, which left her on her own to find these resources. She was surprised, however, with the academic advising. She did not believe it would be beneficial but was appreciative of the help and concern her advisor displayed. Simon and Jane also felt that they would have benefitted from a more detailed explanation of their graduation requirements. They said that they were confused as to how their credits were being applied and wanted to know just what requirements they still needed to complete.

Because of the distinctive and diverse nature of transfer students, no single orientation program can satisfy all the needs of all transfer students in attendance.
Perhaps the best that can be hoped for is that the student has at least been introduced to some of the institutional resources and staff available to them.

**Institutional resources.** An orientation program, alone, cannot be blamed as the only reason participants experienced a drop in their grade point average or experienced frustration with their transfer experience. Clearly, other factors such as those personal characteristics that have been previously discussed also had an important role in their initial grade point average.

One resource available to all students is the Academic Advancement Center. Here students can get help in the form of tutoring, assistance from a writing center and help with math courses. It is important to note that none of these participants utilized any of the services offered through the Academic Advancement Center in their first term of enrollment. Many, like Simon, Alex, and Wanda, stated that they knew nothing about this resource and found out about it only after their first term of enrollment.

Amy, Joe, and John did not believe that they needed to use this resource. They had never used tutoring services before and did not see any benefit since they had earned acceptable grades at their previous institutions. These three participants, in particular, stressed that they had formed good relationships with their faculty, which may have led them to feel that they did not need to utilize the services offered from the center.

All college campuses possess multiple student resources geared to assist them academically, socially, spiritually, and physically. Physical buildings such as the library are the hub of student research and creativity. For these participants, the library became their primary outlet for study. All participants cited that they used the library as a
campus resource. It seems rather obvious that the library is an essential element in the success of a college student. Alex, for example, said that he would spend hours in the library studying. On the other hand, Doug spent little time using institutional resources. He tended to rely on his own level of motivation to complete his work. Although he did use the library, it was infrequent. To further illustrate his lack of reliance on such resources, he did not even participate in a required workshop for students placed on academic probation. Luckily, Doug began to understand that he had to assume some responsibility for his situation. “I’m getting a little bit better about doing the stuff I need to do and not trying to find something else to blame it on. I always knew that it was my fault but, in the real time, sometimes I like to find other things to blame.”

**Financial support.** Financial support supplied by financial aid, scholarships, or loans are resources students need in order to earn a degree. Working a part-time job also provides additional monies to help students meet their financial obligations. Six of these participants worked part time jobs so as to meet monthly rent, utility, and food bills. Working and taking classes took its toll on some participants. Sharon worked at least 30 hours a week in order to maintain her health insurance. As a result, her grade point average dropped every term following her transfer.

John and Simon both worked part-time jobs; John at a local internet provider and Simon at a fast food restaurant. John had the luxury of sometimes being able to study at work whereas Simon never had the opportunity to study while working. For Simon, working, his relationship problems and his poor coping mechanisms all contributed to a devastating first term grade point average.
Amy and Jane worked as tutors on campus. The flexibility this provided allowed them to keep up on their own work while at the same time tutoring allowed them to keep past information fresh. The monies they earned tutoring provided just enough extra income that they were able to meet their expenses and to not feel too stressed by money problems.

Working allowed these students to develop good time management skills. Because they knew they had to go to work, they were able to prioritize their own studies and were able to get their work done on time. Time management will be a skill that they can transfer into other areas of their life as they enter grad school or seek full-time employment.

**Institutional characteristics summary.** An analysis of the themes that were identified from these nine participants’ narratives provided the foundation for chapter four. Relevant themes were identified that ran across all cases while some were specific to just a few. Through the use of cross case analysis, these themes were subjected to in-depth analysis to identify additional tones and distinctions and then scrutinized in relation to the research questions.

This study explored the perceptions of transfer shock and the general transfer experience as perceived transfer students who enrolled at Ohio University. It sought to examine the personal and institutional characteristics that contributed to these participants grade point average drop as well as their perceptions and experiences as they improved their grade point average through successive terms of enrollment.
Research Question

What are the salient academic and social experiences of students who transferred from community colleges to a Midwest research university, which is home to primarily traditional age, residential students? A corollary question is: How did particular personal and institutional characteristics relate to participants’ transfer experiences and subsequent academic and social adjustment? Major themes that emerged included educational and personal goals, the transfer and community college experience, and relationships.

Re-evaluating self. Educational goals represented an important aspect in a student’s decision of whether to transfer to another institution. In addition, their individual personal goals for growth and learning and whether they believed these goals were being met at their current institution also influenced their decision to transfer. For these nine participants, their educational and personal goals were major factors in their transfer decision.

These participants identified areas of concern that impacted their adjustment. The need to “fit in” was cited as a factor in both their transfer decision and in their first term grade point average. Dealing with new freedoms and independence also created some obstacles. Finally, overcoming procrastination was important to academic success.

A desire to fit in and be accepted is common for students. Transfer students have a difficult time fitting in because they are entering a system in which relationships have already been formed. Unlike freshmen, transfer students are upper classmen and there are few orientation courses designed specifically for transfer students. As a result, they do
not receive the same introduction to campus resources that the freshman student receives. If they must live on campus, they are often housed with other upper class students who have already established peer relationships. If the transfer student is housed with primarily freshmen students, then they do not feel as if they fit with that group either since the novelty of college has gone. Rather than completing general education courses, transfer students are focusing on their major requirements. Wanda, in particular, found that learning a new “lingo” was difficult. She had no reference point for when a native student went “uptown” and felt foolish having to ask what this meant. For Jane, forming new relationships was important since much of her self-worth was tied to her friendships.

Since many of these participants lived at home while attending their community college, they had to adapt to new freedoms and independence once they moved to Athens. This independence meant balancing classes and work. Developing time management skills in order to complete assignments and managing their budget. Dealing with this new freedom created some anxiety but it also created opportunities.

Procrastination was directly linked to their new freedom and independence. These participants used words like lacking, immature, lazy, and irresponsible to describe their self-perceptions. Experiencing procrastination contributed to their initial grade point average whereas overcoming procrastination and establishing a weekly schedule were vital to their academic success.

**Community college and transfer experience.** All participants attended a community college prior to their enrollment at Ohio University. All participants stated that their original intention was to obtain a Bachelor’s degree. However, by first enrolling
in a community college, they were able to earn college credits, save money, and used the experience to improve their confidence in their academic abilities.

Attending a four-year university was a goal for many of these participants. Many were not happy with the physical environment of their community college and stated that it didn’t “feel” like they were in college. These students had a picture in their minds eye of what a college campus should look like: trees, stately buildings, students milling about. Once the campus they saw with their eyes matched the picture of the campus they had in their minds, congruence formed for them. They formed an attachment to their new environment and this allowed them to focus on their academic success. For many of these participants, they would be the first in their families to graduate from college. Even though this created some anxiety for them, it also served as a motivator for them to make their families proud.

Some of them had a positive experience at their community college. Participants, such as Doug, found that he was capable of completing college level work successfully. He, along with Jane, Simon, and Alex had the desire to attend a four-year university but knew that they did not have the academic preparation necessary to be successful. Their community college experience encouraged them to further pursue their educational and personal goals. On the other hand, Sharon, Amy, and Joe all had negative experiences at their community college. These negative experiences spurred their desire to escape the community college and attend a four-year institution.

Transfer students have many questions: How will my credits transfer? What requirements do I still need to complete? How will I adjust to a new environment? Will
I make new friends? Transfer students face the process of application, acceptance, registration, and matriculation with a mixture of anxiety and confidence. They have experienced college and have an idea of what is expected. On the other hand, they are entering a new environment with new sets of challenges and expectations that must be met. A positive transfer experience can pave the way for a successful academic experience.

**Relationships.** Relationships are important to a transfer student’s successful integration to their new environment. The relationships formed with admissions staff, orientation and advising staff, and faculty all contribute to a transfer student’s success. Initial apprehension gave way to gradual acceptance as the students came to realize that people did care about them and wanted them to be successful. All nine participants were appreciative of the relationships they were able to form. Jane, Amy, and Wanda were especially grateful for the relationships they were able to form with advisors and faculty. By forming good, positive relationships, these transfer students improved their chances of a successful assimilation to Ohio University.

Not all relationships were positive. Sharon and Simon each experienced difficult personal relationships that contributed to their poor academic performance. The time and energy it took for them to deal with their personal lives resulted in a poor academic performance. It is interesting to note that the difficulties Sharon experienced had a sustained impact on her academic performance as evidenced by a steady decline in her grade point average. Simon, on the other hand, demonstrated a steady increase in his grade point average once he had successfully resolved his relationship issues. These are
good examples of how relationships can have either a beneficial or detrimental impact on students.

**Institutional Characteristics**

Each of these participants attended a one day orientation program. Their perceptions of the program varied. Some, like Sharon, Joe, and Alex, found the program useless and a waste of their time. More one-on-one academic advising was cited as an improvement that could be made to the orientation program. It can be frustrating having to wait to speak with an advisor and a lack of privacy makes asking sometimes difficult questions even more difficult.

Simon, Amy, Jane, and Doug all had a positive orientation experience. Even though they had a better experience, one factor that they identified as a potential improvement to the program was more one-on-one advising. It seems obvious, based on these participants’ perception, that improvements to the advising system would make for an overall better experience.

Identifying those factors that were important in their subsequent academic success were more difficult for these students to identify. It was common for these students to say “I got it” or “things began to click.” By this they meant that they began to understand what changes they needed to make in order to be academically successful. Whether it was increasing the amount of time they studied or creating a time management schedule, these students tapped into some internal motivations to succeed.

How did these participants improve their confidence? They devoted more time to studying. They formed satisfying relationships with peers and faculty. They developed
time management skills. As a result, they began to see their grades improve. These participants credited their improved confidence in their academic abilities as an important factor in their subsequent academic and social adjustment.

Finally, because they did not have to worry too much about finances, they were able to concentrate on their academics. Most of these students worked part-time jobs. Only Sharon expressed concerns with the number of hours she had to work at her job. It should be noted that Sharon is also the only student that is not currently enrolled in classes or has already graduated. It seems clear that for most of these participants, they did not experience a great deal of stress and anxiety associated with finances which allowed them to focus their time and energy on their studies.

Academic success has many components and factors. Transfer students experience a unique set of circumstances not experienced by the freshman student. These participants successfully maneuvered through their transfer experience and gained increased confidence in themselves and in their abilities to be a successful student. These participants attributed many factors to their initial academic performance: (a) independence; (b) motivation; (c) relationships; (d) work responsibilities; (e) amount of time spent studying; (f) knowledge of institutional resources

For these students, feeling like they fit in was important in their adjustment and success. As they began to develop friendships and relationships with faculty and staff, their confidence began to improve and they procrastinated less and less. Since most of them were not overly stressed by finances, they were able to devote time and energy to studying rather than working.
Discussion of Findings

This section is divided into two sections. First, I place the findings in the context of previous work conducted on transfer students and, specifically, previous research on transfer shock. The second section addresses the findings of this study through Schlossberg’s Transition Theory.

Transfer shock. The findings of this study support the phenomenon of transfer shock. The pioneering work conducted by Hills (1965) created the foundation for research into the phenomenon of transfer shock by suggesting that transfer students should expect to see a drop in their grade point average and that transfer students can also expect to see an improvement in their grade point average over time as they continue in school.

Five participants experienced an initial drop in their grade point average. This drop was attributed to several factors including social and academic adjustment, personal characteristics such as motivation and procrastination, and non-utilization of campus resources such as academic advising and academic support services. This is in line with the findings of Duggan and Pickering (2007) who found that issues such as the need to balance employment and studies, the student’s view of his or her own abilities and traits, confidence, and academic and social integration were dominant factors influencing transfer student persistence.

Fitting in and understanding new policies and procedures caused these transfer students to “feel like a freshman again” (Townsend, 2008, p. 73). Dealing with these issues sometimes created feelings of frustration and anxiety and caused some participants
to question their decision. Hoyt and Winn (2004) asserted that transfer students drop out at a higher rate and have lower grade point averages than their non-transfer counterparts. Because of the many risks associated with transfer students, it is imperative that colleges and universities work toward identifying resources that improve retention and ease the transition to a new environment.

Monroe (2006) reported that transfer student concerns, as they relate to their new institution, encompass several different areas. Institutional “fit” also applies to transfer students. This is supported by the work of Tinto (1982). Furthermore, issues surrounding academic integration and institutional communication were also vital in the transfer students’ decision to persist or drop out of their new institutional home. Transfer students have multiple interactions with faculty, staff, and offices in their new environment. If these interactions are negative, they can lead to a disconnect developing, distancing the new transfer from integrating into their new environment.

Unlike true freshmen, transfer students bring with them the experience of having been in a college or university setting. Although they share many transitional experiences of first year students, transfer students do not wish to be treated as freshmen and have a strong desire for programs geared to their specific needs (Townsend, 2008). Similarly, Kodama (2002) reported that transfer students had few sources of on-campus support and were more likely to be marginalized than other student populations. These findings support this earlier body of research.

Schlossberg’s transition theory. Transition theory is appropriate as a framework to use in an exploration of these participants’ stories. Transfer students are
people in a transition. The very nature of a transition involves change and the processes associated with deciding upon and coping with such a change. Schlossberg’s transition theory is “an examination of what constitutes a transition, different forms of transition, the transition process, and factors that influence transitions” (Evans et al., 2010, p. 214). According to Schlossberg, a transition can be generally described as “any event or nonevent that results in change in relationships, routines, assumptions, and/or roles within the settings of self, work, family, health, and/or economics” (Schlossberg, 1984, p. 43).

A transition involves the process of moving in, moving through and moving out. In considering transferring to a different institution, participants began the process of moving in. The desired bachelor’s degree was critical in this decision. Because a four-year degree was the goal, transferring to another institution was required. They moved through the transition by applying to Ohio University, registering for classes, and moving into the Athens, Ohio area. The first term of enrollment was critical in determining their ultimate success. Finally, the participants moved out of the transition as they became involved in the social environment of Ohio University and settled into a routine. A key component of Schlossberg’s theory is what is considered the 4 S’s: Situation, Self, Support and Strategies.

**Situation.** Situation involves what triggered the transition, the timing, and how much control the individual believed they had in the situation. In addition, situation relates to how the person’s role will change, how long the transition is expected to last, and what previous experiences the individual has had. A significant part of situation is
the perception of the individual and how he or she views the transition. Perception is an important factor in navigating a transition such as a transfer to another institution.

The perception these participants had regarding their transfer experience was an important factor in their academic and social adjustment. The unique lens through which they viewed their transition and the meaning they attached to it lie at the heart of this study. Participants evaluated the level of impact the transition had on their lives and learned how to adjust their behaviors to meet these new challenges. Transitions, such as transferring to a new institution, create stress. Dealing with this stress required a combination of personal (Self) factors such as ego strength, motivation, and the belief that they could be successful (self-efficacy) combined with support factors such as relationships with others, relationships with family, and relationships with the institution (Schlossberg, 1984).

Most participants viewed their transfer in a positive light. Even though some anxiety was present, each of these students expressed excitement about their transfer to Ohio University. Jane, in particular, took advantage of her transfer by earning a higher grade point average than she had ever attained. This changed her perception of herself as a student bringing about a new sense of confidence and a “passion for learning”.

**Self.** Self is divided into two categories: how the individual views life and the psychosocial resources of the individual. Psychological resources such as self-efficacy were important in their transition. Self-efficacy is the belief in one’s ability to be successful. Tied to this concept is the participant’s confidence and sense of independence. All nine participants viewed themselves as confident and independent.
Their ability to secure housing or jobs served as examples of this confidence and independence.

John valued his ability to figure out on his own what he needed to do. “If I know how to do it I don’t want help for it.” He believed that central to his success was independence and his ability to make independent decisions. Similarly, Amy described going directly to her faculty if she had a question and valued their relationship. She indicated that her independence helped her to become more successful. She developed the ability to know what needed to be done and could take the steps necessary to complete her work. Comments such as these were echoed by other participants. They embraced their ability to make responsible decisions and find answers to questions.

Support. Support refers to the social support system of the individual especially relationships such as family, friends, institutions, and communities. The role support played in the academic success of these students is focused on the multiple relationships these students formed. Everyone needs to feel supported, cared about and encouraged. Schlossberg identified four types of support: intimate relationships, family units, networks of friends, and institutions and communities. Relationships provide acceptance, a personal connection, guidance, and opportunities for stimulation and challenge. This study supported the importance these types of support play as transfer students transition to their new academic environment.

Sharon was frustrated by her transfer experience. She found it difficult to connect with her academic advisor and enrolled in courses she had already taken. Sharon is the only participant that has not graduated or is not currently enrolled in class. It is plausible
that her negative perception of her transfer, coupled with the stress of working full time
and of problems with her boyfriend’s family all created an environment which proved too
much for Sharon to balance, resulting in a sacrifice of her education as a way to cope
with the stressors.

Simon’s transition, though relatively smooth, still brought challenges. While he
adjusted fairly well to his new academic environment, his difficulty coping with the stress
of his breakup and choice of coping strategies resulted in his dismissal from Ohio
University. He had a weak social support system and spent hours alone trying to work
through his feelings. It took time, but Simon is still enrolled and working towards
completing his degree.

Wanda’s transition led to considerable anxiety. She questioned her decision to
transfer and her lack of an established social support system made her first term of
enrollment difficult. Once she established some relationships by joining a sorority and by
interacting with classmates, her anxiety lessened and she was better able to enjoy herself.
Wanda also benefitted from strong support from her parents. Because of this support,
Wanda graduated.

Amy benefitted from a good relationship with her faculty advisor. She saw him
as caring and concerned about her as a student; something she had not experienced at her
previous institutions. Because she sought a more balanced social and academic life, Amy
developed social relationships that enabled her to expand her network of friends.

The theme of relationships is echoed throughout these participants’ lives. The
nature of these relationships, both constructive and contentious, were instrumental in
their adjustment and in their academic success. Understanding the role relationships play in a transfer students’ success are crucial for campus administrators to consider as they plan programs, events, and activities directed toward transfer students.

**Strategies.** Finally, strategies reflect the individual’s coping responses that allow them to react positively or negatively to the transition. In other words, it relates to the choices they make to manage the challenges of the transition. Evans et al. (1998) suggested three categories or possible coping responses: (1) modify the situation, (2) control the meaning of the problem, and (3) manage the stress of the aftermath. I saw evidence of each of these approaches by the participants.

As a coping response, modifying the situation suggests an altering of the situation in some fashion. As participants moved in and through the transfer process, they were able to alter their perceptions of the event. They could not modify the event; however, they could modify their perceptions of the transfer process. Wanda met the experience with a combination of trepidation and anxiety. She was able to work through this by forming positive relationships with advisors and faculty. Their ability to answer her questions and provide reassurance allowed her to successfully navigate the transition. Joe also used the relationships he formed with faculty to ease his transition and to actually increase his level of confidence he had as a student.

The transfer experience is not easy. Participants sought to gain some control of the process through the questions asked from the time of admission through registration. Information is power. These participants questioned how their credits transferred and why they were or were not give credit for particular requirements. Amy’s conversations
with her faculty advisor allowed for a re-evaluation of how her credits were applied allowing her to receive credit for introductory courses and many prerequisite courses so that she could enroll in upper level courses directed toward her major.

Moving out of the transition related to how participants reacted to the transition and the ways they dealt with the stress. Simon turned to alcohol to manage the stress of the transition and breakup with his girlfriend. Though this could not be considered a “positive” way to manage the stress, it was, nonetheless, one option available to participants. Jane developed more internal strength and found that she did not have to rely on relationships as a way to provide self-worth.

Coping with the transfer to Ohio University required these participants to tap into resources already available or to develop resources that they could use to manage the transition. Most resources they utilized were positive such as academic advising and supportive relationships. Since seven graduated, the support systems they developed obviously worked and allowed them to be successful and make a positive transition.

Implications and Recommendations

This study supports the earlier literature findings that transfer students have unique needs. Social, academic, and personal characteristics influence a transfer student’s acclimation to their new institutional home. In addition, institutional resources, programs, and policies are not always sensitive to the needs of transfer students. It becomes easy for institutions to view all transfer students as the same while seeming to ignore the individual’s unique qualities and characteristics. As practitioners, it is
imperative that we begin to address these unique concerns and develop policies and programs that are transfer-friendly.

Based on these transfer student’s stories, it is clear that there is much to accomplish towards understanding, anticipating, and meeting the needs of transfer students. Unfortunately, it is these same unique concerns and issues that make developing comprehensive and uniform policies so difficult.

Ohio has become a leader in improving the transferability of courses among public institutions. The creation of the Ohio Transfer Module (OTM) and Transfer Assurance Guides (TAGS) has lessened the confusion transfer students have in terms of how their credits will transfer. However, much work still needs to be done to expand the number and scope of these courses. Right now, many general education courses are included in the TAG and OTM guides. The inclusion of upper level coursework and major-specific courses would aid the transfer student in the decision-making process of whether or not to transfer. In addition, it would aid students seeking to take a course at their local community college or university during the summer and have those credits transfer back to their home institution. Moreover, the OTM and TAG guidelines do not apply to Ohio’s private colleges and universities. While most private institutions honor the OTM and TAG courses, they are not obligated to honor the transferability of the course like the public institutions.

The creation of a transfer student specific orientation program would benefit not only the student but also the staff and faculty who work to advise them. Because of the uniqueness of each transfer student, a “one size fits all” approach to orientation and
academic advising will not work. It takes time to understand each transfer student’s individual situation. Group advising sessions are counterproductive to establishing an inviting environment and rapport with transfer students. Orientation programs can be expanded into a one and one half or two day event. This would afford more time for individual, one-on-one advising.

The implementation of a transfer student focused orientation class would allow transfer students the same opportunity afforded freshmen. Orientation or first year seminars allow freshmen to interact with a small group of peers, to interact one-on-one with faculty, and to be introduced to college-level expectations and resources. A transfer student class could provide the opportunity for small group interaction and more individual time with faculty. It would also be able to introduce the transfer student to campus resources that would aid their transition. Specific training in understanding the needs of transfer students should be provided to staff and faculty who advise and teach transfer students.

Expansion of scholarships for transfer students would lessen the financial burden they experience. Since many scholarships are institution-specific, they would not follow a student to their new institutional home thereby requiring the transfer student to find the monies lost in transfer. Institutional, state or federal dollars could be set aside for transfer students. This could encourage students attending a community college to continue their education and complete a four-year degree.
Suggestions for Further Research

More research needs to be conducted on the needs of transfer students. Research focusing on ways to improve the social acclimation of transfer students would benefit institutions and administrators in the planning and funding of transfer student-centered programs and activities.

Further study into the many different types of transfer students such as non-traditional aged, commuter versus residential and vertical, lateral, and reverse transfer students would aid in understanding their unique needs. Additional research is needed to determine if the number of credit hours transferred in by students impacts their adjustment to their new institution as well as how their grade point average is impacted.

Further research into the phenomenon of transfer shock would be useful in identifying traits and characteristics that may put some transfer students at greater risk of failing. A longitudinal study could focus on those specific personal and institutional characteristics that were beneficial and detrimental to transfer student academic success and persistence to graduation.

This study was conducted at Ohio University; a large, research extensive university situated in a rural area. Since students transfer to a variety of institutional settings and locations, research into the experiences of students attending a small private or an urban institution could provide additional information into the characteristics of transfer students and the identification of strategies to assist them in the transfer process.
Personal Reflection

As I reflect on this experience, I am thankful to these nine individuals for their time and openness. They shared details of their lives, inner thoughts, and private feelings that were intimate and sensitive and allowed me to enter into their world. I entered as a stranger but left as a friend. I learned that resilience, perseverance, and confidence were not just words, but that these words had a face and a name. John and Alex exemplify perseverance. Joe displayed resilience and each one was confident that they would be successful and achieve their goals.

I came to understand that transitions can be embraced and welcomed; they do not have to be feared and avoided. I had the opportunity to observe nine people work to navigate an important transition in their life. More importantly, I watched as most of them navigated the transition successfully. I learned that asking questions are essential to understanding and that making mistakes is a learning experience and not a statement of self-worth.

Finally, I believe that I understand how to better serve students, how to advocate for their needs, to “think” like a student, and to look critically at procedures and processes. I know that I am a better person because of the interactions with these participants. I know that my life and work will never be the same as it was before I met these wonderful individuals.
References

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Appendix A: Interview Questions

Interview Questions

1. Can you talk to me about your decision to transfer?
   a. Why Ohio University?
   b. How would you have described yourself before you transferred?

2. How would you describe your transfer experience?
   a. On a scale of one to five with five being the best and one being the worst, how would you rate your transfer experience?
   b. Why do you feel this way?

3. How would you describe your first quarter of enrollment?
   a. Do you remember in what courses you were enrolled?

4. What do you believe contributed to your academic performance?
   a. What personal characteristics do you believe contributed to your academic performance?
   b. What institutional characteristics do you believe contributed to your performance?
   c. On a scale of one to five with five being the best and one being the worst, how would you rate your first quarter of enrollment?

5. Can you talk to me about your next quarter of enrollment?
   a. How do you believe it was different?
   b. In what ways was the next quarter different?

6. To what do you attribute your academic performance during your second quarter of enrollment?
   a. What personal characteristics do you believe contributed to your academic performance?
   b. What institutional characteristics do you believe contributed to your academic performance?
   c. On a scale of one to five with five being the best and one being the worst, how would you rate your second quarter of enrollment?

7. How would you describe yourself after you transferred?

8. If I gave you a magic wand, what would you change regarding your transfer experience?
Appendix B: Consent Form

Ohio University Consent Form

Title of Research: Rebounding from Transfer Shock: Student Perceptions of Initial Academic Performance and Grade Point Average Recovery

Researchers: Randell Price

You are being asked to participate in research. For you to be able to decide whether you want to participate in this project, you should understand what the project is about, as well as the possible risks and benefits in order to make an informed decision. This process is known as informed consent. This form describes the purpose, procedures, possible benefits, and risks. It also explains how your personal information will be used and protected. Once you have read this form and your questions about the study are answered, you will be asked to sign it. This will allow your participation in this study. You should receive a copy of this document to take with you.

Explanation of Study

This study is being done to explore the phenomenon of transfer shock. Transfer shock is the drop in a transfer student’s grade point average immediately following the first term of enrollment at their new institution. Transfer rebound is the subsequent rise in grade point average. This study seeks to better understand transfer students’ perceptions of transfer shock and transfer rebound. What institutional and personal characteristics aided the student’s academic performance?

If you agree to participate, you will be asked to participate in a structured interview that will be audiotaped.
You should not participate in this study if you do not wish to discuss your perceptions of transfer shock and transfer rebound.

Your participation in the study will last approximately six (6) months.

**Risks and Discomforts**

No risks or discomforts are anticipated.

**Benefits**

This study is important to science/society because transfer students represent a unique group of college students. Better understanding the phenomena of transfer shock and transfer rebound will aid future students and college administrators in better understanding the needs of transfer students.

You may not experience any personal benefit other than the sharing of your experiences to enlighten future students and administrators.

**Confidentiality and Records**

Your study information will be kept confidential by being placed in a locked cabinet. Information will be accessed only by this researcher and my adviser. Approximately one year following completion of this research, all identifying information, including audio and/or video recordings will be destroyed. This will occur approximately on or around 1/1/2013.

Additionally, while every effort will be made to keep your study-related information confidential, there may be circumstances where this information must be shared with:
*Federal agencies, for example the Office of Human Research Protections, whose responsibility is to protect human subjects in research;

*Representatives of Ohio University (OU), including the Institutional Review Board, a committee that oversees the research at OU.

**Compensation**

As compensation for your time/effort, you will receive a $20.00 gift card purchased through personal funds.

**Contact information**

If you have any questions regarding this study, please contact Randell Price, pricer1@ohio.edu, 740-593-2844 or Dr. Peter Mather, matherp@ohio.edu, 740-593-4454.

If you have any questions regarding your rights as a research participant, please contact Jo Ellen Sherow, Director of Research Compliance, Ohio University, (740) 593-0664.

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By signing below, you are agreeing that:

- You have read this consent form (or it has been read to you) and have been given the opportunity to ask questions and have them answered
- You have been informed of potential risks and they have been explained to your satisfaction
- You understand Ohio University has no funds set aside for any injuries you might receive as a result of participating in this study
- You are 18 years of age or older
- Your participation in this research is completely voluntary
- You may leave the study at any time. If you decide to stop participating in the study, there will be no penalty to you and you will not lose any benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.
Appendix C: Ohio University IRB

The following research study has been approved by the Institutional Review Board at Ohio University for the period listed below. This review was conducted through an expedited review procedure as defined in the federal regulations as Category(ies):

Project Title: Rebounding from Transfer Shock: Student Perceptions of Initial Academic Performance and Grade Point Average Recovery

Primary Investigator: Randell Scott Price

Co-Investigator(s):

Faculty Advisor: Peter Mather

Department: Counseling and Higher Education

Rebecca Cale, AAB, CIP
Office of Research Compliance

03/10/11
Approval Date

03/09/12
Expiration Date

This approval is valid until expiration date listed above. If you wish to continue beyond expiration date, you must submit a periodic review application and obtain approval prior to continuation.

Adverse events must be reported to the IRB promptly, within 5 working days of the occurrence.

The approval remains in effect provided the study is conducted exactly as described in your application for review. Any additions or modifications to the project must be approved by the IRB (as an amendment) prior to implementation.