

FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE THE SUCCESSFUL TRANSFER OF  
TWO-YEAR COLLEGE STUDENTS TO FOUR-YEAR RESEARCH UNIVERSITIES:  
EXAMINATION OF A LARGE TWO-YEAR COLLEGE TRANSFER PROGRAM

by

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(Under the Direction of James C. Hearn)

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research was to study the experiences two-year college students had as they transferred to four-year research universities. Through individual interviews, using qualitative research techniques, the positive and negative factors that influence transition from a two-year college with an established articulation program to a four-year research university were identified and grouped with recommendations for improved practices. These recommendations can be utilized by both two- and four-year colleges to develop informed transfer programs, policies, and procedures that support bachelor degree attainment for students who transfer. This research is of particular interest now with national attention focused on the need for more timely degree completion. It is also significant because the number of students beginning higher education at two-year colleges is rapidly increasing.

This study included interviews with students who attended and graduated from Georgia Perimeter College, a large two-year college in the metropolitan Atlanta area, and then transferred to the University of Georgia, Georgia State University, or the Georgia Institute of Technology. This study enriches the existing body of transfer literature because it focuses on the successes

and pitfalls students encountered in their transition and not solely on academic preparedness and performance. The specific guiding research questions were:

1. What factors contribute to the successful transfer of two-year college students to four-year research universities?
2. In particular, what can be learned for improved practice by examining a two-year college transfer program?

**INDEX WORDS:** Community colleges, two-year colleges, four-year universities, transfer, transition, Transfer Admission Guarantee Program (TAG), culture, and engagement

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## DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this dissertation to my family, Ginny and Mark Reiss—my sister and brother-in-law. Without their continued support, encouragement and understanding, I couldn't have finished this endeavor.

This dissertation is also dedicated to my late parents, Evelyn and Hoke Fowler. They believed in me and they believed in life-long learning. Even though they have passed away, I know they both watched over me as I made my journey through this doctoral program and dissertation. I miss them both dearly.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

The number of students who plan to earn their four-year degree by combining two years at a community college followed by two years at a four-year college or university has been increasing significantly, causing educators to reevaluate their assumptions about the best way to earn a bachelor's degree (Poisel & Joseph, 2011, p.7). The term "transfer" is defined in higher education literature as "the movement of a student from one postsecondary institution to another, while the term "native" is used to describe students who have attended the same institution for their entire undergraduate career" (Cuseo, 1998, p. 1). The largest component of the transfer population continues to be community college-to-university transfers (Hankins, 1996). Community colleges have become an affordable, convenient and viable option for students to begin higher education (Cohen & Brawer, 2003).

Two-year transfer institutions are establishing articulation programs to support a smoother transition for students to four-year universities. In this era of heightened accountability in higher education, it is important for two- and four-year institutions to consider relevant feedback from student experiences throughout the transfer process. Learning from student experiences can be a valuable tool in developing institutional policies and practices for transfer and degree completion.

#### Purpose of the Study

The path to a bachelor's degree is not as straightforward as it once was when the majority of students started their higher education at the four-year institution where they earned their

degree. Enrollment patterns now reflect an increased trend in the number of students attending more than one institution in their college career; and in some institutions, new transfer students outnumber entering first-year students (Jacobs, Lauren, Miller, & Nadler, 2004). Because of this trend, student learning and development now cross many aspects of the campus to include life experiences outside the classroom such as employment, family responsibilities, and volunteerism.

National attention is now focused on college completion and particularly on the growing number of students who begin their college careers at two-year institutions and then transfer to four-year institutions. The recent White House Summit on Community Colleges (2010) is one good example of this recent attention and the importance being placed on successful college completion.

Dr. Jill Biden stated at the Summit on October 5, 2010, “Our challenge is not just to get students into college, but to keep them there and to graduate them faster with the skills they need to succeed in the American workforce. This is the moment for community colleges to shine” (The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, 2010, para. 22). President Obama stated:

. . . in recent years, we’ve failed to live up to this legacy, especially in higher education. In just a decade, we’ve fallen from first to ninth in the proportion of young people with college degrees. That not only represents a huge waste of potential; in the global marketplace it represents a threat to our position as the world’s leading economy.

(The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, 2010, para. 36).

He further stated, “So I’ve set a goal: By 2020, America will once again lead the world in producing college graduates. And I believe community colleges will play a huge part in meeting this goal . . .” (para. 37).

According to the AACCC (American Association of Community Colleges, 2010), almost 43% of all college students are enrolled in two-year colleges with over 71% transferring to four-year institutions. Politicians, two- and four-year college presidents, chief enrollment management officers, student and academic affairs personnel, and prospective students and their families are keenly interested in this trend.

In her study of transfer for the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, Wellman (2002) states:

The baccalaureate degree is becoming the entry point to the workforce for the majority of students, making it increasingly important that 2/4 transfer works well. Several forces are converging to push more students to community colleges as their initial point of access to postsecondary education: growth in the number of high school graduates; demographic changes that are increasing the proportion of poor and minority students; more stringent admissions requirements in many four-year institutions; and rising college tuitions (p. 7).

In addition to the national focus on college completion and the role of transfer, states are focusing on finding efficiencies in policies and procedures to support graduation, progression, and transfer. The University System of Georgia Board of Regents has established the Graduation Task Force to “. . . step up its ongoing oversight and assessment of institutional plans and results related to retention and graduation rates” (University System of Georgia, Newsroom,

2010, para. 3). Preczewski, member of the Board of Regents' Graduation Task Force, wrapped up the briefing by presenting recommendations from the task force. These include:

- The development of annual assessment tools used to review institutional progress toward established improvement in retention/graduation performance;
- Establishing ties between performance rate improvement and resource allocation; and
- The identification of additional performance measures to capture student movement among colleges both within and external to the USG to account for students who complete their degrees at institutions other than where they began their academic careers (para. 14).

States, including Georgia, have been faced with significant budget reductions and now the University System is considering tying resource allocation to the successful retention and graduation of students (para. 14). In light of the recent push from national and state policy makers to ensure students attain four-year degrees in a timely manner, it is critical to research the influencing factors that impact transfer students as they move from two-year to four-year institutions.

This research studied, through individual interviews, students who attended a two-year transfer college with an established transfer program and transferred to four-year research universities. From these interviews, the positive and negative factors that influence transition from a two-year college to a four-year research university were identified and grouped to develop “best practices” that can be utilized by both two-year and four-year institutions.

#### Guiding Questions



1. What factors contribute to the successful transfer of two-year college students to four-year research universities?
2. In particular, what can be learned for improved practice from examining a transfer program at a two-year college?

#### Sub-questions

1. What practices did the two-year institution have in place that were effective in preparing students for transfer to four-year universities?
2. What practices did the two-year institution have in place that did not facilitate successful transfer to four-year universities?
3. What practices did the four-year universities have in place that aided successful transfer?
4. What practices did the four-year universities have in place that limited successful transfer?

#### Significance of the Study

This research aims to develop improved understanding from analysis of the experiences these students have had and to identify what is working and what needs improvement at both two-year and four-year institutions. This study provides accurate information regarding transfer students so both two- and four-year administrators can develop informed transfer programs and policies that support the factors leading to successful bachelor's degree attainment for students who transfer.

## CHAPTER TWO

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Four areas of scholarship are especially relevant for the present research project:

- (1) History of Community Colleges, (2) Student Academic Preparedness and Performance,
- (3) Organizational and Institutional Culture, and (4) Student Engagement and Integration.

Literature on the history of community colleges was examined in order to provide a historical perspective of the evolution of their mission that helped frame the research and guiding questions in this dissertation. There exists a large body of scholarship on how academic preparedness relates to the academic performance of students in both two- and four-year colleges and universities. While this dissertation is qualitative in methodology, it was important to read the quantitative literature on academic performance to better understand how student experiences at two-year colleges and four-year universities impact their grades. It was also essential to read and assimilate the research that has been done on organizational culture and in particular, the importance of culture in both two- and four-year institutions. This literature shows the influence that culture has on student development and how quickly students integrate into college life.

#### Historical Perspective

Community colleges, and in particular two-year transfer institutions, play an important role in today's higher education as a result of providing accessible, affordable, and high quality postsecondary options for students. The AACC (American Association of Community Colleges, 2010) reports that over 43% of all US undergraduates are attending community colleges and the number of students attending community colleges dramatically increased between fall 2007 and fall 2009 with total enrollments growing from 6.8 million to 8 million, a 16.9% increase.

Community colleges have had the flexibility of developing and offering programs that respond to the changing needs of students and of the marketplace.

The term “community college” refers to a wide range of postsecondary institutions with differing missions that offer vocational diplomas and certificates, and two-year liberal arts associate degrees (Hankins, 1996). An emphasis on open-access for all students, even those who might be considered academically underprepared, has been a core value of all these institutions. Nevertheless, Lee and Frank (1990) argue that although more lenient admission criteria allows for greater access, greater access does not necessarily translate into “real” education for disadvantaged students.

Community colleges have been in existence for over one hundred years and their progression has followed eras in American history:

The community college evolved from at least seven sources of educational innovation. Two began in the 1880s and 1890s: (1) community boosterism and (2) the rise of the research university. Three came from the educational reforms of the Progressive Era (1900–1916): (3) the advent of universal secondary education, (4) the professionalization of teacher education and (5) the vocational education movement. The final two, (6) open access to higher education, and (7) the rise of adult and continuing education and community services, were primarily post–World War II phenomena. The seeds of all seven of these innovations can be found even in the earliest junior colleges (The History of Community Colleges, para. 1).

The community college movement accelerated during the 1960's changing the belief that higher education was only attainable for a privileged few in our culture (Hankins, 1996). This opened doors for many more students to pursue a college education.

In more recent years, community colleges have grown appreciably in times of economic prosperity and even today, with weakened federal and state budgets, community colleges continue to meet the changing needs of their surrounding communities (Cohen & Brawer, 2003). Advocates of two-year colleges believe that they serve a much more diverse population than four-year colleges and provide students from disadvantaged backgrounds and students who are underprepared academically an opportunity for higher education that they would not have had (Velez & Javalgi, 1987).

For the purpose of this research, community colleges are defined as two-year institutions where the highest degree granted is a two-year associate degree with a mission of transfer. The transfer function was, and still is, an important role of community colleges.

Two-year college students are quite different from traditional age students who typically attend four-year colleges and universities immediately after high school graduation. They are more diverse, more likely to be employed—at least part-time, largely female, the first person in their family to attend college, older than traditional college students, and in need of financial assistance (Bragg, 2001).

There are three other distinct bodies of scholarship that are relevant to this research: student academic preparedness and performance, organizational and institutional culture, and student engagement and integration. Each of these areas of research influences the student transfer process from two-year colleges to four-year universities.

## Academic Preparedness and Performance

The success of two-year transfer students has long been used as the main measure of the quality of a two-year education. Cohen and Brawer (2003) concluded from their studies that GPAs at two-year institutions have been a good predictor of the transfer students' GPAs at four-year institutions and the two-year college GPAs have been a strong influence on students attaining a bachelor's degree. Numerous studies of students who transfer from two-year colleges to four-year institutions, suggest that once students transfer, many perform well, but it takes them longer to obtain a bachelor's degree. Not surprisingly, students who transfer with greater numbers of credit do better than those with fewer hours of transfer credit (Cohen & Brawer, 2003).

Melguizo, Kienzl and Alfonso (2011) compared the educational outcomes of community college students with the educational outcomes of four-year college juniors. For their research, they utilized two alternative measures of attainment: total non-remedial credits earned and completion of a bachelor's degree within eight years of graduating high school. Melguizo, Kienzl and Alfonso state, "The results suggest that there were no statistical differences in terms of educational attainment between transfer and rising junior students" (p. 280). They did conclude that despite the fact that they found no differences in the educational outcomes of community college transfer students and four-year college rising juniors, only a small percentage of community college students managed to transfer to four-year institutions. Melguizo, Kienzl and Alfonso went on to state, "results of this study suggest that community colleges have the potential of preparing students for the demands of four-year college...if a transfer path is not clearly articulated, the likelihood of getting lost and falling through the cracks is a strong

possibility” (p. 282). Their research reinforces the need for two-year colleges to provide the academic courses and support that students need to transfer in a timely manner and be successful.

Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) have reviewed the large body of studies on how colleges affect students. They concluded that “ students who began their postsecondary education at a two-year institution were about 15% less likely to earn a bachelor’s degree in the same time period as similar students who started at a four-year college” (p. 551). Regarding the impact of beginning college at a two-year institution versus beginning at a four-year institution, Pascarella and Terenzini conclude that:

- Students at the two kinds of institutions are essentially equal in their first-year gains in reading comprehension, mathematics, and critical thinking and in gains over two years of college in science reasoning and writing skills.
- Two-year students show greater gains than native four-year students in their openness to both intellectual and racial-ethnic diversity.
- Two-year students who transfer to four-year colleges take longer to complete their degrees.
- The degree aspirations of students who begin their education at a two-year institution are reduced by as much as 40% even after adjusting for students’ precollege characteristics, including degree plans.
- Students who begin their education at a two-year college are able to transfer to more selective four-year institutions than they could have if enrolled directly out of high school. This is even more profound for students from low socioeconomic families.

- Initial attendance at a two-year college appears to have only a modest, negative effect on subsequent occupational status, and does not confer a significant earnings penalty (p. 592).

The work of Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) reinforces that two-year colleges have a significant impact on students who begin there; in some cases attending a two-year college can have an even greater impact than four-year institutions on the success of students who are less academically prepared, who come from underrepresented populations, who have a lower socioeconomic status, and who are first-generation college participants.

In another study of the success of two-year transfer students, Glass and Harrington (2002) focused on the academic performance of two-year and four-year students, the GPAs of transfer students during their first semester of transfer, the retention rates of two-year transfer students and native students, and the graduation rates of two-year transfer students and native students. They specifically compared students from community colleges in the North Carolina Community College System who transferred to a large four-year North Carolina university compared to a group of students who entered the four-year university as native students their freshmen year. The authors concluded that:

- The mean GPAs of transfer and native students were the same at the end of spring semester (2<sup>nd</sup> semester)
- There was a slight decline in the GPA after fall semester for two-year transfer students and not for native students
- There was no significant difference in retention and graduation rates for two-year and four-year students

- Personal and family backgrounds, academic motivation and socioeconomic situations of two-year students, as well as the culture of the two-year institution, have significant impacts on performance (pp. 420-424).

There has been much research and debate on the reasons for performance issues among two-year transfer students, and on whether their academic preparedness plays a role. Pascarella & Terenzini (2005) speculate that two-year college students have unclear or confused educational goals. There are also studies that demonstrate that the GPAs of two-year transfer students are at the same level or higher than native students and they are retained at the same or higher levels (Glass & Harrington, 2002). Academic preparedness and prior academic performance are both significant factors that are cited in scholarship about the transfer process for students moving from two-year colleges to four-year institutions.

The range of factors that influence the successful progression of students from the two-year colleges to four-year degree completion is shown in Figure 1 below. All of these factors will be examined in this case study.

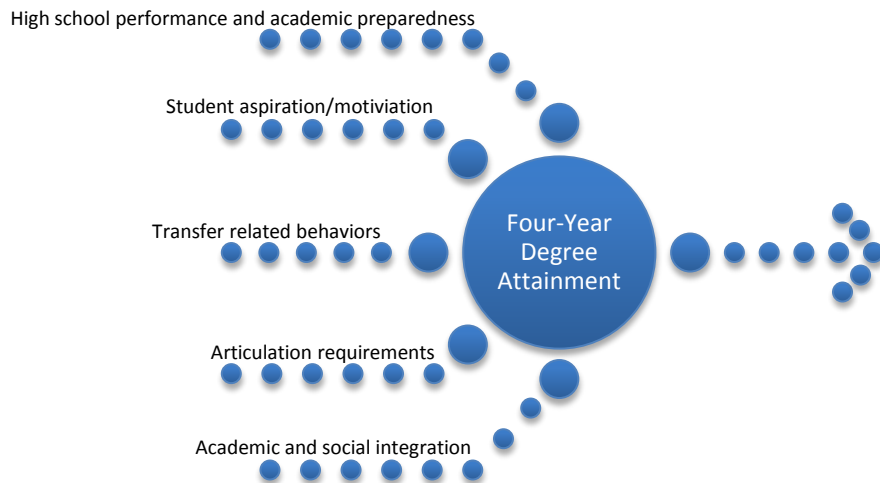


Fig. 1 Influences on Aspiring Transfer Student Success



## Organizational and Institutional Culture

The topic of organizational culture has been studied by numerous disciplines, ranging from anthropology and sociology to management science and organizational behavior, resulting in no single definition, according to (Cowings, n.d.). Culture is difficult to define because it is the sum of many parts, including organizational mission, values, behavior, myths, beliefs, and experiences.

Edgar Schein (1996), a MIT Professor of Management and leading authority on organizational development, defines organizational culture as:

A pattern of shared basic assumptions that the group learned as it solved its problems that has worked well enough to be considered valid and is passed on to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems.

The deeper level of basic assumptions and beliefs that are:  
learned responses to the group's problems of survival in its external environment and its problems of internal integration; are shared by members of an organization; that operate unconsciously; that define in a basic "taken for granted" fashion in an organization's view of itself and its environment (pp. 229-240).

Colleges and universities do not differ from businesses in that they each have a unique organizational culture made up of their mission, beliefs, values, goals, and routines. Culture in institutions of higher education helps answer questions like, "who are we?" and "what makes us distinctive?" Institutions are influenced by external factors such as demographics, economics, and politics; yet they are also influenced by internal factors within the institution. Culture

becomes the core identity of the institution, recognizable internally by students, faculty and staff and externally by the community.

Masland (1985) states “examination of culture can help explain how organizations arrive at their current state. Culture may explicate past influences on decisions and development and provide rationale for institutional development” (p. 166). This deeper level of understanding can lead to better and more informed decision making and/or program development.

The values, beliefs, and experiences that students bring to institutions of higher education cannot be ignored. Any research on organizational culture in colleges and universities should take into account that there are distinct student subcultures and that student bodies are not homogeneous.

“The most provocative delineation of student subcultures is that devised by Trow and Clark. Their four subcultures emerge from two variables: the degree students are involved with ideas and the extent to which students identify with their institution” (Lewis, 1969)

The four student subcultures in Trow and Clark’s model give institutions an insight into the integration of all types of students into the organizational culture:

- 1) Academic – students in this subculture are focused on their coursework and interacting with faculty. They have their sights set on graduation.
- 2) Collegiate – students in this subculture are interested in the social aspects of college life and academic success is secondary to having fun.
- 3) Vocational – students in this subculture are focused on starting their career and see college as a means to that end.

- 4) Nonconformist – students in this subculture are detached, rebellious and often idealistic. They are more focused on the life of the community and society than the college (Terenzini & Pascarella, 1977, pp. 225-227).

Velez and Javalgi (1987) report the findings of their study assessing the effects of various predictors on the successful transfer from a two-year college to a four-year institution. “Factors affecting transfer can be grouped into four areas: (a) personal background, (b) academic processes, (c) psychosocial process, and (d) institutional integration” ( p. 82).

In 1994, Dougherty went on to say that: “The fact that community college entrants get many fewer bachelor’s degrees than comparable four-year college entrants means that we can no longer dismiss the baccalaureate gap as due to students’ personal traits. We must now also give a sizable role to the institutional characteristics of the college they have entered” (p. 53).

As institutions of higher education look at the factors that influence successful transfer, they often turn to examine their own organizational culture. Both two-year and four-year institutions with deeply rooted organizational culture know that their culture can be tied to student transition and success.

### Student Engagement and Integration

The importance of student engagement is another common thread in the literature about transition from two-year to four-year institutions. There is a strong relationship between the extent to which students become involved in the academic and social systems of their educational institutions and their perceived gains in growth and development and the attainment of their educational goals (Horn & Ethington, 2002).

Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kenzie and Gonyea (2008) conducted a study of conditions that support student success, including institutional practices. They found that student engagement in

educationally focused activities is positively related to academic performance and that student engagement has a positive effect on first-year grades and retention to the second year of college at the same institution. Their findings reinforce that institutions should develop a culture that embraces student success with teaching practices and programs such as first-year seminars and learning communities as well as meaningful co-curricular activities that draw students in and engage them.

Kuh, Kenzie, Schuh and Whitt (2005), conclude:

Student engagement has two key components that contribute to student success. The first is the amount of time and effort students put into their studies and other activities that lead to the experiences and outcomes that constitute student success. The second is the ways the institution allocates resources and organizes learning opportunities and services to induce students to participate in and benefit from such activities. What institutions do to foster student success has a direct influence (p .9).

Relatedly, Serban (2008), in a two-to-four-year transfer study in California, discusses the role “transfer culture” plays in successful transition. Serban concludes that colleges with a “transfer culture” have activities and services throughout the college that support transfer and encourage student integration. Transfer is perceived as a responsibility that everybody who works at the college shares, rather than as a task that is assigned to those whose job descriptions focus on transfer support. One element that contributes to a strong transfer culture is that students hear about transfer frequently and from a variety of different sources – peers, counselors, support staff, faculty, and college leaders. The information they receive emphasizes

that transfer is possible and that transfer should be considered (Serban, 2008). Similarly, Pascarella (1984) reported that there are consistently reliable influences of college culture and environment on successful student transfer from two-year to four-year institutions.

Tinto (1975) found that students who had personally rewarding interactions with the institution's academic system – student and faculty interaction – were more successful. Numerous other studies have reinforced the importance of encouraging and supporting academic and social integration as a way to increase retention (Astin, 1985; Tinto, 1994).

Flaga (2006) conducted qualitative research in 2001 to find what kind of transition two-year transfer students had during their first semester at a large four-year university, and also how transfer students' experiences changed between their first and second semester at the four-year institution. This study is of particular interest because it examines the relationship between students and their new institutional environments.

Flaga (2006) met with 35 two-year transfer students in 2001 during their second semester at Michigan State University asking them about the experiences they had at their two-year institution and about their first semester at Michigan State. She later interviewed this same group of students to compare their time at the two-year institution compared to their first and second semester at Michigan State. Their responses led Flaga to develop five dimensions of transition:

- Learning Resources – utilizing tools that were formal and part of the official university environment, informal, learned through friends and alumni and information that the students gathered through their own initiative

- Connecting – developing relationships with faculty, staff and other students
- Familiarity – internalizing the information gathered for assimilation into new environment
- Negotiating – adjusting behavior for success
- Integrating – putting into practice all that has been learned – student development

The dimensions help provide a comprehensive picture of the many issues that two-year students face when they transition to a four-year institution. Their responses were assessed in three campus environments: academic, social, and physical (p. 5).

The particular value of this study is that students who participated indirectly provided advice to future two-year transfer students. Notably, they pointed to a need for a clear communication pathway between the institutions so students would have the opportunity to make contacts at the four-year institutions prior to transfer and have a solid understanding of the expectations that the four-year institutions had of them. Together, such features help ensure a more seamless transition.

Researchers have used various instruments to collect data from transfer students to better assess their experiences at four-year institutions. Laanan (2004) moved from focusing on outcome levels to focusing on understanding the psychosocial adjustment that two-year students go through when they arrive at their four-year institution. Laanan surveyed students who transferred from California community colleges to four-year institutions in Southern California. The Laanan survey had three main sections: social demographics, community college experiences, and four-year university experiences. The social demographics section included

questions about age, race/ethnicity, gender, hours working during college, residency, and educational attainment of parents, to name a few. The community section included questions about class preparation, hours spent on campus, number of honors classes, academic advisement, and more. Questions on the university experience section included college activities as well as majors, GPA, reason for attending four-year institution, honors program involvement, and attendance at orientation among others (Laanan, 2004).

There are many conclusions that can be drawn from the survey responses in Laanan's study. Some of the highlights include:

- Transfer students who were involved and engaged in curricular and co-curricular activities at their two-year institution were more successful at the four-year institution
- Transfer students who had formed relationships with faculty members in an advising setting during their education at the two-year institution had a smoother transition to their four-year institution
- Transfer students who had information about the culture of the four-year institution had an easier transition because they were familiar with the institution and the expectations that the institution had for students (pp. 343-344).

Laanan's study measures the perceptions two-year transfer students have of their four-year institution, reinforcing again that the organizational culture plays a role in student success and particularly in the success of two-year transfer students. It also points to student engagement as one of the important influencing factors as students transition from a two-year college to a four-year institution.

With the number of students choosing two-year colleges to begin their postsecondary education continuing to grow, the pool of potential transfer students will also continue to be sizable (Longden, 2006). Given these trends, it makes sense to concentrate on this diverse population of students with an even greater emphasis on student engagement and integration at both two-year and four-year colleges. Student success is most often measured by how well institutions retain, graduate, and transfer students, and, in some states, budgets are tied to these same measurable outcomes. Longden (2006) concludes from his findings that institutions play a crucial role in students' experiences at the institution and whether they persist or not.

### Summary

Scholarship on the topic of transfer of two-year students into four-year institutions is limited. Two-year transfer students make up a significant and growing student population, yet it is surprising how few scholars have focused on why two-year college students transfer, whether transferring helps them attain their educational goals, and what programs effectively supported their successful progression.

Cutright (2010) summed it up well:

Transfer students will continue to be a complex, diverse, promising, frustrating, messy group of folks. They will continue to apply with either a few or many prior credits. Their preparation will be weak, and it will be strong. They will be focused, and they will be unfocused on their objectives. They will work hard, and they will get by. They will be Black, White, Latino, Asian, and everything else. They will have high financial need and great self-sufficiency. They will fit right into the conventional college population, and they will come with families



and off-campus commitments. Institutions will need to ferret out one-size-fits-all approaches to their acceptance – in all senses of that word –and adapt to the fact that transfer students are a very substantial part of the future. It is not just a matter of institutional positioning and doing well. It is a matter of national priority, fulfilling higher education’s mission of improving society through education, and doing good (p. 9).

## CHAPTER THREE

### RESEARCH DESIGN

This chapter addresses specific aspects of the research design for studying the following research and sub-questions: (1) methodological approach, (2) setting, (3) data collection, (4) researcher's role and bias, (5) data analysis, (7) transferability, and (8) trustworthiness.

#### *Research Questions:*

1. What factors contribute to the successful transfer of two-year college students to four-year research universities?
2. In particular, what can be learned for improved practice from examining a transfer program at a two-year college?

#### *Sub-questions:*

1. What practices did the two-year institution have in place that were effective in preparing students for transfer to four-year universities?
2. What practices did the two-year institution have in place that did not facilitate successful transfer to four-year universities?
3. What practices did the four-year universities have in place that aided successful transfer?
4. What practices did the four-year universities have in place that limited successful transfer?

## Methodological Approach

There is a significant body of scholarship on student transfer that informs this study. Quantitative research has largely focused on academic performance at both the two- and four-year institution and qualitative research has focused on student engagement at both the two- and four-year institution.

To identify and assimilate, from student interviews, the common factors that influence transition from a two-year college to a four-year university, a qualitative approach was advantageous. In 1982, Bogdan and Biklen summarized the five distinguishing characteristics of qualitative research: “(1) reliance on the natural setting as the direct source of data and the researcher as the key instrument; (2) emphasis on “rich” descriptions; (3) focus on process rather than products or outcomes; (4) use of inductive data analysis as opposed to deductive hypothesis testing; and (5) concern with finding “meaning” based on participant perspectives” (pp. 27-30). Additionally, in 2008 Corbin and Strauss state:

There are many reasons for choosing to do qualitative research, but perhaps the most important is the desire to step beyond the known and enter the world of participants, to see the world from their perspective and in doing so make discoveries that will contribute to the development of empirical knowledge. (p.13)

In this study, the researcher was particularly interested in what students experience at two- and four-year institutions and in what meaning they give to their experiences at both.

## Settings

This study focused on understanding the participants within a certain context – where participants had their experiences. Therefore, the settings became an important source of data.

The settings included: Georgia Perimeter College, where all of the participants attended, as well as the three research universities where these students transferred: the University of Georgia, the Georgia Institute of Technology, and Georgia State University.

To understand the influences on transfer from a two-year college to a four-year university, an appropriate two-year college setting had to be established. Georgia Perimeter College emerged as the ideal setting for this research. Georgia Perimeter College (GPC) is an urban, two-year, transfer institution and is the third largest in the University System of Georgia (Georgia Perimeter College 2011). The mission of Georgia Perimeter College is to provide an accessible two-year education that prepares students for transfer to four-year colleges and universities. Georgia Perimeter College has established a comprehensive transfer program called the *Transfer Admission Guarantee* (TAG) which is a purposeful and intentional outreach program with a cadre of support services for students that begin when they apply to GPC and continue until their successful graduation and transfer (Georgia Perimeter College, 2010).

Georgia Perimeter College has Transfer Admission Guarantee agreements with 45 public and private four-year colleges in Georgia and across the country. These TAG agreements guarantee students are accepted as transfers to partner institutions if they have completed the required coursework and maintained the required GPA. The academic affairs division at each TAG partner institution establishes the coursework and GPA that GPC students are required to adhere to in order to participate in the TAG Program and transfer to the four-year TAG partner institution they have chosen (Georgia Perimeter College, 2011). New students are informed about the TAG Program at orientation and are encouraged to sign Intent to Transfer forms while at orientation. Students can sign an Intent to Transfer form at any point in their GPC education,

but it is advantageous to sign up early so all necessary coursework can be completed and the required GPA maintained to insure a timely transfer.

Specially trained TAG advisors, located on each campus, work closely with students throughout their education career at GPC. Students are required to meet with their TAG advisor at established advising credit hour checkpoints. The first checkpoint is when the students have earned 12 credit hours to discuss their progress from the past term and the current term. TAG advisors verify current academic standing/GPA with each student and identify any barriers that are hindering their academic success. If problems are identified, referrals are made to support services that include Personal Counseling, Tutoring, Disability Services, etc. This first advising checkpoint occurs shortly after the first semester so if signs of academic distress are apparent, there is ample time for students to be referred to the appropriate support services. There are also advising checkpoints when students have reached 24, 36 and 48 credit hours. Again, these regular advising sessions ensure that students are enrolling in and completing the specific coursework to transfer to the partner four-year institution of their choice. TAG advisors also assist the student with a preliminary graduation audit when they are within two semesters of graduating from GPC. This intrusive advising model makes certain that there is regularly occurring contact between the academic advisor and students.

Representatives from TAG partner institutions come to GPC each semester for TAG Fairs. These college fairs give the four-year institutions regular opportunities to talk with students who are interested in participating in the TAG Program as well as students who are already participating in the program. Students are able to meet with representatives from all the TAG partner institutions to ask questions about specific programs of study as well as to receive general information about the institutions.

This research focused on students who attended Georgia Perimeter College, transferred, and are now attending four-year research universities in Georgia. Students were asked to share their experiences and specific factors that had an impact on their transition from a two-year college to a four-year university.

All of the interviewees attended Georgia Perimeter College, participated in the Transfer Admission Guarantee (TAG) Program and graduated. The participants then transferred to one of three Georgia research universities: the University of Georgia, Georgia State University or the Georgia Institute of Technology. These three research universities were selected because they receive a significant number of transfer students from GPC. In 2008-2009, 20.2% of the University of Georgia's transfer students came from Georgia Perimeter College, 47.4% of Georgia State University's transfer students came from Georgia Perimeter College, and 32.2% of the Georgia Institute of Technology's transfer students came from Georgia Perimeter College (Personal communication from the GPC Director of Institutional Research and Planning, November 9, 2011).

To better understand the experiences that students had transferring to these three research universities, it was necessary to examine their unique missions, characteristics, and cultures. It was apparent in interviewee responses that the culture of each institution influenced their transfer and transition experiences.

The University of Georgia, Georgia State University and the Georgia Institute of Technology were selected because they are the three large, prominent research universities in the University System of Georgia where significant numbers of students transfer. While all three universities are similar in many aspects, they do have different missions, settings, and cultures.

These three research universities attract students because of their distinctive characteristics which follow:

The University of Georgia (2011) was founded in 1785 and is the first state-chartered university in America. The University of Georgia (UGA) is located 60 miles northeast of downtown Atlanta and has an undergraduate student enrollment of 25,947. UGA is both a land grant and a sea grant college.

The University of Georgia (2011) describes their mission and culture in their *Mission of the University of Georgia*:

With its statewide mission and core characteristics, the University of Georgia endeavors to prepare the University community and the state for full participation in the global society of the twenty-first century. Through its programs and practices, it seeks to foster the understanding of and respect for cultural differences necessary for an enlightened and educated citizenry. It further provides for cultural, ethnic, gender, and racial diversity in the faculty, staff, and student body. The University is committed to preparing the University community to appreciate the critical importance of a quality environment to an interdependent global society. As a comprehensive land-grant and sea-grant institution, the University of Georgia offers baccalaureate, master's, doctoral, and professional degrees in the arts, humanities, social sciences, biological sciences, physical sciences, agricultural and environmental sciences, business, ecology, environmental design, family and consumer sciences, forest resources,

journalism and mass communication, education, law, pharmacy, public health, social work, and veterinary medicine. (para 3)

The University of Georgia (UGA) is often referred to as the “flagship university” of the State of Georgia. The history and traditions at the University of Georgia are well known throughout the State and the Southeast.

The University attracts students nationally and internationally as well as from within Georgia. It offers the state's broadest array of possibilities in graduate and professional education, and thus a large minority of the student body is post-baccalaureate. The predominantly Georgian undergraduate student body is a mix of highly qualified students originally admitted as freshmen and selected transfer students principally from other University System institutions. (para 5)

The second university included in this study is the Georgia Institute of Technology (Georgia Tech). Like the University of Georgia, the Georgia Institute of Technology is rich in history and tradition. Georgia Tech is a newer institution than the University of Georgia with a different physical setting.

The Georgia Institute of Technology (2011) was founded in 1885 and is located in downtown Atlanta. The Georgia Institute of Technology has an undergraduate and graduate enrollment of over 20,000 students with a focus on advanced technological and scientific research.

The Georgia Institute of Technology (2011) describes their mission and unique characteristics in their *Designing the Future: A Strategic Vision and Plan*:



Technological change is fundamental to the advancement of the human condition. The Georgia Tech community—students, staff, faculty, and alumni—will realize our motto of “Progress and Service” through effectiveness and innovation in teaching and learning, our research advances, and entrepreneurship in all sectors of society. We will be leaders in improving the human condition in Georgia, the United States, and around the globe. (p. 8)

The Georgia Institute of Technology continues to focus on research and innovation. The Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) initiatives at Georgia Tech are well known in this discipline and attract students throughout the country to these majors. Georgia Tech describes their culture in the following way:

Through the combined efforts of our faculty, staff, and students, Georgia Tech’s innovative spirit has characterized our research enterprise, and now that spirit will infuse the university’s educational experience as well. Georgia Tech will encourage and reward learning initiatives, remove institutional obstacles to both incremental and transformative educational innovations, and convert challenges into opportunities. Georgia Tech’s faculty and students embrace intellectual challenges, they take a practical, “applied” approach to problem solving, they address issues analytically, they work hard, and they are resilient. These shared characteristics have produced graduates who have become leaders in many fields. (p. 10)

The Georgia Institute of Technology mentions the value of student services and co-curricular activities in their mission statement. Their mission statement emphasizes the value of holistic education for their students. This emphasis is described in the following passage:

We must continue to encourage a well-rounded collegiate experience where deep and demanding intellectual dimensions are balanced by a rich student life. Much of what students learn is gleaned outside of the classroom, and this is also important in preparing them for success after graduation. Georgia Tech has a rich and strong history of providing the student support services and co-curricular learning opportunities that help our diverse student community acquire and apply life-learning skills. (p. 4)

Georgia State University (2011) was founded in 1913 and is located in downtown Atlanta. Georgia State University is the youngest of the three universities included in this research. Georgia State has an enrollment of 32,000 undergraduate and graduate students and is an urban research university.

Georgia State University (2011) details their mission and culture in the passages below from their *Strategic Plan 2011-2016/21*:

The overarching goal of Georgia State University as it enters its second century is to be recognized as a dynamic academic community where teaching and research combine to produce leaders and create solutions to conquer the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The Georgia State community is characterized and strengthened by its diversity, which is among our greatest sources of pride.

Our student body reflects the makeup of our state and anticipates the increasing diversity of our nation as a whole, as acknowledged in the University's Diversity Strategic Plan, an executive summary of which is appended to this document. We take as a matter of course that all of our students, who come from every county in Georgia, every state in the nation and more than 150 countries, deserve a first-rate education. And while we have continued to provide access to nontraditional students, over the past decade GSU also has attracted many of the state's most talented undergraduates. We are confident that thus far we have been successful in educating our multifaceted student body.

(para 2)

GSU, once known as a commuter school, now offers a rich and vibrant student experience through a remarkable array of academic, social and cultural opportunities, including community-building programs in athletics, student life and recreation, Freshmen Learning Communities, and peer tutoring. Over the past 15 years we also have added extensive undergraduate housing. And over the past decade we have built exciting, competitive NCAA athletic programs, including the GSU Panthers football team, which established a winning record in its first season of play in the Georgia Dome. (para 3)

All four of these higher education settings have some similarities as well as some distinct differences. Research and sub-questions were designed to capture the uniqueness of all of these institutions from student perceptions.

## Data Collection

The sampling plan in this case study may be described as purposive or selective sampling, rather than theoretical sampling. In order to discover what factors influence transfer from two-year to four-year institutions, students currently enrolled at the University of Georgia, Georgia State University, and the Georgia Institute of Technology participated in individual interviews. Potential participants were selected in advance with the assistance of the Georgia Perimeter College Office of Institutional Research and Planning. The data on students who participated in the TAG program were already collected. Georgia Perimeter College transfer students were invited to participate in individual interviews. The researcher gained general information about their experiences transferring from a two-year college to a four-year research university. Targeted individual interviews were conducted to gain deeper knowledge and understanding of the factors that influenced their transition from a two-year college to a four-year university. Interviews were conducted with eight students at each of the three identified universities.

The interviewees were key informants because they all attended GPC, transferred to a four-year research university, and had all shared the experience of participating in the TAG program. The interviews were conducted at local libraries and schools. Open-ended, loosely structured questions with follow-up probing were used at the interviews. Some of the interview questions included:

1. How would you describe your overall experience at Georgia Perimeter College?
2. Did you find participation in the TAG program to be helpful in your transition to your current institution?
3. What were some of the things you found particularly helpful?

4. What things were not helpful?
5. What would you change about the TAG program at Georgia Perimeter College?
6. How would you describe your transition to (Georgia State, Georgia Institute of Technology, or the University of Georgia)?
7. What did you expect and what did you actually find when you got here, to your four-year institution?
8. What experiences played a major positive or negative role in the success or failure of your transfer to this four-year research university?
9. Can you tell me about the “culture” at Georgia Perimeter College? Did the “culture” have an impact on your transfer to a four-year university?
10. Can you tell me about the “culture” at the four-year university that you are currently attending?
11. Can you tell me about your grades and performance while at Georgia Perimeter College?
12. Can you tell me about your grades and performance at the four-year university that you are currently attending?
13. Through what social, academic, and administrative mechanisms do students new to a two-year and a four-year college become involved in the college both inside and outside of the classroom?
14. Who were the important people who facilitated or impeded your transfer?
15. What would you change to facilitate a smoother transfer from your two-year college to your four-year university?

Credibility was ensured by member checking. At the conclusion of each interview, the researcher summarized the main points of the interview to make sure that the information collected was recorded accurately. Interviews were recorded with a main recording device and with a backup recording device. All information was stored securely on a server with backup copies of all data on a flash drive and on an alternate computer with equal security. Interviewees were given the option of confidentiality and could determine if they wanted their names included in the research findings. Data was triangulated by using not only the transcripts, but also researcher's observations and other supporting evidence.

It was imperative that the participants were all enrolled in the Transfer Admission Guarantee Program (TAG) while at Georgia Perimeter College. This study obtained input from interviewees who were both advocates and critics of the TAG Program. Once the possible participants were identified, the researcher contacted them by phone and email to ask them if they were willing to participate in this study. Once they agreed to participate in the study and a signed consent form was received from each participant, individual interviews were scheduled as part of the data collection process.

#### Researcher's Role and Bias

The researcher in this qualitative study was the primary instrument in both the data collection and in the data analysis. The researcher had the unique position of being an "insider" employed at the two-year college in this study. In order to avoid bias, this study did not focus solely on the positive factors influencing successful transfer but also identified the negative factors that interviewees disclosed in an effort to improve the transfer experience at both the two- and four-year institutions.

Neutrality on the subject of the TAG Program was conveyed to the interview participants explaining that the researcher's purpose was not to "sell" the program, but to discover what the participants believed influenced their transition to their four-year university. The goal of the interviews was to obtain candid, thoughtful, and thorough responses.

Participants were made aware of the purpose of the study, but asked not to prepare responses in advance. Prior to the beginning of each individual interview, respondents were given a brief, one-page description of the study and a statement of informed consent to participate. To ensure confidentiality of the study, participants were informed that they had the ability to stop the study at any time.

### Data Analysis

The Literature Review provided a conceptual framework for the analysis of this data. Through an inductive approach, categories were generated and common themes and patterns emerged and directed writing the final report.

The verbatim transcripts were analyzed and interpreted using the constant comparative approach (Corbin and Strauss, 2008). Through coding the transcripts of individual interviews, the researcher combined "like" responses and grouped them into broad categories. Careful attention was given to ensuring internal consistency among the coded categories and also to ensuring that even though the categories are consistent, they are distinct.

Each of the three, four-year research universities was treated as a separate case study that included a description of each institution in addition to the actual transcripts of the enrolled students. The researcher looked for the commonality between the research universities. The emerging themes from student responses at each institution revealed "best practices" and identified negative factors that influenced transfer processes.

### Transferability

The dependability and transferability of the research ensured that the research, as set up in this study, could be understood and even replicated at another institution using the same research design. The design, interviewee selection, interview questions, and data analysis were designed carefully to allow use in the study of another set of students at another institution. Collecting other documents in addition to the interview transcripts ensured triangulation of the data. The interview data was supplemented by other documentation and archival information providing validity to the study and allowing readers the opportunity to assess the similarities and differences between the data in this study.

### Trustworthiness

Integrity was ensured through an extensive audit trail. Checks and balances were in place so that the research design and analysis of the data was trustworthy. In addition to the interview transcriptions, raw data, tapes, notes, documents, TAG program criteria and components, category descriptions, process notes on methodological decisions, and trustworthiness criteria were available.



## CHAPTER FOUR

### FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to understand the factors that influence the transfer of two-year college students to four-year research universities. In particular, this study examined the experiences students had who participated in a transfer program at their two-year college. This chapter presents the results of the qualitative analysis in the following sections: (1) the participants, (2) major themes, and (3) summary.

#### Participants

Eight students from each of the three Georgia research universities, a total of twenty four students, were interviewed and asked the same set of open ended questions. All of the participants had completed at least one year at their four-year institution and five of the participants had graduated from their four-year university. The participants ranged in age from 20 – 55 years of age and they came from very diverse backgrounds. There were fourteen female participants and ten male participants. Fifteen of the participants were traditional college-age students who had gone straight from high school to Georgia Perimeter College. Nine were non-traditional students who had been in the workforce, were displaced employees, or stayed at home raising a family for a number of years before deciding to pursue a college education. It was interesting to note that of all the participants, only the students who transferred to Georgia Tech lived on campus in student housing. All other participants at Georgia State University and at the University of Georgia lived off campus. Seven of the participants were the first person in their family to attend college. Five of the participants were international students. There were even

three students who began their college career while still in high school through the Dual Enrollment Program. These students were on an accelerated track and had completed at least 18 hours of college credit at Georgia Perimeter College by the time they graduated from high school. Seventeen of the participants worked at least twenty hours per week. Thus, there was substantial diversity in the students' backgrounds, cultures, family situations, and work history.

This study sought to understand how this group of individuals made meaning out of their transfer experiences. It also sought to understand if participation in a comprehensive articulation program was beneficial from student perceptions.

### Major Themes

The semi-structured interviews were analyzed using the constant comparative method. These open ended questions allowed the perceptions of the study participants to tell the story as it emerged. The viewpoints of the researcher were set aside to more deeply understand the experiences of the participants. The researcher listened without judgment to what was said (and left unsaid) by the study participants.

Four major categories were constructed by sorting and categorizing these themes: transfer/articulation program, perceived differences in two-year and four-year college cultures, transfer challenges and strategies, and relationship building. An overview of the major coding categories and themes based on participant responses is provided in Table 1 below.

Table 1: *Overview of Categories and Themes*

Major Themes	Coding Categories
Transfer/Articulation Program	<i>Benefits</i> <i>Deterrents</i>
Perceived Differences in Two-Year and Four-Year College Cultures	<i>Institutional Setting</i> <i>Institutional Mission</i> <i>Diversity</i> <i>Orientation</i> <i>Academic Preparedness</i> <i>Academic Rigor</i> <i>Class Size</i> <i>Class Availability</i> <i>Academic Advisement</i> <i>Mentorship</i>
Transfer Challenges and Strategies	<i>Adapting to New Culture</i> <i>Communication</i>
Relationship Building	<i>With Students</i> <i>With Faculty and Staff</i>

*Transfer/Articulation Program Benefits and Deterrents*

The first coding category of transfer/articulation program benefits and deterrents emerged as all of the participants mentioned their participation in the Transfer Admission Guarantee (TAG) Program in many of their interview question responses. In order to participate in the TAG Program, students had to take specific courses and earn specific GPAs outlined in the transfer agreements between Georgia Perimeter College and the University of Georgia, the Georgia Institute of Technology, and Georgia State University. One of the benefits of participating in the TAG Program is that all of the coursework from GPC transfers to the four-year partner institution. Students who transfer and have not participated in the TAG Program often have to take additional coursework prolonging the attainment of their four-year degree. Interviewees mentioned that knowing they would receive transfer credit for all of their coursework at GPC, reduced a considerable amount of stress in their transfer experience.

Many of the participants told the researcher that the TAG Program was one of the top reasons they selected GPC as the college to start their college career. The TAG Program gave them the vehicle to start their college education at a two-year college that is affordable and accessible with courses that transfer. In other words, they could get where they wanted to end up by attending and graduating from GPC. For example, one of the participants who already graduated from the University of Georgia said:

Well, the reason I felt drawn to GPC was the TAG Program. I did really well in high school academically and worked hard. My mother and I looked at a lot of different options and I applied to several colleges, but in the end GPC was affordable, convenient to my home, and I could get to UGA. It was a stepping stone for me and ended up being a very good decision. My transition to UGA was an easy one because of the TAG agreement. My credits all transferred in and none of the classes I took at GPC were wasted.

Another participant who is currently enrolled at the Georgia Institute of Technology commented on the benefits of the TAG Program:

The TAG Program was very helpful. I don't know if I would have gotten in otherwise. Transferring to Georgia Tech is very competitive and they only accept a limited number of transfer students. I met with my TAG advisor and completed all the necessary paperwork. My transfer was smooth, without a hitch.

A Georgia State participant stated, “It was an easy decision for me to attend GPC, save money and still end up at Georgia State. It was a great deal – go to GPC, do a good job, and you automatically get into your first choice university.”

The following comments from a University of Georgia student echo the benefits of participating in the TAG Program:

It is tough with the reductions in the HOPE Scholarship and more and more people who want to stay in-state for college to save money. The competition to get into here (UGA) is tough. There are only so many people they can take. The TAG Program, at least, guarantees you’ll have a seat. I think it is a path, and I think the TAG Program keeps people on track. If you are participating, it gives you more initiative to stay and keep your grades up to transfer.

On the other hand, several participants indicated that the TAG program was not that beneficial in their transfer process. They indicated that they would have had a smooth transfer process whether they were a part of this articulation program or not. They felt their GPAs were high enough to have been accepted at their four-year university. Others expressed that they felt their GPA would have gotten them accepted at their four-year institution, but participating in the TAG Program helped. As noted by one participant from the University of Georgia:

I had a 4.0 GPA at Georgia Perimeter College. Even though I could have gotten into UGA without the TAG, it did help streamline the paperwork and the admission process. For that alone, I am glad I did it. It extended my options for pursuing my bachelor’s degree.

It is interesting to note that some of the participants signed TAG Intent to Transfer forms early in their coursework at GPC, while others made the decision to participate in the TAG Program after several semesters at GPC. Participants who were traditional age students signed up to participate in this program at new student orientation.

### *Perceived Differences in Two-Year and Four-Year College Cultures*

The next major theme was the perceived differences in two-year and four-year college cultures. This theme appeared again and again in question responses. In the discussions that developed from the open-ended questions in this study, students most always brought the discussion back to the similarities and unique differences in the cultures of both types of institutions.

Georgia Perimeter College is a large, multi-campus, two-year, transfer college in the University System of Georgia. The campuses at GPC are located in five distinct parts of metropolitan Atlanta. There are students at GPC representing over 145 different countries. The majority of the participants mentioned, at length, the diversity at Georgia Perimeter College and what that meant to them. One participant had this to say about the diverse culture at GPC:

From a student's perspective, at least at the Clarkston Campus where I attended, it is a very diverse international culture, and you get a taste of a little bit of everything. That is what is interesting about GPC, because all the campuses are different. You see people from different cultures on each campus. It is unique in that way, especially for my major. I appreciated the diversity and was receptive to different

cultures from different parts of the world – it came to my doorstep really, and I was always learning something new.

For example, a current University of Georgia student related his experiences regarding the diverse culture at GPC:

There are a lot of people from all different cultures and backgrounds – all colors, which I like. Everyone seemed to get along well. I learned a lot just being around people from all over the world. There was a social sense in the community because people come from so many different backgrounds. There didn't seem to be clicks like in high school. People just sort of came together, all different ages and all different races. It made for a positive experience. I made a lot of friends there that I might not have had the opportunity to know in other settings.

The Georgia Institute of Technology and Georgia State University are large research universities within the University System of Georgia and are both located in urban settings in downtown Atlanta. Participants who transferred to these two universities talked about the similarities and differences in culture and diversity. One student from Georgia State University described his observations in the following statement:

Going to Georgia State wasn't a huge transition because even though Georgia State has moved close to being a more traditional university, it still has that commuter school vibe. I am a non-traditional, older student and I consider that to be diverse. Georgia State has a lot of older students who are not right out of high school. There are others

like me who are working full time and going to college. Maybe that is why it has been fairly seamless in terms of feeling comfortable. It hasn't been a huge culture shock or anything; it's just bigger.

One of the participants from Georgia Tech relayed that even though Georgia Tech is large and in an urban setting, it had very traditional campus life. Other participants from Georgia Tech talked about the diversity of international students on campus. They also mentioned that there were more students who had enrolled there right after they graduated from high school.

Another Georgia Tech student stated, "There is more of a college atmosphere here than at GPC. At GPC, it was up to you to really get yourself involved. Here (Georgia Tech), it is much easier to know about all the activities even though it is much faster paced here."

The University of Georgia is viewed differently than Georgia Tech and Georgia State University. Participants from there talked about the beautiful campus, the traditions, and the "UGA experience". They all knew that is where they wanted to get their four-year degree since before they were in high school. Participants indicated in their interview responses that the majority of students come to UGA right after high school graduation. Several of the participants also said that in their perception, UGA did not have a large number of transfer students. One student commented:

The real difference between GPC and UGA is that at GPC everyone commutes, and at UGA only a small number of students commute. At GPC the bonding took place in the classroom, but at UGA people bond in the dorms, sororities and fraternities. So, at UGA, in the classrooms, people don't really try to get to know each other, and I really didn't make many friends. I chatted with a few people but I



never spent time with people outside of class. They all seemed busy with their own friends that they had made from living there.

Orientation emerged as a coding category under the Perceived Differences Between Two-Year and Four-Year College Cultures. All twenty-four participants in their interview responses stated that their university did not offer a special orientation specifically geared for transfer students. Many of the participants did attend an orientation, but it was the orientation tailored for first-time college students. The interviewees all felt that having an orientation session for transfer students would have been extremely helpful. They indicated that the information they needed to know was different than a brand new college student. One student from Georgia State University shared his thoughts:

I think there should be a transfer orientation. That way you don't have transfer students mixed in with freshmen. Our needs are different. I went through the freshmen orientation and it was a bit elementary. I think transfer students would be a little offended by that; I know I was.

In a similar response, a student from the University of Georgia indicated that he attended the new student orientation and found some of the information helpful, but he stated, "I just never felt very integrated into the process. Maybe it was because I was a commuter student". It was clear that an orientation program for transfer students was lacking at the universities examined in this study.

Students also indicated that Georgia Perimeter College should have stressed the transfer process in their new student orientation. Most students interviewed came to GPC with the intention of transferring but did not feel it was stressed enough at orientation. Some participants felt it would have been helpful to have a separate session on graduation and transfer.

The themes of academic preparedness and rigor were interjected into many of the participant responses. The majority of the students interviewed felt they were well prepared academically at GPC for when they reached their four-year university. Participants stated that the small classes and accessible faculty members at GPC gave them a strong academic foundation. One of the participants from the University of Georgia said, “We were more at ease (he and other GPC transfer students). We had already been in a tougher environment at GPC and we were equipped with the skills we needed”.

Another participant from Georgia State University compared his academic experiences at GPC with those at GSU by saying:

I expected GSU to be a little more difficult, but I haven't found that to be true. I would have to say, to GPC's credit, I thought the instructors there were every bit as good as and, in many cases, better than my instructors at Georgia State University. I had a solid foundation coming into GSU. The instructors at GPC focused on teaching; whereas at GSU, they have research and other things going on that take their time. I have been taught by a number of graduate assistants.

However, one participant from the University of Georgia felt differently. She stated that classes at UGA were much more difficult than at GPC and she did not feel adequately prepared for that. She went on to say:

Students don't really want to be at GPC. They are all just on their way somewhere else or they have to be at GPC because they screwed up along the way and have to get back on track to get to their first choice university. Students are more focused here. I didn't have to try that

hard at GPC. I had some good faculty members, but I wasn't academically prepared for UGA.

Another UGA student interviewee shared her thoughts regarding academic preparedness when she stated:

I definitely felt prepared. I think someone who worked hard at GPC would have a very easy time integrating at UGA. I maintained the same 4.0 GPA that I had at GPC, and I think that speaks for itself regarding being academically prepared.

In another comment, a GSU student said, "Georgia Perimeter College students walk tall, we have a reputation overall of being better prepared for the four-year collegiate experience".

It should be noted that while there was not an interview question specifically about student motivation, responses in the area of academic preparedness and rigor included statements about how motivated the participants were and how that level of motivation influenced how quickly they moved through their two-year program and how successful they were at their four-year university.

Class size and availability was also mentioned in responses under the Perceived Differences Between Two-Year and Four-Year College Cultures. Most participants mentioned the benefits of the small classes at GPC. One interviewee, who is now at the University of Georgia commented, "Classes at GPC were not that big, you have an opportunity to interact with faculty. I am shy so it is hard for me to ask questions, but there, I felt comfortable to raise my hand and ask questions". Other participants mentioned that it was difficult to adjust to larger classes at their universities.

Some participants indicated that getting the classes they needed was a challenge at their universities. They also indicated that getting the classes they wanted at the times that were convenient was a challenge while enrolled at GPC too. One Georgia Tech interviewee said, “Right now, I am working full-time and in school full-time. I really assumed that Georgia Tech would have a fairly large pool of courses for evening students like me, but that is not the case”. Some participants took online courses at GPC and indicated that online options were helpful given their busy lives as employees, parents, etc. Participants mentioned that the TAG partner universities should offer classes at a variety of times. This might be hard to do but if both two- and four-year institutions support student success and the timely completion of degree programs, students have to be able to build a full schedule each semester with the classes needed to transfer. Obtaining a workable class schedule is vital to the successful transition and retention of students.

Academic advisement emerged as one of the main themes in this research study. The advisement process and effectiveness was listed as a major factor in all of the participant responses. Participants had much to say about their advisement while in the TAG Program at GPC. Even though TAG advisors meet regularly with their advisees, the majority of the participants in this study told the researcher that they were much more connected to a faculty member for academic advisement and encouragement than they were to their TAG advisor. One participant stated, “There needed to be more contact with the TAG advisor so that I knew I was on track when it was time to graduate and transfer”. Another student added, “I met with my TAG advisor a couple of times, but other than that, I received academic advisement from my faculty member. That was helpful since she was in the line of work I wanted to pursue.”

A third interviewee added “TAG advisors should have in-depth knowledge of the partner institutions. I transferred to UGA and was not aware of several of their requirements for the Teacher Education Program. If I had known about these extra requirements, I would have saved myself a lot of time”.

Other students commented that they had accurate and thorough academic advisement through the TAG Program and the TAG advisors. They indicated that the TAG advisors assisted them through the process, making sure they took the appropriate courses, maintained the required GPA, and filled out all the necessary paperwork for admission to their university. The following example came in a comment from one student:

It was apparent that accessible and accurate academic advising at the two-year college level was of great importance to the interviewees and to their smooth transition. Whether students are advised by faculty or TAG advisors, the common denomination is that thorough information is shared with the advisees and they are connected to someone who can guide them through the transfer process. A smooth transition is not possible without this type of advising.

Academic advising at the university level was also of concern to the participants in this study. Students expressed that they would have benefited from connecting with a university transfer advisor while they were still enrolled at GPC. One participant stated:

Having a connection to an advisor at Georgia State University would have been very helpful. For me, it is always helpful to have a person to talk to instead of finding and interpreting the information that is on the web. It should be more proactive on their part.

When asked about their advising experiences at the university level, students again talked about the importance of faculty advisors. A participant from Georgia Tech spoke of advising there:

I was assigned a faculty advisor, so I made an appointment with him and it turned out to be one of the biggest causes of my success. It kept me going at Georgia Tech. He was always willing to help me and talk with me. He was a very busy man but he always had time to talk with me. He told me all I wanted or needed to know about my major and the job market in this field. I worked hard because I didn't want to let him down.

The responses about academic advisement turned to mentorship and the participants all had someone in their life who was their advocate, encouraging them and believing in them. It is interesting to note that all of the participants talked about a faculty member who was their mentor or a family member who assumed this role during their time at the two-year and four-year institutions. They indicated in their responses that this support system was a critical factor in their successful transition from Georgia Perimeter College to their university and that this support system kept them motivated and on track.

A participant from UGA shared her academic advisement experience when she responded:

My mom was my biggest advocate. She had done all the research on the TAG Program and thought it was a great thing for me to do. She believed in me. She helped advise me and pushed me to be successful. She had never gone to college, so she learned all she could about GPC.

I am a first-generation college student and my mother realized her dreams through my educational journey. I had excellent instructors and my TAG advisor was great, but my true advisor was my mother.

Another example of academic advisement is evidenced from the comment of this participant:

My political science professor was my mentor from the first class that I took from him. He knew of my interest in this major and he was willing to take a lot of time talking with me. He helped me through the process. He even wrote recommendations for me to be involved in student leadership opportunities at Georgia State University. We are still in touch and I graduated from GPC over a year ago. I still go to him for advice. He has been a role model for me.

### *Transfer Challenges and Strategies*

The next theme was transfer challenges and strategies. The participants in this research faced challenges in their transition, some more than others. They were all very forthcoming with suggestions and strategies that future transfer students could benefit from and many of their suggestions are reflected in the Implications for Improved Practice section of Chapter Five.

Adapting to a new culture at a new institution was a topic that all of the participants discussed. A participant from Georgia Tech elaborated when she said:

I am 53 years old. At GPC, there were students in their 40's, 50's and even 60's. There were students who had been out of high school and working for a number of years in the same classes with students who were 18. It worked though; we all lifted each other up. When I got to

Tech, I just didn't feel like my fellow students were trying to look out for my success or hoping that I would succeed along with them. I had to take the time and effort to get to know some of the students in my class and even though we came from different worlds, I was able to make friends. I think success is all about feeling connected.

Another student response to the transfer challenges and strategies that were faced was:

I wasn't prepared for the different parts of term. There are seven week terms and fifteen week terms and I didn't know that in some of my courses there were very strict attendance policies. I have to take responsibility for not knowing some of this. As much as I would like someone to take me through all of this in person, I know that ultimately it is my responsibility. My suggestion for future transfer students is to read. All of the necessary information is on the university web page. It might not be easy to locate, but it is there. The days of hand holding should be over by the time we are in college but it helps to have someone helping you along the way.

A Georgia State University student made the following comments pertaining to his transfer:

I wish GPC would have prepared me a little bit more as to what to expect at GSU. GPC is more capsulated, whereas you have to be much more street smart at GSU. Being in downtown Atlanta is a world apart from the Newton campus of GPC. Students aren't used to being aware of their



safety and their surroundings. I see students walking around with their cell phones and laptops with people bumping into them and taking everything they have. It would be great to have a current Georgia State student come back and meet with the students who are ready to transfer about life in an urban location and everything that comes with that. I grew up in Manhattan so I was used to it, but I talked to many people who had lived in Atlanta all their lives who never went downtown. You have to know what to expect in order to be successful. Some of this could have been covered in the TAG Program by an advisor or mentor.

One of the participants from the University of Georgia said “You get more individual attention at a two-year college and when you get to that four-year college, you better develop a relationship with that advisor quick”. Along those same lines, a participant from Georgia Tech stated:

I think the key is taking visits and making sure you go to the university and understand the dynamics of it. That is number one. Going from a two-year college to a university is a big change. Do what you can do to find out as much as you can about it.

It is interesting to note that while there was much discussion about improvements that could be made to the TAG Program to facilitate a smoother transition; students did realize that the true ownership rested with them. They knew that it was ultimately their responsibility to be successful. Their suggestions for the TAG Program included ways that TAG advisors could help empower students to grow and learn and take charge of their educational plan.

Communication was another major theme in the interview question responses. The responses about communication included; communications from the TAG Program, communications from the two-year college, communications from the four-year university, and finally, communication between students. Some of the participants felt that they needed more communication about the TAG Program and that they needed that information as early as when they had expressed an interest in attending GPC. The information about the TAG Program could and should be a recruiting tool since it allows students to begin their education at a two-year college that is affordable and accessible providing an avenue for guaranteed transfer to four-year universities. Responses also included the importance of the TAG Program in student persistence. Students who participated in this study stated that the TAG Program kept them on track through regular communication with their TAG advisors.

The importance of communication from the four-year universities to students while they are enrolled at the two-year college was also another student recommendation. This participant expressed her feelings stating:

Georgia State should come to GPC and host TAG orientations. They should have three or four students who transferred from GPC come back to talk about the experiences that they went through and provide an overview of GSU from a transfer student perspective.

I would have really liked to have had the opportunity to talk with students who had already transferred. GSU should make arrangements with GPC to do just that.

The lack of communication between the two-year and the four-year university and the student were mentioned by several participants. Participants expressed a desire to have more

connectivity with staff and faculty, even after their transfer. One of the participants from Georgia Tech elaborated:

It would have been nice if Georgia Tech communicated with me, even with an email or text to see how my transfer had gone. A short message asking how I was doing or if there was anything they could do to help you. That would have gone a long way.

Communications between students is another category that emerged. Students provided insight into their experience transferring as a non-traditional student. Four of the participants suggested that students at two-year and four-year institutions form a student organization for non-traditional students. Having opportunities for non-traditional students to socialize with other non-traditional students would be beneficial and help ease the angst of acclimating to a new college or university.

### *Relationship Building*

The final theme was that of relationship building, referring to relations with both other students and with faculty and staff. The student responses reinforce the literature of George Kuh (2008) about the importance of student involvement and connectivity. The participants all mentioned in numerous responses how important being connected to their TAG advisor or their faculty advisor was to them. They talked of that relationship keeping them on track and giving them a feeling that someone cared about their academic success. Relationships with faculty and staff on campus and relationships with supportive friends and family members were equally important and essential and the challenges for students seemed to come when they did not feel connected.

## Summary

The interviews provided detailed information about student experiences and perceptions of what worked and what needed improvement in regard to their participation in the TAG Program. More generally, this study revealed comparisons and contrasts between student experiences at a two-year college and at a four-year university. While the backgrounds and perspectives of the students interviewed were quite different, the responses to many of the questions were similar.

This chapter presented the findings related to the two research questions pertaining to this study plus ancillary findings. In summary, the major findings of the research follow:

1. Four broad themes with coding categories appeared repeatedly in response to the research questions: benefits and deterrents of a transfer/articulation program, perceived differences in two-year and four-year culture, transfer challenges and strategies and finally, relationship building.
2. Earlier research on student transition was supported in the literature review as it relates to the following three areas: student academic preparedness and performance, organizational and institutional culture, and student engagement and integration.

Each of these three areas is discussed below:

### *Student Academic Preparedness and Performance*

Interview responses indicated that the majority of students felt that they had received a good educational foundation at Georgia Perimeter College and that they were academically prepared for the rigors of university coursework. These findings in this study reinforce the findings of Cohen and Brawer (2003) that a student's GPA at the two-year college level is a good predictor of their GPA at a four-year institution.

Although data regarding their GPAs at both the two-year and four-year institution was anecdotal, all but one of the participants reported that they had not seen a dip in their GPA upon transferring to a four-year university. These findings are in contrast to the studies by Glass and Harrington (2002) in Chapter Two which indicated that there was a decline in the GPA after fall semester for two-year transfer students and not for native students.

### *Institutional Culture*

College and university culture is influenced by a number of external and internal factors. It is the culture of both the two-year and four-year institutions that becomes their core identity. That core identity is recognizable to students and to faculty and staff. Students in this study had very definite perceptions about the cultures at the two-year and four-year institutions. It is interesting to note that the participants had expectations about the culture of the four-year university long before they even arrived there. In some cases, their expectations did not match reality.

Students' beliefs and experiences also influence institutional culture. It was apparent that the participants in this study mirror the subcultures in Trow and Clark's model (1977). Some were extremely focused on their coursework and saw it as a means to an end and others were involved more in the social aspects of college life. Despite the subcultures that the participants represented, they all were aware and influenced by the cultures at the two-year college and four-year university.

### *Student Engagement and Integration*

Just as student engagement was a common thread in the literature review; it was a common thread in the interview responses of the students in this research. The findings of Kuh (2005 and 2008), Horn & Ethington (2002), Serban (2008), Astin (1985) and Tinto (1994), all

indicate that students are more successful if they are integrated into college life and activities. Student engagement has also had a positive effect on GPAs and retention. The theme of student engagement and connectivity was the most emergent of the four themes. Students in this study all indicated that the connections they had with faculty or staff members were one of the biggest factors as to whether or not their transition was smooth. Two participants indicated that they needed more connectivity at the two-year and four-year institutions. They didn't become integrated and relied on family members to serve as their "mentors".

In addition to the expected findings, there were some surprises. Several of the participants did not feel that the Transfer Admission Guarantee Program was beneficial except in the facilitation of admission paperwork between GPC and the research university. Some students felt that they were much more connected to faculty members at GPC than to their TAG advisor and in some instances, did not have much contact at all with their TAG advisor. There were other influencing factors that played more important roles in the successful transition outside of participation in the TAG Program. Student Engagement and integration surfaced as being a major influencer in successful transition, even aside from participation in the TAG Program.

This research reinforced that the experience non-traditional students have at both two-year and four-year institutions is much different than that of traditional age students coming to higher education directly from high school. Non-traditional students shared that their needs from the point they signed up to participate in the TAG Program through their transfer were unique and that broad programs developed to meet the needs of all types of students might not be effective for this student population.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### INTERPRETATION OF FINDINGS

This chapter provides findings in relation to the research questions, suggests implications and recommendations for improved practice in the field, highlights limitations and provides recommendations for future research, and presents concluding thoughts on the analysis.

#### Findings in Relation to the Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to explore and understand, from students' perceptions, the factors that influence successful transfer from a two-year college with an established articulation program to four-year universities. The following research and sub-questions were utilized to obtain student responses.

#### *Research Questions:*

1. What factors contribute to the successful transfer of two-year college students to four-year research universities?
2. In particular, what can be learned for improved practice by examining a two-year college transfer program?

#### *Sub-questions:*

1. What practices did the two-year institution have in place that were effective in preparing students for transfer to four-year universities?
2. What practices did the two-year institution have in place that did not facilitate successful transfer to four-year universities?

3. What practices did the four-year universities have in place that aided successful transfer?
4. What practices did the four-year universities have in place that limited successful transfer?

This study examined, via individual interviews, twenty-four students who all participated in the Transfer Admission Guarantee Program at Georgia Perimeter College, graduated from GPC and then transferred to the University of Georgia, the Georgia Institute of Technology or Georgia State University. All of the participants enrolled in Georgia Perimeter College with the intention of continuing their education at a four-year institution. The research data yielded a variety of categories and themes. These categories and themes were significant because they reflect views shared by participants and because of their connection to existing literature.

The literature review in Chapter Two indicated that increasing numbers of students are deciding to take a different path to reach their educational goal of a bachelor's degree by starting that journey at a two-year college and then transferring to a four-year college or university (Fast Facts, 2010). This trend is likely to result in more collaborative partnerships between two- and four-year institutions as they both have a significant role to play in student success.

#### Implications and Recommendations for Improved Practice in the Field

The findings of this study have practical implications for local and national politicians, academic and student affairs administrators, faculty members, academic advisors, students and their families, state university systems, and others who recognizes the benefits of a seamless and successful transfer from two-year to four-year colleges and universities. These findings also have implications for those concerned about the national agenda for college completion in a timely manner. This topic is also of particular interest to state legislatures who now are



examining ways to include retention, graduation, and transfer rates as factors in state performance based funding models in an effort to establish more accountability in funding higher education.

Understanding how a transfer program can benefit student transition, satisfaction, and success can help higher education administrators and others charged with developing and sustaining retention, transfer, and graduation initiatives make informed decisions about policies and procedures for improved student transition. For two-year colleges and four-year universities without a formal articulation program, having this understanding could help lay the foundation for the creation of a comprehensive transfer program. The practical implications of the findings of this study follow.

By sharing their experiences, both positive and negative, the participants in this study provide Georgia's two- and four-year colleges and universities with insight into the transfer process and into their experiences as participants in a transfer program. The recommendations for improved practice in the field are categorized into: (1) recommendations for two-year colleges, and (2) recommendations for four-year colleges.

The overarching recommendation is that both two-year and four-year institutions should establish comprehensive transfer programs that are intentional, obvious and readily available to students. Programs such as the Transfer Admission Guarantee Program at Georgia Perimeter College have proven to be successful in guiding students through their two-year college education and transferring seamlessly to four-year universities and can be easily replicated at other institutions. The following recommendations can be incorporated into a comprehensive transfer program or implemented as individual initiatives to strengthen the transfer process.

The recommendations for improved practice in the field are categorized into: (1) recommendations for two-year colleges, and (2) recommendations for four-year colleges.

### *Recommendations for Two-Year Colleges*

*Orientation:* Information about the transfer process should be discussed at new student orientation. Two-year colleges should have high expectations for their students, expectations which include obtaining an associate degree and continuing on to obtain a bachelor's degree. Even if colleges do not have comprehensive transfer programs, students should have accessible and easily understood information on the transfer process so they can get started on this path early on in their college career.

*Academic Advisement:* Accurate advisement is critical to a smooth transition from two-year colleges to four-year universities. Academic advisors at two-year colleges need to have extensive knowledge about the admission requirements, transfer policies, programs, and curriculum at the universities where their students are transferring. Having at least one knowledgeable point of contact for transfer academic advisement is essential so students can develop an academic plan that includes the needed coursework and required GPA to transfer. Advisors should work with faculty members to identify early in the term those students who are in academic distress and direct students to available support services before a decision to withdraw has been made.

Academic advisors at two-year colleges should also partner with advisors at four-year universities to “co-advise” students intending to transfer. As a “transfer team”, these advisors can stay in regular communication with each other and the students ensuring that the students are on track, enrolling in the appropriate courses, and maintaining the required GPA. This team

approach would give students at two-year colleges a point person at the four-year university who could answer questions and serve as a resource to students before they transfer.

*Student Engagement:* As discussed in Chapter Two, there has been significant research conducted on the correlation between student involvement (social and academic) at their college and academic success and goal attainment (Kuh, Kenzie, Schuh and Whitt, 2005). One recommendation for improved practice at two-year colleges is to establish student transfer organizations which could function much like student clubs with a focus on providing students with the tools they need to successfully transfer. Even though students receive transfer information from a number of different departments at two-year colleges: recruitment and admissions, enrollment and registration services, advising and counseling services, and academic departments, students would feel more comfortable connecting with other students who plan to transfer. This student organization could arrange guest speakers from four-year university partner institutions and even arrange trips to visit four-year universities with opportunities for two-year students to interact with four-year university students, faculty, and staff. This type of student organization would be particularly helpful to non-traditional and first-generation students providing a network of support.

*Peer Mentoring:* There is a need for peer mentoring – matching students who already transferred from the two-year college and are enrolled at a four-year university to students who are within a year of transferring to a four-year institution. Four-year students could return to the two-year colleges to meet with students informally and to provide seminars on life at a four-year university. This information about “lessons learned” would be informative and help answer questions that students might feel more comfortable asking fellow students instead of faculty and staff.

*Communication:* It would be advantageous for four-year universities to begin to communicate with two-year college students as soon as they have expressed an interest in transferring to that institution and continuing until transfer. This outreach of letters, text messages, and emails from admissions, academic departments, and transfer advisors would help students feel connected throughout their studies at their two-year college. The need for enhanced outreach and communication was voiced by the participants in this research study. Regular communication would help students see their educational path beyond the two-year college. This recommendation for communication and outreach is important for both the two-year institutions and the four-year universities.

#### *Recommendations for Four-Year Universities*

*Orientation:* It is important for four-year universities to establish “transfer orientations” which are separate and different from new student orientations. The needs of students who have been enrolled and/or graduated from a two-year college are much different from traditional age students right out of high school. Although transfer students do need to become familiar with the physical logistics of the university, they have needs for information such as transfer academic advisement and other services that support the unique needs of transfer students.

*Institutional Culture:* The majority of two-year college students are coming from an educational setting with small class sizes taught by faculty who are not typically involved in research. Adjustment at a large university, where classes are large and often taught by graduate assistants, can be unwieldy for some students.

Four-year institutions can counteract these adjustment problems with some of the recommendations listed in the two-year college section above. As stated in Chapter Four, some of this study’s participants felt isolated when they arrived at their four-year institutions. Many

indicated that they had to find their way and that most institutional attention was focused on first-time, full-time students. This “sink or swim” environment could result in student attrition.

*Academic Advisement:* As in the recommendation section for two- year colleges above, accurate and intrusive academic advisement is also needed at four-year universities. Transfer students need to be in contact with an advisor or advisors who are knowledgeable about transfer credit and can maintain contact with transfer students to ensure they are aware of the courses they need to take to graduate in a timely manner.

*Collaboration:* There is a need for more collaboration and partnerships between two-year and four-year college administrators. While competition for students will continue, it is advantageous for college administrators to work together for shared student success. Transfer students will continue to come to four-year universities in increased numbers. Four-year universities would be wise to place “transfer admissions counselors” at two-year colleges to recruit two-year college students who are within a year of graduating.

*Academic Preparedness:* Faculty at four-year universities could partner with faculty in the same discipline at two-year colleges to discuss common course outcomes and academic expectations at both sectors. This could be especially helpful in university systems such as in the State of Georgia where course transferability is critical to student success. Four-year faculty could be guest lecturers in select two-year college courses. These partnerships and collaborative initiatives are a win-win with all involved working toward a common goal of college completion and student success.

#### Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

One of the main limitations of this study was that it was based on only the responses from twenty-four students at three, four-year universities in Georgia. The voices of more students

who transferred from a two-year college with an articulation program to another four-year university in the University System of Georgia and to other institutions of higher education across the country need to be heard. It is important to examine whether the findings here would be replicated among other students who participated in an articulation program had the same kinds of experiences and perceptions about their transition to four-year universities.

A second limitation of this case study was that it captured student responses at one point in time. Students in the study had attended at least one year at their four-year university or had already graduated. It was beyond the scope of the research in this dissertation to study these students over a longer, continued period of time. A longitudinal study of these participants would reveal their successes and experiences over a period of time.

Another limitation of this qualitative study was that it did not include quantitative data on the academic performance of these students. Further research using institutional data would be valuable to examine grade point averages at the two-year college compared to grade point averages of these transfer program students at their four-year university. The participants shared anecdotal information about their academic performance at both the two- and four-year institutions in this case study but those accounts were not verified with institutional data.

It would be beneficial to focus a study on student motivation and the relationship that motivation plays in the transfer experience. Participants mentioned motivation in several of their responses, but it was not the focus of this research. Examining motivation could be enlightening since students coming to college now come from such diverse ages, cultures, races and socio-economic backgrounds.

Institutional data would also reveal the majors and courses in which students enrolled; the number of credit hours they acquired; whether or not they stayed on track academically; and if

they had enrolled in any remediation courses. In particular, it would be advantageous to research the academic success of these students in relationship to the major they pursued.

Participants in this study were very diverse and represented minorities, first generation college students, differing ages, gender, cultures, work experience, and socio economic backgrounds. Although participants relayed similar experiences in their interviews, it would be of interest for research to determine the extent to which student experiences vary according to these diverse characteristics and if the findings in this study would be consistent across these different student sub groups.

It would also be informative to have statistical data on the retention and graduation rates of students who participated in a transfer program at both institutions. Examining the graduation rates of students who participated in a transfer program would also provide insight to determine if these participants graduated in four years.

Lastly, more research is warranted on the components of transfer programs at other two-year colleges across the nation. This study focused on one large two-year college with a comprehensive transfer program, but there are many models that have been implemented as a result of the attention on timely degree completion and the trend of more and more students starting their college career at two-year colleges.

### Conclusion

This dissertation provides relevant insights into the structuring and effects of transfer programs at two-year colleges and informs both two-year and four-year institutions regarding the factors influencing transitions. It is imperative that in these days of limited budget dollars and increased accountability, two- and four-year institutions form partnerships to make transfer opportunities and programs available for the increasing number of students who begin their

higher education at a two-year college and then transfer to a four-year college or university to complete their bachelor's degrees.

Both two- and four-year institutions are grappling with finding the most effective ways to facilitate successful transfer and completion as more and more students are beginning their college careers at two-year colleges. Two-year colleges are focusing more attention on retaining and preparing students for transfer; four-year colleges are focusing on how to assist students as they acclimate to a new institution; and all institutions are focused on the bigger picture – that of student success.



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## APPENDIX A

### Participant Invitation Letter

<<Date>>

<<insert name and address here>>

.....

.....

Dear <<insert name>>:

I am a doctoral student at the Institute of Higher Education at the University of Georgia with research interest in the transfer process from two-year colleges to four-year universities. I am now writing to request your participation in a research study dealing with influences that affect the transfer process.

The general purpose of our study is learn from students who attended a two-year college, participated in a transfer program (TAG) and are now enrolled at the University of Georgia, Georgia State University, and Georgia Tech. Through individual interviews, we hope to learn more about what students indicate are the positive and negative factors that influence transfer from a two-year to a four-year institution. Specifically, we would like to better understand what influenced the decision to begin college at a two-year college with the intention of transferring to a four-year university in Georgia. This study may have practical implications for national and state policymakers and college administrators who are faced with improving college completion rates. The findings may also be used to develop strategies and procedures for successful transfer programs.

We are most interested in capturing the experiences you have had transferring from a two-year college with a transfer program to a four-year research university. If you are willing to participate and your schedule permits, I would like to interview you during the month of May and June 2011. The interview will not take more than one hour and you can choose the interview location.

If you choose to participate, efforts will be made to keep the personal information in your research record private and confidential. Unless you would prefer to be mentioned by name, your confidentiality will be maintained by using a pseudonym (such as, UGA student) both in the study and in the research records. With your permission, an audio record the conversation will be recorded to help remember what was said at the interview. The audio files will be destroyed once they have been fully transcribed. While conducting the study, only the principal investigator, Dr. James Hearn and I will have access to the audio files and transcripts. All information will be stored in a locked file or password-protected computer.

Your participation is voluntary. You can refuse to participate or stop taking part at any time without giving any reason, and without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You can ask to have all of the information about you, returned to you, removed from the research records, or destroyed. No foreseeable risks or discomforts are expected. There may also

be no potential benefits for you personally from this study. However, the potential benefits to the higher education field may include a better understanding of how successful transfer from two-year to four-year institutions works.

If you should have any questions about this research study, please feel free to contact me by email at [lfowler@uga.edu](mailto:lfowler@uga.edu) or by phone at 770-374-6164. For additional information about your rights as a participant in this study, please feel free to contact the University of Georgia Institutional Review Board Office at 706-542-3199.

Thank you for your consideration to participate in this research study. If you would be willing to make the time to participate, we would be truly grateful as we know your perspective will add value to the study. We will contact you via telephone or by email in the last week of May to schedule a time for us to talk, if you are willing and available. I will also be able to offer further explanations if you have any questions about the study. Again, thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Lisa Fowler  
Doctoral Student  
University of Georgia

Dr. James Hearn  
Principal Investigator  
University of Georgia



## Participation Follow-up Email

Dear [insert name],

I am a [professor / graduate student] at the University of Georgia. I am writing to follow-up on a letter that I sent you last week in hopes of interviewing you for my study on the factors that influence the successful transfer of two-year students to four-year research universities in Georgia.

Basically, I am interested in the experiences you had while at a two-year institution, your participation in a transfer program (TAG) and your experiences at your current four-year university. I was hoping to interview you as a way of helping me understand the process of transferring from a two-year college to a four-year university. I hope to conduct my interviews during the last week of May and the first week of June. If you are willing to participate and your schedule permits, I would like to interview you then. The interview will not take more than one hour.

I am attaching my initial letter of invitation and hope to hear back from you on the dates you will be open to interview with me. Thank you for your consideration. I look forward to hearing from you and to talking with you.

Lisa Fowler  
Co-Investigator  
Doctoral Student – University of Georgia

## APPENDIX C

### Informed Consent Form

*NAME*

*DATE*

**Title:** Factors That Influence Successful Transfer of Two-Year College Students to Four-Year Research Universities

**Principal Investigator:** James Hearn, Ph.D

**Co- Investigator:** Lisa Fowler, M.S., doctoral student

#### **I. Purpose**

You are invited to participate in a research study. The purpose of this research study is to identify factors that influence transfer from two-year colleges to four-year universities and describe the experiences of students who have transferred from two-year colleges to four-year universities. You are invited to participate in this study because you attended a two-year institution, participated in a transfer program and are now attending a research university in Georgia. Your participation will only take an hour of your time.

#### **II. Procedures**

If you decide to participate, you will be interviewed by the student co- investigator. The interview will last no more than 60 minutes.

The interview will be the focused on the factors that you identify as having had a positive or negative effect on your transfer to your current four-year university. Questions in this interview will include asking you to describe your experience at the two-year college, your participation in the transfer (TAG) program and your experiences at the four-year university where you are enrolled currently. Your contact information was provided for this study by Georgia Perimeter College TAG participant lists.

#### **III. Risks**

If you decide to participate, you will not have any more risks that you would in a normal day in life.

#### **IV. Benefits**

You may not gain any direct benefit from this study. However, reflecting upon the experience you had as a transfer student may help both you and the researchers understand these experiences better. It is also believed that the result of this research will provide national and state policymakers and college administrators critical information that can be utilized to identify procedures and best practices to facilitate a smoother transfer experience for future students.

#### **V. Voluntary Participation and Withdrawal**

Your participation in this research project is strictly voluntary. You have the right to refuse to participate. If you decide to be in the study and later change your mind, you have the option of leaving the study at any time without penalty. Additionally, you may also refuse to answer any question during the interview. No risks or penalties are involved.

#### **VI. Confidentiality**

All information collected for this study will be kept confidential to the extent allowed by law. Whatever personal information gathered during the interviews will be deleted when the study is presented and/or its results published. The recorded files will be kept in a password protected secured online archive for three months while being transcribed into text. During transcription, any references to people, places, or things that may be mentioned by you during the interviews will be concealed so as to avoid second-party data. The transcribed text will be saved in the researcher's personal computer protected by both a computer log in password and a document security password.

#### **VII. Contact person**

If you are interested in obtaining further information about this study, please contact:

Ms. Lisa Fowler  
3060 Pharr Court North  
#309  
Atlanta, GA 30305  
Phone: (770-374-6164)  
Email: [lffowler@uga.edu](mailto:lffowler@uga.edu)

You may also contact the principal investigator:

Dr. James Hearn  
Institute of Higher Education  
Meigs Hall  
University of Georgia  
Athens, GA. 30602  
Phone: (706) 542-7829  
Email: [jhearn@uga.edu](mailto:jhearn@uga.edu)

Additional questions or problems regarding your rights as a research participant should be addressed to The Chairperson, Institutional Review Board, University of Georgia, 629 Boyd Graduate Studies Research Center, Athens, Georgia 30602-0001; Telephone (706) 542-3199; E-Mail Address IRB@uga.edu Questions or concerns regarding your rights while participating in this study may be answered by contacting the University of Georgia Institutional Review Board (IRB) at 706-542-3199.

**VIII. Copy of Consent Form to Subject**

We will provide you with a copy of this consent form for your personal record. If you are willing to volunteer for this research project, please sign below.

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Printed Name**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Participant Signature**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Date**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Co- Investigator**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Date**

*Please sign both copies and return one copy to the researcher.*

## APPENDIX D

### Semi-structured Interview Protocol

1. How would you describe your overall experience at Georgia Perimeter College?
2. Did you find participation in the TAG program to be helpful in your transition to your current institution?
3. What were some of the things you found particularly helpful?
4. What things were not helpful?
5. What would you change about the TAG program at Georgia Perimeter College?
6. How would you describe your transition to (Georgia State, Georgia Institute of Technology, or the University of Georgia)?
7. What did you expect and what did you actually find when you got here, to your four-year institution?
8. What experiences played a major positive or negative role in the success or failure of your transfer to this four-year research university?
9. Can you tell me about the “culture” at Georgia Perimeter College? Did the “culture” have an impact on your transfer to a four-year university?
10. Can you tell me about the “culture” at the four-year university that you are currently attending?
11. Can you tell me about your grades and performance while at Georgia Perimeter College?

12. Can you tell me about your grades and performance at the four-year university that you are currently attending?
13. Through what social, academic, and administrative mechanisms do students new to a two-year and a four-year college become involved in the college both inside and outside of the classroom?
14. Who were the important people who facilitated or impeded your transfer?
15. What would you change to facilitate a smoother transfer from your two-year college to your four-year university?