

WE ARE STILL HERE:
A NARRATIVE INQUIRY EXPLORING THE SOPHOMORE PERSPECTIVE ON
SURVIVING FIRST-YEAR COLLEGE ATTRITION

Shareika L.M. Fisher

Master of Education, University of Louisville, 2012

Bachelor of Arts, University of Louisville, 2010

Submitted to the Department of Counseling, Educational Leadership,
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and the faculty of the Graduate School of
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The following faculty members have examined the final copy of this dissertation for form and content, and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Doctor of Education with a major in Educational Leadership.

Kristin Sherwood, Committee Chair

Jody Fiorini, Committee Member

Jean Patterson, Committee Member

Alicia Thompson, Committee Member

Rhonda Lewis, Committee Member

Accepted for the College of Applied Studies

Shirley Lefever, Dean

Accepted for the Graduate School

Coleen Pugh, Dean

DEDICATION

This is for my family. May I contribute to the honor through the life I live and my character, rather than through my accomplishments. Let this be a testament to the values you have instilled in me, and the beginning of a greater legacy to carry forth pride. I love you all.

I don't know how, but YOU did it!

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Three years of hard work and much encouragement to keep pushing towards a life-long dream. I could not have made it to end without the help and prayers of many people. I would like to thank my family who has always set high expectations and standards for me. My mom who sacrificed so much of her life for my brother and I to be where we are today. To my friends, without each of you, these three years would have seemed like a lifetime. I appreciate your check-ins, humor, and willingness to listen to me share the highs and lows of this journey. Dr. Sherwood, my advisor, chair, and mentor you have made me feel more than capable and competent throughout this process. I appreciate the many hours of edits, your willingness to assist me, dedication to teaching, and the post-it notes of encouragement. To my study participants thank you for allowing to share your stories. Without you this study would not have been complete. To anyone who took time to send notes and words of encouragement I thank you. For anyone who has a goal and struggled to persevere know that you will make it and it will be worth it all in the end. Never give-up and remember your why.

ABSTRACT

This research study focuses on retention of First-Year students with a qualitative approach to collecting data. The purpose of this study was to explore lived experiences of sophomore students who were retained between their first and second year at their university. The four sophomore participants reflect on their first-year student experiences to provide a deeper understanding of retention from the student perspective. This research will explore the ways in which the sophomore participants make sense of their college transition and how they responded to surprises during their first-year experience as a student on their campus using the organizational theory Sensemaking and Surprise by Louis (1980).

The four sophomore participants contributed to the findings through their reflections of the first-year student experiences on their individual college campuses. Each student provided data through two interview meetings and email. The following document shares their stories using Narrative Inquiry as the research methodology. Their unique experiences provide insight on shared transition challenges they faced on their campuses. The conclusions and implications shared from this data can assist those who are interested in the transition and retention of first-year college students.

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CHAPTER 1

American universities are trying to be more intentional with their efforts to keep students in school because retention and graduation rates are not at the desired level. As post-secondary educators look to aid new students in their transition to college it is imperative that their needs are understood; both in and outside of the classroom. A study conducted by Raisman (2013) of 1669 national colleges and universities found the consequences of ineffective retention practices contribute to annual losses averaging \$16.5 billion dollars among American universities. While this concern is of interest for the universities due to loss in revenue; it is the consequences of the loss of education for the students who are not being retained that is most concerning.

This is not a new issue faced by Institutions of Higher Education (IHE) and with billions of dollars in revenue being lost each year Higher Education professionals are beginning to focus their efforts on retention of first-year students, which seems to be the most critical group on college campuses. During the last thirty years research has shown a consistent pattern in which 30% of freshman students are not returning for their sophomore year (*Freshman college retention rates: National Universities*, 2017; Porter, 1989). The majority of all students leave the university within their first two years or 30 credit hours of completion on a college campus. Nationally, one in three first-year students do not persist to their sophomore year. Research suggests, “if students do not resolve transition issues within the first year..., their likelihood of persisting at that same institution is diminished” (Stewart, Lim, & Kim, 2015, p. 12). Within the last decade 40% of the first-year students entering college leave their campuses and do not persist to degree completion within six years of starting (Aulck, Velagapudi, Blumenstock, & West, 2016; Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie, & Gonyea, 2008).

In order to highlight and define this specific population of first-year students this study will include data specific to new students transitioning from high school directly into college (Camara, 2013; Conley, 2012). New students will exclude those who are defined as transfer and adult learners. While all can be new students on a campus, this study will specifically provide insight on the first-year students who have no previous experience as a fulltime college student and an average age range of 18-20 years.

Students enter college with expectations and goals to receive formal education that could result in a certificate, licensure, and/or degree. Students hope that additional studies will provide them with opportunities and time to explore disciplines that will yield an outcome. Identifying ways to aid retention to ensure that their goals are achievable and that their expectations are met while they are in school is the responsibility of the institution. Meeting the students' needs to ensure they remain in school is ultimately how universities measure retention. The evaluation of the academic and social supports the university provides to aid retention are not yielding the results universities or students would hope (Braxton, Doyle, Hartley III, Hirschy, & Jones, 2013; Tinto, 1999). The struggle with increasing retention is not one that is selective to institution type or size.

College campuses are trying to provide students a multitude of resources and tools in order to address the additional needs that are beyond the academic realm. Researchers have found that poor academic performance can be related to high levels of psychological distress (Harward, 2011). With the understanding that students need support both in and outside of the classroom to be successful in continuing their education and achieving their individual goals (Braxton et al., 2013; Conley, 2007; Nora et al., 2012) all Kansas public and private universities have developed additional varieties of support to assist a student beyond the classroom. These

areas of support span a range of resources that address the holistic (social, physical, mental, emotional) needs of college students. Additionally, many universities try to equip new students prior to their arrival to campus through New Student Orientation programs. Many campus personnel understand that success of new students can begin before they start classes, which is why many campuses provide New Student Orientations (NSO) and Welcome Week programming to assist students with adapting to their new role and environment. These programs, along with the support provided to new students throughout their first year of college, are designed to address holistic needs and build a strong academic foundation for these students. Higher Education has had an increase in freshman specific programming since the 1990's (Finn & Rock, 1997; Gerdes & Mallinckrodt, 1994). While these services start with Orientation and Welcome Week activities many additional supports continue throughout the first year to support these students in their transition.

The retention efforts of Kansas universities provide insight into national retention efforts. However, their additional programs are similar to other efforts that have been implemented across the country to support the retention of first-year students (Mertes & Jankoviak, 2016; Stewart et al., 2015; Tinto, 1999). These efforts include the development of programs and curriculum designed solely for first-year students. Typical seminar courses are one credit hour course offered to provide additional support in the transition of a new student to their campus. In addition to curriculum, universities often offer freshman mentoring programs. These programs can be optional for students new to campus requesting to have an upper classman mentor them throughout their first year (MidAmerica Nazarene University, 2019).

Along with Kansas, many universities across the nation are wondering the best way to assist their first-year students that will result in an increase in their retention. As universities

continue to seek to understand factors that aid student retention within their first year, a closer look into what these students find effective is necessary (Tinto, 2017). While academic support exists for students on most college campuses, practitioners are aware that there are various challenges students face within their first year of college that are not being adequately addressed by the programs available (Conley, 2007; Stewart et al., 2015).

Research Problem

Universities have tried to increase the retention of first-year students in many ways including improved transition practices for incoming students (Braxton et al., 2013; Fike & Fike, 2008; Nora et al., 2012; Tinto, 1999). Universities have expanded resources for first year students by providing out of the classroom support that aids in addressing their holistic needs (Edmunds et al., 2017; Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010; Kuh et al., 2008). This trend is evidenced by the growing number of departments across college campuses that are focused not only on academic support, but the overall well-being of the student body (i.e., counseling centers, wellness and recreation facilities, diversity centers, and student involvement offices). This additional support can begin from the time the student decides to commit to attend the university.

Extending support opportunities beyond the classroom throughout the student's first year transition to higher education is a key strategy used by college administrators to increase student retention and persistence to completion. In their research, Braxton et al. (2013) looked at a number of factors for student persistence and their attainment of their bachelor's degree. This research suggested that retaining a student costs far less than recruiting a new student to a college campus (Raisman, 2013). While retention rates affect the bottom line of the university, students

who are not retained lose the most. Students who do not persist or are not retained lose time, money, and confidence if they pursue a degree and do not complete.

While universities are investing in the success of their students upon their entry as freshmen, the students are also investing time and money as they begin their post-secondary studies. Students who do not persist to graduation are losing full-time work experience while paying the cost of schooling their first year. A study by Raisman (2013) evaluated the cost of retaining a student. Students who graduate college earn over a million dollars more in wages over their lifetime in comparison to their peers who enter the workforce after receiving their high school diploma (Ma, Pender, & Welch, 2016). Students who do not persist to degree completion typically lose a year or more as a fulltime employee in the workforce. This means that on average each year a student can lose more than \$60,000 if they do not continue to persist to graduation. This number includes a year of lost wages in addition to the average cost of college tuition and fees. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2019a) 85% of undergraduate students at four-year degree granting postsecondary institutions enrolled full time utilize financial aid which includes student loans to assist to pay for college. Students who use student loans for assistance for their first year and do not return can have even greater losses due to the interest rates for both public and private education loans.

The expression “stopping out” refers to a situation when “students do not complete their plan of study within the normal schedule, having skipped a term or more, and then return to college” (Hoyt & Winn, 2004, p. 397). If the student returns to college later, stopping out causes a longer journey to graduation (Hoyt & Winn, 2004). Many will face increase of responsibilities as an older adult, and may have to balance “conflicts between their jobs and college” (Hoyt & Winn, 2004, p. 403). Research suggests that stop outs are significantly impacted by these

variables, and may return to college part-time, with an even higher tuition rate because the cost of higher education increases annually by 3.7% on average nationally (College Board, 2018).

While universities continue to expand resources to aid in the retention of first-year students by adding holistic support for them, retention rates continue to be stagnant for this population of students (Aulck et al., 2016; Fike & Fike, 2008; Nora et al., 2012; Tinto, 1999). Nationally, the average of retained students from the first to their second year of college has remained relatively stationary at approximately 60-65% (Conley & Educational Policy Improvement, 2012; Fike & Fike, 2008). The university, as well as the first-year student, experience losses that are financially critical. Students experience professional and personal loss through failure to persist toward degree completion.

Part of the issue might be administrators continue to expand resources for first-year students without garnering input from the students they are serving. Nationally, universities continue to gather quantitative data from their retention programs, however through my research of literature I have found that there is a gap in research of qualitative empirical studies from the field indicating student input into the design and evaluation of the programs. Higher Education Administrators continue to “use nationally developed models” implemented by university personnel strategic retention teams “rather than institutional-specific data to identify potential factors involved” in their specific student body attrition (Mertes & Jankoviak, 2016, p. 9; Tinto, 1999). These teams and committees develop long-term retention plans to provide greater student engagement in hopes of driving persistence for first-year students to continue their education (Kuh et al., 2008). Administrators are implementing initiatives and programs to support retention of this student population without gathering input from the students these programs directly affect (Tinto, 2017). While campus administration continue to explore ways to aid in

their retention of first-year students by adding resources for their success, studies evaluating the effectiveness of these resources through the perspectives of the students retained through these supports are limited (Fike & Fike, 2008). Implementation of new programs to aid in the efforts of retention should be evaluated to ensure the desired outcomes are meeting the unique needs of the institution and the students (Fike & Fike, 2008).

Quantitative data indicates that retention remains problematic for many first-year students, however there are students who continue to persist to their sophomore year (Braxton et al., 2013). With the many factors they may have faced over their first year these students return to continue toward degree completion. Listening to the stories of the students retained could be the university's key to success in understanding how to best support first-year students.

Involving sophomore students in research to illuminate their first-year transition experience, the changes they successfully made, and the challenges they faced could reveal effective resources and strategies that assisted their first-year transition and persistence to their sophomore year (Bragg & Taylor, 2014; Kuh et al., 2008).

Having direct feedback sophomore students could build understanding of the lived experiences of these students, and how the retention efforts influenced the achievement of their goals. Continually expanding resources for students on campuses has not resulted in a national increase in retaining the first-year student population in over 60 years. Universities could benefit from learning about the changes and surprises first-year students' encounter on their campuses. The insight gained from these students regarding retention efforts could benefit administrators and their decision-making. As universities continue to strive to provide additional and effective resources that aid in the transition of first-year students, understanding these students' perspectives may provide insight into more effective ways to retain these students a

second year and beyond on their campuses (Braxton et al., 2013; Fike & Fike, 2008; Nora et al., 2012; Tinto, 1999).

Theoretical Framework: Sense Making and Surprise

The theoretical framework is the anchor by which a qualitative research study is approached (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The chosen theory provides the foundation for the methodological process (Clark & Creswell, 2015). For this study an organizational theory developed by Louis (1980); Sense Making and Surprise has been chosen. This theory describes the process by which newcomers to an organization perceive their new experience through change, contrast, and surprise (Louis, 1980). This framework allowed individuals new to an organization to describe how they coped and made sense of their transition as a newcomer. Similar to the attrition of first-year students, organizations in the late 1980's were concerned with the growing turnover rates for new employees (Louis, 1980). The foundation of this theory assesses the “crucial gaps of organizational entry..., [providing] appreciation of the newcomers typically during the transition period and how they cope with their experiences...[this] is fundamental to designing entry practices that facilitate newcomers' adaptation in the new setting” (Louis, 1980, p. 226). Sense Making and Surprise provides a social approach in understanding how an individual learns and copes as they transition into a new environment.

Sense Making is a social cognition theory of change. Sense Making is a term coined by Louis (1980). It is how an individual or an organization learns. This theory conceptualizes and suggests how individuals are constantly trying to make sense of their world. Sense Making suggests that interaction and engaging activities help people to reexamine their current understanding and perceptions of topics and issues (Kezar, 2014). This theory describes how organizations or individuals compare past experiences or former knowledge to provide context to

a new occurrence or sequence of events over time (Harper & Newman, 2016). The process of Sense Making begins when individuals make assumptions and predictions of future events (Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005). Louis (1980) has argued that when the individual experiences something unexpected, what Louis referred to as a surprise, the result is cognitive dissonance, which must be examined in order to cope. The meaning of surprise is assigned as an output of the Sense Making process. Sense Making is the cognitive process by which an individual interprets and adapts to changes and surprises in their environments. Utilizing this framework will allow me to understand the process of being a new student on campus and how each individual socialized and coped in their new environment (Louis, 1980).

Change, contrast, and surprise. Change, contrast, and surprise are three concepts in which an individual views an experience (Louis, 1980). These three concepts are stages of the theoretical process of Sense Making, “Although all refer to differences associated with entering new settings, they focus on separate types of differences” (Louis, 1980, p. 235). Understanding change, contrast, and surprise in the context of a new student to a university provided insight to their transition into the organization of the university.

Change refers to the difference between old and new settings. Louis (1980) described the process of understanding transitions individuals usually experience a change, of sorts. The more similar the setting, the less change a student will experience in transition from high school to college. With change there is a notable and knowable difference. Evidence of change is physical, publicly recognized and is anticipated or known in advance by the individual experiencing change. Change can be noted by a new location, change in phone number, or a new position (Louis, 1980). Individuals experience a variety of changes in the transition to college. Many first-year students experience a change in their physical location to a new educational

setting. While they may attend college in their hometown, they are physically going to attend classes at a college, they will no longer be physically going to their former primary school. Additionally, students who move away for college may be experiencing living on their own for the first time. Living on their own or with a new roommate is a change that is physically and publicly noticeable. The latter examples are what Louis (1980) describe as change. The three examples are physical changes that are seen by the individual and those around them.

Contrast refers to the prior context of the individual's world. Contrast takes the previous experiences of the individual to provide context to the new experiences the individual encounters. Differing from change, contrast is personally noticeable rather than publicly noticed. Louis (1980) described contrast as being “person-specific and represents subjective differences between new and old settings by which the newcomer characterizes and defines the new situation” (pp. 11-12). Therefore, two individuals both experiencing the same change such as entering college could have different contrasts emerge. Contrast is an internal difference being experienced by the newcomer. When a newcomer has experienced a new environment there are particular features that emerge. The features that emerge are determined by the context of the individual's previous setting. “It appears that for individuals in new situations, some minimum number of contrasts emerge” (Louis, 1980, p. 237). An example of contrast for this study would be a student who attended a conservative private primary and secondary school has chosen to attend a public liberal arts college. The student carries their experience from their former school into their new role as a new student on campus, however there could be contrast in their role as a student in their new setting. In this example “there are differences between settings and characteristics within (new) settings [that] contribute to the selection of features experienced” (Louis, 1980, p. 236). While the student may understand their role as a student, there could be

contrast in student dress expectations, professor lecture styles, and course topics. Contrast allows the newcomer to cope using previous experiences that may be similar, or not to understand their role in the context of their new environment.

Surprise happens when there is a difference between expectation and reality. As described by Louis (1980) surprise occurs when an individual is new to an organizational setting. A student who encounters a surprise has mismatched expectations of the idea of the experience versus the lived actuality of the experience. Students have their own varying expectations of what college life will consist. Depending on their previous contexts: social, educational, and cultural experiences those provide context in which the individual forms expectations and assumptions about the new setting. When the reality differs from the expectation, the individual experiences a surprise. Surprises can be both positive and negative. Adaptation is required regardless if the surprise that is experienced is positive or negative.

There are five forms of surprise: unfulfilled expectations, aspects of new role are unanticipated, new experience/environment feels different than expected, expectation of self or skills from previous environment are not met, and previous cultural contexts from previous setting are culturally dissimilar (Louis, 1980). The chart below provides examples of an individuals' experience within the context of transitioning to college and each type of surprise as described by Louis (1980).

Table 1 *Examples of the Five Forms of Surprise*

TYPE OF SURPRISE	EXPLANATION OF SURPRISE	CONTEXT ASSUMPTION	CONTEXT EXPERIENCE
UNFULFILLED EXPECTATIONS	Conscious expectations are not met through early experience of transition	College is going to be fun! I will make new friends every day!	I have not met many friends these first weeks of school
ASPECTS OF NEW ROLE ARE UNANTICIPATED	Expectations both conscious and unconscious about oneself are unmet	I was the valedictorian of my class college will be easy	I failed my midterm maybe I am not as smart as I think
NEW EXPERIENCE/ ENVIRONMENT FEELS DIFFERENT THAN EXPECTED	Aspects not considered prior to the experience were identified by the individual to be important but become noticeable due to the presence or absence and is considered undesirable	I am going to enjoy the freedom of being away from home during college	I had no idea how important seeing my family regularly was to me until I had not seen them in over a month
EXPECTATION OF SELF OR SKILLS FROM PREVIOUS ENVIRONMENT ARE NOT MET	What will happen is accurately anticipated but how it will feel is not accurately assessed by the individual	I know I will have to manage my own money in college	I had no idea how hard it is to maintain a budget
CULTURAL CONTEXTS FROM PREVIOUS SETTING ARE CULTURALLY DISSIMILAR	Cultural assumptions are brought from previous context as operating guide but fails individual in new setting	A student from a rural town moves to a larger city for college	Campus culture and other students are not culturally similar and do not share assumptions or beliefs

Note. Created from *Surprise and Sense Making: What Newcomers Experience in Entering Unfamiliar Organizational Settings* by M.R. Louis, 1980, *Administrative Science Quarterly* 25(2), p. 239-241.

As shown in the examples in the chart a student can experience any of these surprises during college in various context of their lives. Surprises can include adaptation in a number of contexts including social, academic, personal/emotional, financial, and cultural areas. With these various forms of surprise the newcomer or student for the purposes of this study are required to assess the experience and adapt accordingly (Harper & Newman, 2016; Weick et al., 2005).

Sensemaking and Surprise (Louis, 1980) provides context to the transition that is happening when a first-year student is entering the university. While students are experiencing an academic change, Gerdes and Mallinckrodt (1994) noted, “Academic adjustment involves more than a student’s scholarly potential, with adjustment comes expectations formed before enrollment about anticipated adjustment” (p.281-282). Understanding how a student balances their expectations formed before enrollment versus their lived reality could provide helpful insight to assist with the retention of first-year students.

This framework allows the student experience to be the guide for assisting and designing the organizational structure that facilitates in their transition (Louis, 1980). When providing context to this study, using Sense Making and Surprise will allow me to interpret how the students made sense of their first-year experiences as well as examine surprises students may have encountered, how they adapted to change, and balanced contrast within their first-year that aided in their retention. This theory provides a foundation to assess how the students coped with their new roles and made sense of their first year of college which allowed them to persist to their sophomore year.

Examining the relationship between university efforts to aid retention of first-year students with the needs of this student population could provide a unique lens through which colleges may learn other ways to approach issues affecting retention. Learning from first-year students about their lived experiences and what their needs are in order to continue their education could be a new context in which the university could consider when making sense of their future retention planning efforts. Doing so could aid in university retention practices versus the lived experiences of the first-year student and the administrative goal to improve retention of

first-year students. The sophomore student perspective could provide a new context for their approach to first-year strategic retention planning.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study is to explore lived experiences of sophomore students who were retained between their first and second year at their university. The sophomore participants will reflect on their first-year student experiences to provide a deeper understanding of retention from the student prospective, often an unlikely voice in Higher Education. This research will explore the ways in which the sophomore participants make sense of their college transition and how they responded to surprises during their first-year experience as a student on their campus.

Research Questions

To guide this study, the following research questions will inform the direction of the research:

1. How do sophomore participants describe their first year in college?
2. How do sophomore participants make sense of their first-year transition experiences?
3. How do sophomore participants describe the influence of their first year in college on their persistence to degree completion at the university?

CHAPTER 2

Review of Literature

To understand the many factors regarding retention for the first-year college student, this literature review explores various definitions of college readiness and student success and also explores the first-year college student transition and college readiness. In this review of literature, I examine academic achievement as it relates to the first-year student's holistic development and suggested practices/strategies for retention of this population on college campuses.

Defining College Readiness

When reviewing the literature, college readiness appeared as an important discussion in retention of first year students, and the definition of college readiness varied between students and administrators. While students have their personal definitions, universities have their data driven definitions of retention (Bragg & Taylor, 2014; Conley, 2012). Personnel such as admissions officers have definitions based on the college's admission requirements. First-year students seemed to define college readiness in ways that consisted of personal goals for success, which included studying abroad and living away from home without much help from family. In contrast, the definitions of college readiness and student success for college administrators and personnel were founded on academics that included test scores and high school Grade Point Averages (GPA). There seems to be multiple operational and applied definitions of college readiness and student success across the country and among the key stakeholders involved (Camara, 2013; Conley, 2012). This is shown by the varying high school academic requirements and examinations that differ from state to state (Gallo, 2017). The definition of college readiness is determined by the narrator's angle or perspective (Conley, 2007; Gallo, 2017; Lombardi,

Seburn, & Conley, 2011). This phenomenon was explored by Gallo (2017) who interviewed second semester college freshmen and three college admission officers from a public university in New York. In his research, Gallo observed that college readiness was defined in vague and intangible terms and meant something different for students than for administrators. This is not unlike the research of Lombardi et al. (2011) who provided clarification between college eligible and college-ready students. Within this body of literature, Lombardi et al. (2011) suggested that while a student may be college eligible by meeting the admissions requirements, a student may not be college ready. This research suggests that the definition of college readiness for the university and the students differs significantly.

A college ready student operationally has been defined by Conley (2012) as a student who is able to enroll and succeed in college level coursework without remediation. While this definition may be the viewpoint by which faculty determine college readiness, this definition is one of many perspectives. Gallo (2017) took a further glance into college student readiness with his study, finding that while students were able to gain admission into the university, many of them reflected that they did not feel they were college ready. This research aligns with other studies suggesting that college readiness could include other variables outside of academics. These additional variables could determine a student's level of success in college level coursework (Bragg & Taylor, 2014; Conley & French, 2014). Many of these researchers have implied that the current definition of college eligibility only assesses test scores. Assessing college readiness while solely looking at Grade Point Average (GPA) and test scores does not provide a holistic lens to assess their other college ready skills and excludes other factors like personal attitudes and behavior that could be additional indicators of college readiness.

Attitudes and behaviors as college readiness components. Researchers have assessed college readiness and identified attitudes and behaviors contributing to student success (Brackett, Rivers, & Salovey, 2011; Conley & French, 2014). These included academic, non-cognitive, and social/emotional support needed for students to succeed. Gallo (2017) conducted a qualitative study that included interviews of 13 college freshmen in their second semester after transitioning into college. He found that eight of the thirteen students did not feel they were adequately prepared for college. The students in the study seemed to have contrast between what they had expected versus what they experienced.

One of the factors to which difficulties in adjusting to university have attributed the discrepancy between the expectations about university life that students have before starting their studies and their actual experience after they have begun their university careers. Consequently, many students experience considerable difficulty in adjusting to life at university (Pancer, Hunsberger, Pratt, & Alisat, 2000, p. 35).

Gallo (2017) focused interviews more on adjustments for new college students to include both academic and personal behaviors that indicate a college ready student. Understanding that students, staff, and faculty have differing expectations showed that these 13 students who were transitioning did not have expectations that were matched and therefore they felt that they were not adequately prepared for college.

If this is the case, then administrators could begin to look at ways to aid in the development of these skills of first-year students as they transition into college. Post-secondary educators could extend these learning opportunities and resources through their first year. The American Institutes for Research explored this concept of college readiness with the expanded lens to improve transition by incorporating social and emotional learning (SEL) (Conley, 2007).

The research by Gallo (2017) produced significant findings in which the university's operational definition of college readiness did not align with the lived experiences of the college students at this university in New York. Students perceived the definition of college readiness to include a more holistic meaning and the admissions officers defined student success with a holistic lens as well. Over half of the students in this study felt they lacked at least one of the college ready attitudes or behaviors necessary for academic success. College readiness when commonly defined could provide a framework by which organizations and students can build upon. Expanding the definition to include both college eligible requirements (i.e: test scores and grades) as well as college ready requirements (i.e., non-cognitive, social attitudes, emotional behaviors) could provide a more comprehensive approach by which students and college personnel strive to fully understand the successful transition of first-year students (Camara, 2013). Having clear expectations for all parties involved (i.e.: faculty, staff, and students) could be the start of retaining more of this population of students at Institutions of Higher Education.

Transition and College Readiness

In order to understand the development of a new college student as they transition from high school to college it is useful to examine some basic development theories that drive the administrative office in Higher Education charged with overseeing first year students. A transition is defined by (Goodman, Schlossberg, & Anderson, 2006; Schlossberg, Waters, & Goodman, 1995) as “any event, or non-event, that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions and roles.” (2006, p. 33). This basic knowledge is important to understanding the new student and therefore describe the event of starting college as a transition. Transitions have added contexts that include both anticipated and unanticipated transitions (Evans et al., 2010). It is important to understand the “factors that influences one’s ability to cope with a transition”

(Evans et al., 2010, p. 216). These factors include what Goodman et al. (2006), described in the transition of new students and the four variables to consider: situation (starting college), self (the student), support (family and university resources and personnel), and strategies (coping methods in the transition provided by university, family and friend support, and the student themselves). These four variables provide insight into how students manage transition using internal and external resources.

When students reach college, campus personnel assume they arrive ready to be academically capable and independent adults (Conley & French, 2014; Edmunds et al., 2017). However, many of these students are living on their own for the first time, doing their own laundry or cooking their first meal, meeting new people and being socially responsible while also trying to maintain academic expectations. For other students, this change means transitioning from a small town to a big city; or for others it could be understanding the difference between high school academics and college academics. Regardless, all students new to college are experiencing what is defined by Schlossberg et al. (1995) as a “transition.” It is important that the student as well as their support systems make sense of their new roles and cope accordingly with the various levels of stress and situations that can arise during this eventful period.

Context of transition and college readiness. College readiness is based on the individual and each student’s transition and depends on the previous educational experiences they enter their campus with (Edmunds et al., 2017). The former educational setting provides context the students use to transition to college. A national qualitative study conducted by Harper and Newman (2016) focused on the transition of black college males across the country. These men were transitioning into varying institutional types (private, public,

community colleges, and historically black colleges) with previous academic, social, and cultural contexts that at times were much different than their new universities. The study aimed to show the differing experiences of these men and how they were able to cope with the college transition. Of particular interest was how these students were able to resolve academic challenges while also adjusting to college. Harper and Newman (2016) found that the men who had similar environments to their new college setting were more likely to experience less incongruence and were better able to cope with challenges based on the context of their previous educational experiences. Meanwhile other males in the study who struggled during their first-year transition were in new settings that were dissimilar from previous experiences. Their study provided further insight into adding social integration and cultural context as part of the discussion when looking at college readiness for first-year students to the university. This study provided a national view of transition and college readiness for first-year students in the United States (US).

College withdrawal rates indicate that among the factors explored by Harper and Newman (2016); there are other factors besides having a high enough standardized test score to gain entrance to a university that hinder student retention. The curriculum covered from pre-k through 12th grade may not prepare students for the transition to college. “Successful completion of those courses is considered to represent students’ mastery of the subject matter necessary for success in college” (Edmunds et al., 2017, p. 2). However, it seems if students successfully complete their pre-college coursework and pass examinations to obtain entry into college, the first-year retention rates should yield less attrition, which has not been the case. Expanding the role of higher education professionals to assess and evaluate students’ college readiness beyond academic assessment and exploring the interventions and policies that currently exist to assist

first-year students in their transition could provide further context for universities to assist in this transition process (Tierney & Sablan, 2014).

Understanding the basic needs of the personal transition students face as they prepare for college would require educators to look more closely at various factors that could aid or hinder their students' success throughout their post-secondary career. Researchers have recently looked into these factors by examining self-regulatory behaviors, especially ownership learning and self-efficacy (Bragg & Taylor, 2014; Conley & French, 2014). Exploring other factors as to why students are withdrawing from college include recurring patterns that are linked to stress of the transition from high school; these include financial concerns, health issues, and personal problems (Pancer et al., 2000). Of the latter, personal issues were found to be the most common. Parker, Hogan, Eastabrook, Oke, and Wood (2006) found these personal issues included an array of concerns ranging from making new friends, feelings of homesickness, and adjusting to the new demands of the college academic learning environment. Understanding these additional factors in order to render success both in and outside of the classroom could aid in the academic success of first-year students.

Academic Achievement and Holistic Support

As universities continue to explore ways in which they can retain students, researchers have investigated other risk factors that could hinder the success of students and contribute to higher rates of attrition. The beginning of college can be an exciting and overwhelming time for students. While many students may be academically prepared, the beginning of college in the US is pressure driven as it marks the onset of adulthood and independence. Feelings of excitement, anxiety, and pressure all can hinder student success in the first year. Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, and Schellinger (2011) assessed social and emotional learning and

student achievement in a meta-analysis study of pre-k through 12th grade students. Durlak et al. (2011) found that students who had social and emotional learning (SEL) curriculum within their formative years of education had improved academic performance. The SEL curriculum implementation showed positive results on students' academic performance at all grade levels.

Other researchers have explored improved academic performance and student engagement as well. Klem and Connell (2004) examined the relationship between student engagement and support from teachers. In their study, students who perceived a supportive educational environment were more likely to be engaged in school and perform higher on examinations. Understanding the social and emotional support necessary for students to be successful is a global concern. Dwyer and Cummings (2001) examined stress, social support, and coping strategies among 75 Canadian college students. Within their findings stressors of transitioning to college were underestimated by their participants, who found it difficult to handle the stressful transition which resulted in decreased academic performance. In an extension of this study, Friedlander, Reid, Shupak, and Cribbie (2007) explored social support, self-esteem, and stress as predictors of adjustment for the first-year college student. Their research was an exploration of why first-year students had higher attrition rates than students in subsequent years of their post-secondary studies. They looked at the adjustment of first-year college students from their first fall semester to the first spring semester. Their research included an examination of these students' social environment and their involvement with social activities provided by the university experience. Additionally, they looked at the emotional environment of the students, which included an examination of stress at the midpoint in their first semester and then again 10 weeks later during their second semester. Friedlander et al. (2007) found that higher levels of stress were reported at the start of the new academic year. Student participants

attributed social support as contributing to their adjustment into college. Self-esteem specific categories such as academic and social self-esteem were significant obstacles to adjustment within those particular areas.

Through these studies researchers have learned that first-year students face difficulties transitioning in college. The impact of the first-year students' coping strategies, resources of support, and their ability to manage stress and other emotions can influence their learning and academic success. Understanding that students may need social and emotional support as well as academic support as they transition to college could be key in assisting first-year student retention rates.

Strategies and Practices for Retention

Universities have implemented programs and provided academic resources to ensure the success of students and aid in retention of students. However the retention of freshman to their sophomore year of college has remained at a plateau over the last several decades (*Freshman college retention rates: National Universities*, 2017; Porter, 1989). Colleges have struggled to improve retention rates despite 80 years of research on the topic (Braxton et al., 2013). This section will focus on the strategies and practices universities have commonly used to increase retention: social integration and engagement of students through orientation programs, college and career programs, technical and adaptive skills, and social emotional learning curriculum.

Social integration and engagement. Social integration is often described as the structure of social relationships (Wilcox, Winn, & Fyvie-Gauld, 2005). Engagement for the purposes of this study involves the student's level of commitment to the university in which they attend, and engagement is shown through the individual's holistic involvement with coursework and co-curricular activities (Kahu, 2013; Kuh, 2007). Social integration and engagement among

first-year college students can be accomplished through a number of ways. While universities can facilitate student integration and offer opportunities for engagement students decide the ways to get involved and make friends on their campus.

A study conducted by Braxton et al. (2013) assessed student persistence on college campuses. They found students who were provided with a good social integration program within their first year in college were more likely to persist. Social integration, for example, could begin from orientation programs, weeks of welcome, cohort based first-year seminars courses, and living learning communities. Additionally, students who experience a sense of community had statistical significance that showed a greater psychosocial engagement of students (Durlak et al., 2011).

The connections that students make with their peers, faculty, and staff within their first year can be critical to their persistence (Friedlander et al., 2007; Gerdes & Mallinckrodt, 1994). These connections, in turn, influence an institution's ability to retain the student from their freshman to sophomore year. In addition to the previous examples, colleges and universities have tried to add programming specific for first-year students that facilitates and jump-starts a sense of community for these students (Kuh, 2007). These additional programming efforts can be academic and social that focuses on the first-year student population. A social program could include a first-year residence hall planning committee and an academic program could be a first-year seminar course. Providing these social opportunities and academic programs are ways in which the university aims to assist in facilitating social integration and engagement (Kuh et al., 2008). First-year seminar courses are extensions of orientation programs that provide students with the basic foundational skills to be a successful student in college. These courses when coupled with other social programs, can aid in student engagement

in hopes that within these frameworks students find a sense of community while also gaining the skills necessary to manage the college transition (Bragg & Taylor, 2014; Conley & French, 2014).

College and career ready programs. College and career ready programs provide support for students, who upon graduating high school, want to enter college or the workforce. In a mixed methods qualitative dominant study Bragg and Taylor (2014) implemented college and career ready (CCR) programs at two institutions with incoming students. Their programming included pre-college programs such as orientation and summer bridge programs. Each program model included holistic components that addressed non-cognitive aspects of the new student transition. From their observations, interviews, and focus groups, they were able to assess the short-term outcomes for incoming freshmen who participated in these programs. They found that CCR program initiatives had the most positive outcomes of the piloting initiatives deployed by the two schools. Using Conley's model to assess the outcomes of the program yielded additional components in ensuring that students are college ready.

Technical and adaptive skills. Technical and adaptive skills are two concepts that have been employed to assess the readiness of a student to enter college. Conley and French (2014) displayed four key areas to address academic performance. These areas used to assess the two CCR program models included both technical and adaptive skills deemed necessary for student to be college ready. While the technical aspects included concepts such as test-taking, being admissions eligible per grades, and ACT scores, the adaptive concepts of this model included non-cognitive abilities students should possess in order to be college and career ready. The non-cognitive or adaptive skills included self-awareness, motivation, collaborative teamwork,

initiative, and self-efficacy. According to Conley and French (2014) adaptive skills are the additional pieces that students in transition to college could benefit from in order to successfully navigate the academic landscape.

Social and emotional learning. Social and emotional learning is an area that has been added to assess whether students are college or career ready. As part of the adaptive skills previously mentioned in the research of Conley (2012) social and emotional learning covers the non-cognitive pieces that students need in order to adapt to a new college setting (Kuh, 2007; Tinto, 1999). These adaptive skills were explored by Dymnicki, Sambolt, and Kidron (2013) to see how social and emotional learning (SEL) could improve CCR. They identified five SEL competencies as part of their assessment model, which were: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. They found these five core competencies could benefit students in their academic and personal success. Dymnicki et al. (2013) explained that relational skills are critical for first-year students as they enter college.

When students enter a new social environment, those who build networks of support can reduce feelings of loneliness and increase social support. Additionally, self-awareness and self-management can be key in the transition of students into college (Becker & Luthar, 2002). These competencies are key to emotion regulation, perception of one's ability to accomplish a goal, coping with stress, and managing feelings of being overwhelmed. Many researchers agree that students who can manage stress, cope with feelings of being overwhelmed, and have a social support network have a smoother transition into college and are more likely to perform better academically than those who do not (Brackett et al., 2011; Gerdes & Mallinckrodt, 1994; Romanelli, Cain, & Smith, 2006).

Many SEL programs have been implemented nationally at the high school level. Continuing focus on SEL will contribute to students retention and success in Higher Education (Conley, 2007). While there are benefits to students participating in these programs not all students are transitioning into college having had SEL curriculum as part of their formative education. Therefore, it may be left to colleges and universities to explore providing SEL as part of the curriculum or program initiatives required for new students as they transition in their first year. Implementing these programs could potentially aid in universities retention efforts of this population of students (Becker & Luthar, 2002; Brackett et al., 2011; Durlak et al., 2011; Gerdes & Mallinckrodt, 1994; Kuh et al., 2008; Romanelli et al., 2006). Exploring these many factors from the experience of the first-year student could assist with universities learning how to best support these students on their campus to aid retention.

The literature has given insight on ways to assist with the readiness and transition of first-year students. There are colleges who are trying to implement supports both academically and socially nationwide, and retention continues to be a national struggle and subject of research (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019b). Studies in this review demonstrated providing consistent definitions of college readiness and student success would contribute to the common understanding necessary for dialogue between Institutions of Higher Education, the high schools sending students to college, and the students themselves. Defining terms is just a start. Assessing the academic and social programs on specific campuses and have having clear learning outcomes that can be tracked through data are directions suggested by research for universities to progress toward. Providing consistency and support for first-year students has been the trend over the last few decades. Ongoing research studying the perspectives of students who successfully navigated the changes and surprises of their first-year experiences could

provide insight regarding the efficacy of current retention efforts and add to the existing body of knowledge on this topic.

CHAPTER 3

Research Design & Methodology

The interest in understanding the phenomenon of retaining the first-year student from the student perspective led me to choose a qualitative research design. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) explain that “qualitative research constructs knowledge by people as they engage and make meaning of an activity, experience, or phenomenon” (p. 23). Qualitative research is appropriate for this study as the interest centers on “how people make sense of their lives and their worlds” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 25). This design also allowed me to review pertinent documents that gave initial insight and context to this research topic (Lapan, 2012; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Narrative Inquiry is a genre of qualitative research that allows the study participants to take part in telling their own story (Clark & Creswell, 2015; Lapan, 2012). For this study the participants played the main role in telling their individual stories. As the researcher I was the storyteller and primary instrument in data analysis for this research design.

Narrative Inquiry

Narrative Inquiry is a research method design that allows the researcher to make sense of experiences through telling stories (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Story telling is a way to communicate with others and a way to understand the world around us (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 33). There are several ways in which a narrative inquiry can begin and one of those ways is through practitioner inquiry. My interest is in getting student voices to lend their perspective on this phenomenon (Butler-Kisber, 2018). This research design allowed me the opportunity to focus on the lived experiences of student participants and gain information pertinent to their first-year experience. Narrative inquiry is the way people interact, engage and experience the world (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Clandinin & Huber, 2002; Clandinin,

Pushor, & Orr, 2007). In this methodology the researcher uses “first-person accounts of experience told in short story form... these accounts [include] journal letters, autobiography, and interviews” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 34). The combination of sources such as these provided me with rich detail and access to different modes to deepen my understanding of the student’s stories.

This research method is designed to “study individuals rather than groups of people” (Clark & Creswell, 2015, p. 291). For this study in-depth interviews with a smaller participant sample allowed me to dive deeper into the research topic from each individual’s perspective. Narrative Inquiry is a collaboration between the researcher and the participants, and “... seeks to understand sociological questions about groups, communities and contexts through individuals’ lived experiences” (p.153). This methodology assumes that stories told by the participant is the way in which the individual constructs reality (Marshall & Rossman, 2011, p. 153) and is used to “explore practical, specific insights that emerge from a personal experience” (Clark & Creswell, 2015, p. 291). Using Narrative Inquiry assists educators because the findings and conclusions provide focus on individual change and improved practices for practitioners (Clark & Creswell, 2015, p. 291). Narrative Inquiry allowed me to examine the student perceptions of the first-year student experience at four different campuses in the Midwest. Through their lived experiences I explored how this phenomenon unfolds on their campuses. In the following section I will provide background and context of each campus site from which participants will be selected.

Context of the Study

Data informing this research was collected at multiple campus sites within a state in the Midwest. Campus locations were chosen because of the professional connections I have with colleagues in this region. Each campus is within a reasonable proximity of personal residence

which assisted in traveling to meet participants for their interviews. There are four regional universities in which participants were chosen to participate in the study. Having participants from multiple sites provided a unique perspective to address the research questions. Additionally, exploring this phenomenon across institutions that vary in size, demographic, and geographic locations provided greater resonance for further research and insight into this phenomenon. In order to illuminate the nationwide issue of the average retention rates of first-year students, four campus sites allowed diversity of perspective and experience of the sample population. Including students at four campus locations allowed me to dive deeper into the larger nationwide retention issues. To provide insight to each campus location a brief description of each campus site was provided. The illustrations of each college provided context pertinent to understanding the differences and similarities of each institutional setting from which the participants were selected. Each campus included in this research was chosen because they each have first year specific programming on their campuses and their retention averages align with the national average retention rates for first-year students. For confidentiality, I used pseudonyms to describe my campus sites.

Rolling Hills College is a four-year private not for profit college in a remote town in the Midwest. Their undergraduate population is just above 700 students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019a). This college offers Bachelor and Master degrees. This college was chosen because the university first-year student retention average is below the national average of first-year student retention at private universities which is approximately 72% (*Freshman college retention rates: National Universities*, 2017). Rolling Hills College retains 64% of their first-year students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019b), their freshman students primarily reside on campus. Rolling Hills College provides a freshman enrollment and New

Student Orientation prior to the start of classes. These programs are designed to assist incoming students and their families as they navigate the process of being new to their campus. The vice president has recently shared that their campus is interested in focusing on retention of their first-year students. While their plans are in the beginning phase the college believes this study will allow a different perspective in which they can hear from their most recent class of incoming students who were retained. Their administration is looking into ways in which their support can align with student expectations to yield greater results in fit, satisfaction, and retention, notably the input provided from the sophomore students who can speak on their first-year transition will speak to the less than stellar retention rate of their freshman students.

As previously discussed, the issue of retention of first-year students is not specific to institutional type. To highlight this through this study I decided to use multiple sites and select participants who can speak to their personal experience on their campuses. In contrast to the Rolling Hills College, Midwest Metropolitan University has previously taken a great interest in focusing on their retention efforts beginning with their first-year students. This public university has a multitude of services for new students. Similar to Rolling Hills, Midwest Metropolitan University offers programs prior to the start of classes with New Student Orientation programs. The New Student Orientation program is hosted by the Office of First-Year Programs which is a department dedicated to assist new students with academic and social acclimation to the university. Midwest Metropolitan boasts that their most recent incoming freshman class was the largest in university history. The total enrollment is over 15,000 students, with 12,000 of those being undergraduate students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019a). The university offers certificates through professional and practicing doctorate degrees. In contrast to Rolling Hills the majority of the student population lives off campus. Their retention is just above the

state average at 73% for their new students pursuing bachelor's degrees (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019b). Administration has expanded new student resources by adding the Office of First-Year programs that provides transition programs throughout the entire first year of the new student transition. While Midwest Metropolitan University's retention rate is just above the national average the administration is striving to ensure that the university continues to growth in the retention of all their students, and this begins with retaining their freshman to sophomore year.

The third site, Grace University, is located in a medium sized city in the Midwest. It is a four-year private institution originally founded by religious denomination but now identifies as non-denominational. The student body population totals around 2000 students with more than 70% of those students pursuing undergraduate degrees. The campus retention rate is above the national average at approximately 75% (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019b). Grace University hosts an enrollment day and a mandatory New Student Orientation program for their incoming class of students. Additionally, like Midwest Metropolitan this campus also provides additional programming for new students throughout their first year. They provide Welcome Week activities to get students introduced to their campus and they provide First-Year Mentors for their freshmen.

The fourth site chosen for this study was Sunflower University. This large institution has over 22,000 students and is known for specialized degrees in agriculture, architecture, and hospitality (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019a). This four-year public institution has seen a steady increase in their freshman to sophomore retention rates over the last decade. Currently their retention soars above the national average at 86% (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019b). This university had a new strategic action plan with specific goals that

include initiatives specific to their undergraduate first-year educational experience. Similar to the other universities Sunflower University had specific services provided for new students on their campus. They have an entire department dedicated to serving this population of students on their campus. They provide Orientation programs prior to the start of classes for their new students as well as first-year seminar courses, freshman mentoring and learning communities.

These four campus sites each had one participant selected to participate in this study. Each institutional experience provided a different perspective by which to explore the retention of first-year students. While each site varies in size, location, and demographics they share similar programming efforts that engage this specific population of students. Implementation of national best practice initiatives for first-year students can vary among campuses, therefore understanding each campus through the student's perspective may glean insight into the details of the retention specific programs. Each participant from these campuses shared their first-year experiences specific to their college community.

Participants and Sampling Procedures

Purposeful sampling is a way to select appropriate participants who will provide the most relevant information to the research topic (Clark & Creswell, 2015). A purposeful sample was selected from second-year students in their first semester who were retained at each of the colleges. The nature of narrative inquiry requires building participant ownership in the research. Establishing rapport was essential to them trusting me as the researcher who will interpret their stories (Butler-Kisber, 2018; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Clandinin & Huber, 2002).

In order to understand how the sophomore students overcame any surprises and made sense of their entire first year of college, a sample of four first semester sophomore students were chosen to share their freshman experience. Carefully planned interactions with the participants

began with the screening process in which the college liaisons assisted in pulling contact lists. In person face-to-face interviews with reflective follow-up via email or text message provided clarification on their stories. Additionally, each participant member checked their narrative in which they had opportunity to review and edit their story.

One student from each campus location was selected from a list provided by the university contact person. University contacts at each site were professional colleagues within the field that I have met at national and regional conferences, and personal connections made within the region. Each contact person provided a contact list of sophomore students at their university using their campus specific student information databases. The university contacts assisted in providing a pool of applicants who were screened based on their engagement with campus resources within their first year. I asked that each list contain a minimum of 50 students who were freshmen in the fall of 2018 and returned as a sophomore student in the fall of 2019. To align with the initial definitions of first-year students and retention; participants selected were students retained from fall of their freshman year to the fall of their sophomore year; they were also first-time, degree/certificate seeking students (Hoyt & Winn, 2004; Nora et al., 2012). The contact persons also assisted by using their student information database that captured students who had been involved with at least one freshman specific service that their university offers.

First-year students who participated in a minimum of one retention program provided assistance in narrowing the pool to one student from each site, totaling a minimum of four participants. Examples of retention specific first-year programs the participants could have been involved with are Orientation, First-Year Seminar, Freshman Mentoring program or other first-year activities specific to their campus. Each list had contact information for each student that was used to narrow the participant list. Upon receipt of the list provided by the university, I

emailed the list of participants to gauge initial interest of participation and narrow the pool to one student from each campus site. For this research study the sophomore students have been chosen as the most relevant participants to provide context to their lived experiences through the first-year transition (Louis, 1980; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Each student is a sophomore, and it was important to have student participants who were culturally and socially diverse in order to provide insight on the overall phenomenon from varying perspectives. Table 2 below highlights the participants in this study.

Table 2 *Demographics of study participants*

Name	Ethnicity	Gender	Student Status	University
Xi Xi	Chinese American	Female		Midwest Metropolitan University
Cole	White	Male	Legacy	Sunflower University
Cooper	White	Male		Grace University
Lydia	Black	Female	First-Generation	Rolling Hills College

To have a diverse participant pool I worked to present a range of participants that varied in ethnic backgrounds, familial experience in the university setting, and have varying socioeconomic backgrounds that could provide rich content to the research questions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Identifying a sample of diverse participants can broaden the scope of the data collected (Lapan, 2012). Including diverse participants in a Narrative study allowed me as the researcher to view the research problem from the different lived experiences of the participants. Including diversity of perspectives through stories provided rich informational data that assisted in providing context for each individual and their experience and lent a deeper understanding of

the phenomenon (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Clandinin & Huber, 2002; Clandinin et al., 2007; Clark & Creswell, 2015; Lapan, 2012; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

The students were initially contacted via email with a written invitation (see Appendix). Those who were interviewed received an informed consent preceding their interview detailing their involvement. A copy of the informed consent is included in the Appendix. At the end of their second interview, research participants received a \$50 gift card for their full participation in the interview requirements. The gift was provided by the researcher through personal funds. Each participant had two scheduled interview meetings during the data collection. Interviews ranged in time from 40 minutes to 90 minutes. Additional follow-up for clarification was via email or text messaging. Each participant also had the opportunity to review and edit their narratives. Through this process only one edit was sent back for correction.

Data Collection

The data collected through the process of research aimed to inform the study's research questions (Clark & Creswell, 2015; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The data was collected through interviews and relevant university first-year experience documents like the first-year programs website. These collection methods allowed me to analyze and interpret meaning in my role of being narrator who will be responsible for sharing the lived experiences of the student participants (Lapan, 2012; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). For this study data collections consisted of person-to-person interviews that were approximately 40-90 minutes with participants. Initial interviews were conducted on or near each college campus, or via Zoom conference software for the convenience of the participants which assisted in building rapport with the study participants (Butler-Kisber, 2018; Clandinin et al., 2007). Each participant was asked to bring an artifact that reflected their first-year experience and was of meaning to them. Requesting each individual to

bring and talk with me about a personal item assisted in continuing to build rapport with the participants. This exercise also provided a foundation or starting point for the second semi-structured interview meeting. Each participant's narrative outlines the artifacts that they shared with me during their second interviews. Xi Xi brought a picture from an event she attended with her roommates. Lydia brought a scrapbook-like page that had her track meet stickers on it. Cooper brought a picture of him running out on the field to play his first college football game. Cole brought a Qdoba burrito coupon that he won from attending a college sporting event his first year. Each artifact and its significance are shared in the narratives in Chapter Four. In addition to their artifacts, I took time with each participant during the beginning of their second interview to clarify questions from the transcriptions of the first interviews. Additional time during this meeting included reflection of highlights from their first interview.

In the second interview participants were allowed time to reflect on experiences and events that had not been included during the first reflective interview. Each participant was able to share additional details of stories and experiences to assist in the development of their stories. We also took time to ensure that I understood the chronology of the highlights they had shared. It was nice to get to know each of the individuals throughout our meeting time together. Meeting in person was not convenient for all participants. Cole and I meet virtually for both our meetings using the Zoom platform. This was the alternative way of interviewing at his convenience which allowed him to participate in the study with his busy schedule. Additional interviews beyond the two scheduled meetings were not needed as data collection had reached saturation within the two meeting times for each participant (Lapan, 2012; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Throughout the data collection processes I allowed open communication for the participants to contact me

regarding their story. Data collection was collected winter break of 2019 and early spring of 2020.

Data collection occurred over five weeks during the sophomore year of the study participants. The interviews of the participants will remain confidential and all identities and campus specific locations have been kept private. Transcripts and interview recordings are being kept in a password protected cloud folder for a minimum of five years.

Document and Social Media Review

There was a review of each university website regarding campus resources both academic and social provided for the first-year students. Any relevant handouts from first-year programs department, other campus resources, or events specific for first-year students that can included: orientation, first-year seminar courses, living-learning communities, or other activities the study participants were involved in their first year were also reviewed. Document review provided additional context specific to each first-year university experience. Reviewing documents for first-year specific programs and initiatives were relevant for me to understand the student participants' reflection of their experience. Activities and programs can vary by college, understanding what was offered at each specific site and how the university provided access and presented this information to first-year students aided in ensuring the semi-structured interview was specific to each participant's experience. Having a general understanding of the campus sites and activities allowed for me to continue to build the rapport with each participant.

Sophomore students were the participant sample however, this research aimed to have them reflect on their first-year experience. The research problem explored how this phenomenon unfolded over their first year in college. Therefore, only documents and the websites pertinent with first-year experience information were reviewed. Protocol questions during interviews

provided additional context to their sophomore experience and how their first year played a role in their return to school for their second year. During the semi-structured interviews, questions facilitated an opportunity for participants to share how they engaged with these documents, brochures, or websites within their freshman year.

Social media was a potential source to provide context to the narratives of the participants. In order to provide visual and additional written context to the narratives of the participants a review of their social media pages (Facebook and Twitter) was requested. This data collection method was to provide a “contemporary context” approach that aimed to assist with gathering additional data to increase the quality of data collected (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Participants were asked to share their social media and reflect on highlights from their first year in college. Each individual was asked to review their social media from their first year of college and were asked to bring pictures and posted status updates to their second meeting. Each participant shared their unique engagement with social media and these four sophomore students while they may have had social media profiles they did not engage on Facebook or Twitter as social outlets. My initial plan was to also immerse in their social media to provide opportunities for participants to build trust in me and ownership in their narrative. However, each of them shared that Social Media was not a way that they captured their first-year student experience. The two female participants Xi Xi and Lydia provided their social media information, but after reviewing their profile pages on Facebook neither of them had posted much throughout their first year in college. Lydia also had a Twitter page, but her Twitter profile consisted more of retweets from other pages rather than thoughts of her own. From our discussions neither of the two male participants, Cole or Cooper, engaged in social media. Cooper did not have Facebook and Cole did not accept my friend request. After speaking with

them during our interviews, social media did not seem to be a high priority for these four participants. After reviewing the two female participants social media platforms their content did not add insight to their individual narratives.

Twitter was used by Lydia but after review, it was a passive engagement that consisted of retweeting other content rather than posting updates from her voice alone. The two male participants Cooper and Cole shared in our meetings that they did not engage in social media. Cooper did not have a Facebook or Twitter profile and Cole said he did not really use social media. Cole did not accept my friend request on Facebook and from what I could see on his profile there was not much content that would have aided in depicting his narrative of his first year in college. Allowing the participants to provide their reflection of their engagement of social media was anticipated to be a way to triangulate their narratives as well as assist with ensuring linear analysis for each story (Butler-Kisber, 2018; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Clandinin & Huber, 2002; Lapan, 2012). However, since the engagement of their social media did not provide additional data, I used member checking and reflection during their second interviews to assist in ensuring that I understood the timeline for their narratives. Member checking also assisted in ensuring that I captured the highlights of their first-year experience in the narratives I reported.

Data Analysis

In order to analyze the data a multiple narrative analysis approach was used. To provide context to the research questions of this study the psychological approach to Narrative Inquiry allowed me to concentrate more on student participants and their contextual knowledge about the phenomenon (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The psychological narrative approach allows the researcher to analyze the data and include the “biological and environmental influences” on the

development of the student through their first-year transition (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 35). This approach is a holistic way to analyze the participant's cognitive, affective, and motivational dimensions of meaning making (Rossiter, 1999).

To accurately portray each story the narratives were analyzed and presented chronologically as each student shared their perspective on their first-year transition to college (Clandinin & Huber, 2002). Adapting the work of Labov and Waletzky (1997) as an analysis tool allowed interpretation of this data to include all elements of the participant's story. This analysis approach allowed me to identify surprise and events of change during their first year in college. Labov and Waletzky (1997) model looks at each event in a narrative and analyzes the process through a six step "condensed story." These six steps include summary, orientation, complicating actions, evaluation, resolution, and coda. Using these two analysis approaches allowed me to ask the participants to review what these events meant during their transition. This allowed me to assess how each student participant came to a resolution through the event and how they reflected on their transition and decision to return as a sophomore student (Louis, 1980). From that analysis process themes emerged and I was able to not only identify findings relevant to each participant but also overlapping findings shared through the narratives (Butler-Kisber, 2018; Labov & Waletzky, 1997). Interpreting the data using this analysis method allowed participants stories to have a "fluid movement" between what they experienced personally and what happened in the social situations around them during their first-year transition (Clandinin & Huber, 2002, p. 167). To ensure accuracy, the transcription after each interview occurred within a week of the interaction. Engaging the participants in describing how the artifacts they provided were woven into their stories provided added layers of thick description and insight into their perceptions of their first-year experiences (Merriam & Tisdell,

2016). The artifacts shared with me were analyzed using the same process of identifying themes from them and including them as a part of their narratives to provide additional context to their first-year experience. I ensured that my analysis was accurately sharing the lived experiences of my participants through member-checking with them the information and understandings gleaned in the interviews (Lapan, 2012; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Member checking was a continual process throughout the data collection timeline, and I used email and text messaging for this purpose. I also provided participants with the final copy of their narrative and gave them the opportunity to reflect and edit their story. These data analysis approaches provided guidance in developing research findings and implications for the higher education field.

Research Quality

Research quality refers to the credibility, validity and trustworthiness of the data collected (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Considering factors of resonance, trustworthiness, and usefulness assisted with ensuring that the methods used to collect and analyze the data were appropriate for the research design (Butler-Kisber, 2018). Clearly outlining these strategies assures the reader that the ways in which the research was gathered and analyzed were of high integrity and are true to each participants narrative (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This section outlines how I maintained the integrity of the data to provide a high research quality for this study.

Trustworthiness

Information is reported in chronological order as it relates to participants' first-year student transition. I used the interviews, social media, and relevant documents to triangulate the data during the analysis phase. I assessed ways in which the study informs broader perspectives and university practices as it relates to providing support that aids in the retention of first-year

students. Reliability of the data gathered provides consistency and stability (Lapan, 2012).

Narrative Inquiry focuses on the participants' stories and lived experiences. In order to ensure the data is reliable I aimed to illustrate the participants' first-year experiences. Narrative analysis provided a unique way in which the I, as the researcher, was responsible for sharing the lives of the participants through story telling. To ensure the data analysis was trustworthy, I shared insight of their first-year experience through a holistic perspective. The holistic perspective allowed me to share a well-rounded view of the first-year student experience on the campus as described by the participants. The collected data informed the findings and conclusions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Once I had gathered all the data from each participant, I used the university first-year experience website to add context and triangulate each individuals' story and their experiences in order to ensure that the data was reliable.

Resonance

Resonance in Narrative Inquiry provides an accurate account of the lived experiences of the participants in a way that others can understand and relate (Butler-Kisber, 2018; Lapan, 2012). Multiple points of triangulation include participants from multiple sites in different geographic areas of the state. Using triangulation and reflecting the data through the conceptual framework of Surprise and Sensemaking during data analysis allowed me to ensure the data is meaningful and trustworthy. In Narrative Inquiry member-checking with the participants allows the researcher to ensure that the stories of the participants are accurately and authentically interpreted (Clandinin & Huber, 2002; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Narrative Inquiry in research is thought to be a combined effort between the researcher and the participants (Clandinin & Huber, 2002). Allowing them to share their stories over a period of time and then reflecting on what they have shared in the transcripts increased the validity of the data. Having the students

assist in the narration of their stories ensured that the data was dependable and truly the student's personal, lived, experiences.

Usefulness

Providing an accurate account allowed the study to inform future studies that could contribute to social change (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Usefulness refers to providing context of the research and findings in which the reader could find applicable on their own (Butler-Kisber, 2018; Lapan, 2012). Providing an engaging story of the participants' life as first-year students and their holistic stories will allow the reader to determine if the data is relevant to their research interests or first-year campus experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Resonance, trustworthiness and usefulness assist the reader in determining if the findings are dependable in order to study a similar participant sample and the retention of first-year students (Clark & Creswell, 2015; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Ethics

Professional and scholarly integrity is required of all doctoral students in the Wichita State University Educational Leadership Doctoral program. The proposal to conduct this study was sent to the Wichita State University Internal Review Board (IRB) for approval. Having four research sites, each had their own requirements to allow me to conduct this study on their campus. Rolling Hills College asked that I provide a copy of my IRB approval in order to release the contact list of students for my study. Additionally, I had to complete additional documentation through their campus IRB to gain access to their sophomore students. Midwest Metropolitan University also wanted a copy of the IRB approval prior to releasing the student contact list. Grace University requested a copy of the IRB approval. Grace University also requested that I complete a full IRB approval through their campus research and assessment

office. Sunflower University released the student contact list upon providing the copy of my IRB approval to my campus liaison, and the Director of the First-Year Experience department. In addition to the IRB approvals, all Wichita State University doctoral students are required to complete Collaborative Institutional Training (CITI) modules to ensure ethical procedures are outlined and followed during conducted research. Confidentiality of participants and the research sites were maintained throughout the research process. The informed consent detailed the involvement of participation in the study and any risks associated with participation. A signed copy of the informed consent was required for participation from the four sophomore students.

Researcher Positionality

In qualitative research providing context of the researcher's previous or current level of engagement with the phenomenon is important to share with readers (Clark & Creswell, 2015; Lapan, 2012; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). As the researcher in this qualitative study I was the primary instrument used for data collection. It was important to disclose personal thoughts, reflections, and biases on the phenomenon so that the reader understands the position or lens in which I am examining this topic. In order to ensure the quality of research, this section identifies and explains my professional experience and position on first-year student retention and its relevance in providing context to this study.

My current professional position on my campus is directly related to the first-year retention services provided to students. I am the person solely responsible for the social and academic programs for first-year students. On my campus I am charged with creating and maintaining the first-year student experience and the programs that aid in the retention of these students on our campus. I have worked with first-year students as a professional for over eight

years. Prior to entering the field of higher education, I was a first-generation college student who had a first-year transition experience that ultimately led to my decision to pursue a Masters in College Student Personnel. Throughout my personal and professional experiences, I have always been connected to the first-year transition and retention experience. As an undergraduate I was an orientation leader, an ambassador and mentor for first-year students, and held the first student intern position in the Office of First-Year Experience at my alma mater. Through my combined observations over a total of 13 years, I have noticed that providing a space for the first-year students to make an initial connection whether it be with another student, staff, faculty, or campus tradition has a great impact on students' affinity with their institution and plays a role in their persistence and retention. However, in the role as the primary researcher for this study I am interested to learn more regarding the way students perceive their first-year experience. While my personal observations can provide anecdotal context to this phenomenon I believe hearing their personal accounts of what made them return as sophomores through the reflection of their first-year transition will provide a new sense of purpose to the way in which myself and hopefully others who are interested and responsible for first-year student retention approach our work.

While I bring a great deal of experience to this phenomenon, I used journaling and a professional colleague to be my peer debriefer (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). My peer debriefer was a professional in the field who is familiar with this population. It was important that I had a peer debriefer because of the scrutiny of the position of retention services that is taking place nationwide. Utilizing my peer debriefer was helpful to ensure that my experience over the last decade did not mitigate the experiences of the participants with my professional perspective as the researcher and storyteller for the participants' narratives.

I was hopeful that using these two methods along with immersing myself within the narratives and participants' social media would assist in mitigating my bias. I wanted to ensure that my research was dependable, trustworthy, ethically sound and of high quality. In order to do so I ensured that my positionality did not interfere with my ability to be the co-storyteller of each participant narrative. Allowing the students to share in the process as co-researchers and doing continual member checking throughout the story telling and analysis is how I ensured that each students' story was truly their own.

Chapter 4

This chapter will discuss the findings from four sophomore student interviews that were conducted at universities in the Midwest. Striving to host a diverse pool of participants in order to represent different perspectives, two females and two males were selected to participate in the study. They each attended a different school within the same state. In this chapter, you will meet Xi Xi, Cole, Cooper, and Lydia, the four participants who returned as sophomores at their universities. Each will reflect on why they chose to attend their college and describe highlights from their first year and their involvement in activities. These findings are a result of my analysis of data collected from multiple interviews and time spent with the four participants.

Our time together focused on the challenges these students faced in their first-year transition and how they overcame those obstacles and decided to continue their college journey at their particular institutions. Each participant shared the following first-year experiences noted on Table 3 below.

Table 3 *Participant first-year specific programming and involvement*

Participant	Orientation	First-Year Seminar	Residential Living	Living Learning Community	On-campus first-year mentorship
Xi Xi	x	x	x	x	x
Cole	x	x	x		
Cooper	x	x	x		x
Lydia	x	x	x		x

Understanding the student's experiences and involvement during their first year allowed greater insight to each of their perspectives on their first-year transition.

Each participant chose their own alias to protect their confidentiality. I wanted them to feel connected to their stories and thought it would be fun for them to choose their own name

for this study. This was one of the first ways I established rapport with my study participants. Establishing rapport from the start with each participant is essential in Narrative Inquiry, and working through the provided college liaisons at each of the university sites to build to identify potential participants allowed me to establish a relationship with them that provided credibility to my invitation extended to students to participate in the research. While I was connected to a couple of the college liaisons through professional colleagues, not all of my contacts knew me prior to my request for assistance with my research study. From the beginning the assistance provided from the campus liaisons to get a pool of participants came with a willingness to assist and interest in the results of my study. Their assistance to pull contact lists and assist with any additional follow-up I needed provided the path that led me to each of the four students.

My initial conversations with each of the students began over email. It was via our initial email communication that I would try to clarify questions and ensure them of my intentions for this research. Additionally, I made subtle changes to my email profile by adding my picture so that they would see my face before meeting in person or online. Our initial meetings began with an informal discussion of the students sharing their individual interest and engagement on social media and which platforms they used. I hoped that discussing these items when first meeting would assist in calming nerves of the students and conversation that we could build on. I met with each of the students for two interviews and then allowed for reflection and editing via email following their second interview. In addition to assisting with building rapport, I asked that each student bring an artifact of significance to their second meeting. The second interview for each participant began with them showing and explaining their artifact of significance and why they chose to bring this item over anything else that they could have chosen from their first year of college. Each artifact is explained and shared in the individual narratives in this chapter.

Additionally, following each participant narrative their summaries will utilize the Table 1 to demonstrate how each of them experienced surprise during their first-year transition. The following narratives are the stories shared during interviews and email correspondence during the data collection phase of the study and are a result of my analysis. The findings focus on the first-year experiences of the students on their college campuses and the changes, contrast, and surprises they ultimately overcame in order to be retained to their sophomore year (Louis, 1980).

Xi Xi

Xi Xi is a Chinese-American student who was adopted from China before she was two years old. She has lived in small towns all of her life until coming to college in a large metropolitan city in the Midwest. She has two older siblings, each whom have significant age gaps. Being the youngest, and 19 years apart from her older sister, she found herself eager to begin her journey in college four hours away from home in a new city. She lived in the freshman residence hall as a floor member of the Honors Living Learning Community her first year of college. Xi Xi quickly became immersed in the many activities her university had to offer, including her on campus job in a lab of the college of engineering and working with primary through college aged students as a tutor off campus. She began as an aerospace engineer major with little background in the area other than being interested in science and math and describes her lack of fully understanding her initial major as a challenge, “it was not so much the work, rather lack of experience.” She has since changed her major a handful of times and is currently wavering with her decision to pursue a strategic communications major.

Xi Xi became involved in many organizations on campus, took a first-year seminar course, and participated in the mentoring program hosted through the diversity office. She

described enjoying the activities offered at her campus her first year with some struggles of juggling her involvement and course work. Xi Xi told me she,

was used to being busy and really involved in high school and thought that college would be similar... I spent one to two hours on schoolwork for classes but found myself busy from early in the morning until almost midnight due to participation and involvement in the organizations on campus.

She then began to rattle off a long list of student organizations in which I stopped counting around the name of the 6th one. In the beginning of our initial meeting I asked Xi Xi if she had Facebook and Twitter and she shared that she had Facebook but did not use it much. She accepted my friend request and she did not have much on her social media from her first year. There was a picture of she and her dad leaving for Midwest Metropolitan University marking the start of her college journey but that was the only post within her first year that was relevant to her story. In our meetings, Xi Xi described finding differences between college and high school, sharing she “learned last year that college was not like high school... I did not have enough time or money to participate in everything I had once before.” As a sophomore, she has limited her involvement and moved off campus to save money. She also has an off- campus job and still works as a tutor.

Meeting Xi Xi

Xi Xi and I met just before the holiday break via email. I had sent out an invitation to the contact list of sophomore students my college liaison had sent to see if anyone would be available during the break to participate in my study. I knew that by requesting someone be available during the break I could potentially narrow down the initial list of students from the contact list. A great deal of students showed interest from Midwest Metropolitan University

(MMU). I had received around 10 responses of students who were willing to participate. The contact list from Midwest Metropolitan included demographic information of all the students on the list and therefore I was able to screen the participant list before choosing one student for this study. After I received the responses from interested students, I would reference the contact list for ethnicity and status of First Generation. Xi Xi according to the contact list was a First Generation, Asian female. From our emails I learned that she also participated in a number of first-year program initiatives at MMU. Xi Xi was my first choice based on her collegiate experiences and demographic information. However, initially when contacted she was slow to respond. It was the week of finals for her campus, so I was patient and did multiple follow-up emails with the students at MMU. While my initial interest response was quick and overwhelming, I noted the students that continued to engage with me for the follow-up questions I had. Xi Xi responded quickly to my initial email but did not follow-up with me for over a week in regard to her winter break schedule. I decided to reach out and follow up with her again and thankfully, after my third outreach to Xi Xi she responded. She was going to be available over the holiday break and was still interested in participating my study. She mentioned having a hectic schedule to conclude her fall semester which was why she was delayed in responding. Once we were able to overcome that communication barrier Xi Xi and I had open and responsive communication for the remainder of the data collection period. Following the New Year holiday, Xi Xi and I had figured out a time that the two of us could meet. She had been pretty busy before and during most of the winter break but had planned to meet with me a week prior to the start of classes since she was in town working. After establishing a meeting place and time, I received an email from Xi Xi the day before our scheduled appointment, saying, "I am at the Starbucks at a tall table. No-rush I just wanted to let you know. Have a good day!" I

immediately panicked as I thought I had confused my dates on my calendar and did not want to lose a participant due to my mix-up. I checked through our previous communication and found that she was just a day early to the meeting. After clarifying that with her via email, she and I met the following day as originally planned and had a laugh about the mix-up which helped in beginning our research relationship. She was dressed casually and when I offered to buy her a beverage, she passed so we both just had water and began our discussion.

To continue to establish rapport and trust, in my initial meetings I spent a little time to talk about my research and set the expectations of our meeting for that day and any follow-up meetings we would need to move forward. We then began to discuss her pseudonym. At first, she was having trouble thinking of a name. We put that decision on pause and began the interview questions. At the close of our time in her initial interview she decided what name she wanted to use for her story. She said, “Xi Xi” and then explained the name’s significance to me. She went on to explain that Xi Xi was her Asian American middle name. A name that she was given but no longer uses since adopted by her American family. That was the end of our first interview meeting. However, at the beginning of the interview Xi Xi began her story by sharing her thoughts on whether she felt prepared for college.

My High School Experience and College Transition

Yes [I was prepared] and no [I was not prepared]. I would say yes in terms of academically, I developed really good study habits when I was in high school. I was someone that had to spend a lot of time studying when I was in high school. School did not really come naturally to me. I ended up becoming salutatorian just because of how hard that I was willing to study and spend the time on [school] and studying and stuff like that. That carried over really well to college. I'm doing a lot of different stuff here. Communication wise really helped

because it is really hard to get into college if you are not willing to actually meet people and talk to people. Some of my friends in my first year they were having trouble staying because they were [struggling] from being socially awkward or really anxious. They would get homesick and things like that. For me, I found that my communication was really helpful to overcome that. My soft skills were pretty well developed just because of how active I chose to put myself into working on that in high school. However, [if I were] doing the bare minimum in high school, I do not feel like I would have been very ready for college at all. My senior year I was up from about 6:00am until about midnight, and then I would start college work and high school homework, just because I was involved in a sport every season. For some of them I was on the varsity team, so you would have [later games] and longer time with that. I was involved with our church and choir, show choir, and band. I was in three or four different clubs at a time. For me, that was just a very comfortable level to come in [college and be involved] at. I thought that college would be like high school and I spent like an hour or two a class on the side [in high school] and I figured college [would be] just like that. College is... not just like that! I think I had this general idea coming into college life as if I am going to be able to do everything like I did in high school. You are not going to be able to do everything, because you do not have the time or money to do that anymore.

Making the College Decision

I was actually looking at a few different schools. A lot of it [the decision] was based on scholarships. I did a lot of different campus visits, you know, because I wanted to make sure if I am going to come [to school] here, I am at least going to like the place. It came down to Midwest Metropolitan University (MMU) or another school in the state, because I had the most scholarships to [attend] both of them. I essentially had full rides to both of them so I would not

really have to pay for [school], which was great! A really nice thing. I went and looked at the other school, and my adopted dad, my sister, my grandpa and some of my family had all gone there and I would have gotten a scholarship for that. Then I got there, and I was like, this is too big. I am used to small town life. You know... and I liked the people there, but it just felt too big for me. I wanted something bigger, just not quite that big. Then I came to MMU and I met a lot of different people. I met the aerospace engineering advisor, and she was really nice. She actually helped me get my first job here on campus. I met a lot of different people through orientation and it just felt like it fit, you know? The people were really nice and really welcoming. I really loved the fact that whenever I came back from a visit, I got handwritten notes from here, which to me are a lot more personal than just a general, "Hey, you came, you saw, cool!" You know, [notes or postcards] that were all typed out and you knew that they were not actually writing it. It was just like... something they had to sign. The fact that they actually personalize it towards me, it was a really big selling point for me. I was like, you know, I'm going to try this out, and it was a really good decision!

My First Year on Campus

First year it went by really fast. I am not even going to lie. I really liked it. I actually got to live in the Honors Living Learning Community (LLC) and that was a really good experience for me. I got to meet a lot of other people that were like minded. They were very goal oriented so when we need to be focusing on our studies and stuff like that [we did]. They were also like, "Hey, we want to have fun and go out on outings." Sometimes we would go get donuts or do random things like that... or stay up past midnight studying together. It was a really good experience and helped me meet a lot of people around campus. I took the Creative Discovery [First-Year Seminar] class. It was a very fun class, very frustrating at times. I found

it frustrating because it was very different than most classes I had taken. It was less structured than most classes. A lot of us in there, myself included at the time were aerospace engineers and we would all look at her and be like, “okay, about the assignment?” She would be like you know, “just you do it and it's about this time you want to turn it in.” There was no structure there. It was a really good experience just in terms of learning how to change the way that I think about things and how you have to be able to adapt to different people, different styles, stuff like that. It was a good experience overall. I worked about 10 to 20 hours a week in the engineering lab. I was heavily involved in our Honors LLC, I was involved in Christian Challenge [a student organization] on campus. I was also involved in SWE, the Society of Women Engineers here on campus. I was involved in ACE... I do not remember what it stands for... All the acronyms!¹ That's also an engineering organization. You get a mentor from the engineering college in that organization. I was also involved with the Office of Diversity and Inclusion. I got a mentor through their Multicultural Student Mentor Program. I was involved with a lot of volunteer work and stuff like that. I participated in some of the intramural sports, but I didn't do that very often. I also helped out by tutoring on the side. I was a bit busy my freshman year!

Building Community and Making Memories

Some of my favorite things were from the LLC. I really liked our RA [Resident Hall Assistant] last year. I am actually still friends with her. She was really great, and she was really great about giving us really fun activities to do. We went ice skating at the end of the year last year as one of our LLC events. That was really fun because I had never been ice skating or

¹ **Accelerate** your success. **Create** your future. **Engage** in your college community.

roller skating. Majority of us from the LLC went and fell a lot! Those are probably some of my favorite memories of just those just random times and we were all from different backgrounds, but we still all came together into one activity and we were going to have a great time no matter what your skill level, no matter what your differences were. We were just going to have a great time and not think about homework for a few minutes, which was really nice for a bit. I had a really good community surrounding me. The honors college, all kinds of people, the admissions team here, the different advisors that I had. The different people that I worked with were really great! My friends, I had really good roommates who would accept the fact that I was gone until midnight most of the time and left at like 6:00am every day. I mean I think it was... I guess the biggest thing for me would just be community. In my busy schedule, trying to plan out time to where I'm like hanging out with friends and stuff like that and making sure that I'm learning how to prioritize. Not... just working and making money and making sure I can pay for things, but also keeping those relationships that I want to keep and making relationships. If I had to pick one thing [that was most helpful during my transition] would be the really great community that I had surrounding me. Whether it be here, or my friends that were not here at MMU but were still supporting me and all my outrageous endeavors. My family who would call me and remind me to sleep every once in a while, or different things like that. I would say community was probably the biggest thing that kept me here and keeps me going.

Academic Struggles and Finding Your Fit

I like the fact that the classes were really challenging, and the professors would still help you as long as you were, you know... upfront and like, Hey, I'm going to go to your office hours, could you help me out? I mean the lows were probably just like the stress of whenever you were getting near the tests and you were wondering if you were prepared. Then talking with everyone

else about the feeling that you were dying because you were not sure if you were going to make it through the semester because you were not sure how prepared you were, or whether you were going to keep your scholarship. Those were probably like the low parts of that [first-year] college feeling of just being stressed overall. There is a lot of studying. There is [a lot of studying] as long as you want to do really well. There is a lot of studying hours and I came in as an aerospace engineer. When I came in, I was like, well... I do not know what anything you are saying to me is, but it is fun! It's cool! Coming into college, I had a lot of different things [majors] that I was looking at. I had been looking at lawyer for quite a quite a while. Then I had been looking at being a teacher and seriously looking at becoming a college professor [just] a lot of different stuff... athletic trainer. I was all across the board. My mom, if I remember correctly, she suggested while we were in the car one day, she looked at me and she said, "what about engineering?" I said, "What about it? You know...? I have never shown any interest in this, right? Where is this coming from?" She says, "You like working with your hands, you like talking to people, things like that, and you are always fixing things." That is how I [initially] chose aerospace engineering, but I did not really have any experience with aerospace engineering. Most people, especially in aerospace engineering, when they go into it, they have had some experience with it, whether it be [through] some camp or some class or something like that. They have some basis of knowledge there. My on-campus job really helped a lot, but as for prep from high school for college [as an engineer] there was a little bit lacking there. I did not have the experience coming in. I felt very behind, but I worked really hard and I got pretty good grades for both semesters and things like that. A [few] little hiccups here and there. I switched over to education after my first semester of sophomore year. I really like everything. That is probably the hardest thing about picking a major is the fact that I like everything. I have kept a

psychology minor throughout the entire time and then I switched over to strategic communication this semester, I cannot make up my mind. With changing majors, I would really like it, [but] I wouldn't be the best at it. What I have learned is that, I love just helping people in general. Every job you are going to [have will] affect tons of lives regardless, but it depends upon how you want to affect their lives. As a teacher. I'm affecting their lives, to help them go towards the path of whatever they're going to choose as a career. You know, just whatever it is you are going to affect people. Figuring out what stamp you want to put on the world because whatever you pick, you're going to put a stamp on the world. Everything I found out in the past year and a half was the fact that I care about people, you know? I care about the fact that you have to be able to communicate with people effectively, no matter what you do in life, no matter what your career is, no matter what stage of life you are in, you have to be able to communicate with people. And then on the other side of it, you have to also be able to understand people, which is where the psychology minor comes in. That was a lot of back and forth between [being] a psychology major and a communications major of [which] both of those to me are immensely important to anything that I would want to go into. I do definitely enjoy communication. It is that practical side of my brain that was like, okay I'll get a communications degree. I am sure I would enjoy psychology classes as well, but I did not know what I would do with that [degree] per se. I do need options. I like options, so yeah this should be fun!

Balancing the Transition

I think I had this misconception coming into college that I was going to come into college, and I'm going to do [all of] this. I [thought I] would always be gradually increasing and becoming a better leader, becoming a better student, just becoming a better person all the time. And then I got into college and it was like, well, it's fine... but also not fine at times to

where I was like, you need to start catching up or you know, just those small things that just really started piling up. And so... I would say that there's a lot more self-awareness now. I wouldn't say that it's... it's... at its peak or anything. Still definitely learning. But definitely, [there has been] a lot more growth because of college. Just because of... again... going back to the community thing of just the different people around me, but also just the fact that not only have they been just really supportive, but they've also been really good about calling me out on things. I am definitely a workaholic. I will be upfront about that. I'm a workaholic. I love spending all of my time just being active and doing a lot of different stuff. I have been very fortunate in the fact that I have really good friends and currently a very good boyfriend and they will say, "Hey, you cannot work over 40 hours a week and think that you are going to take over 12 credit hours of classes, and think you're going to have a social life, and think you're going to have sleep."

Doing It on My Own Versus Asking for Help

Something that I figured out coming into college was the fact that I'm very stubborn. I knew that part coming into college. That was also part of just the transitioning into college life and figuring out that I needed to go talk to counselors and things like that. What I didn't quite realize was the fact that I was extremely stubborn about doing everything myself, I didn't have a car my first year, so I bought my own car. I would honestly say the biggest change for me coming into college was depending on people so much. I also had that same fear that a lot of students have of looking dumb, you know? And that was something that I noticed that really held me back in some of my classes was the fact that I would not ask for help in the class... and then I would try and carve out time and the rest of my day going to go talk to my professor here and figure this out. Then I still wouldn't want to do it every once in a while, because it'd be like...

well... what if I'm bothering them or what if they think I'm stupid? You know, what if they changed my grade? Cause they're "this person shouldn't be here because she doesn't even know this." Just small things like that. I just did not want to depend on them. I wanted to be able to do it all by myself, show people that I could be successful on my own and figure it out on my own. I grew up hearing that I was either going to be going places, or that I was being dumb, it was just one of the two. I got here and I was like I'm going to prove the people who say that I am dumb, wrong! I am going to figure it out! You know, I may be a four eleven Asian female... but I am going to figure it out. Gosh darn it! You know? I was letting that pride come in the way of figuring out how to ask for help from people. As I mentioned earlier, figuring out I need to go to the counseling center. That was probably like the hardest thing I'm still trying to figure out now. I'm not going to lie you..., I am still definitely working on that one now. I would say that has for sure been the hardest is figuring out how to reach out to people and how to accept the grace if you will, that they show me. The most surprising part about it was the fact that there are a lot less people that find you a burden when you are asking them for help, than I would have thought. A lot of the times I did not want to ask for help, because I know [other people] have their own stuff going on. You know, I am surviving here. And obviously [they are] needing to survive too and have their own stuff going on. If I am surviving, I obviously do not need help. Don't need help, you know, with the quotations. It was really surprising to me when for lack of a better phrase, I essentially went off the deep end last year and I really, really needed help and was really struggling and how [so] many different people just noticed. It is the fact that I do not want people to have to worry about me, you know? And so, the fact that they were worried about me and they were reaching out and there was some that sent reports [to the school care team] about me. They were just concerned, and having some people suggest that I needed to go see a

counselor, you know? And just that realization of I have really gotten to this point where all of these people, one, are noticing, but two, are banding around me to really help me up. That was surprising and also just a really, really nice realization. It was my drive, all my involvement, [and] I have all these expectations because backing out from something is not an option. You made a commitment, you got to commit to it, and you have to stay with it. I would not allow myself to say no to things, so when someone said, "Hey, join this club, it'll be great." I said, yes, let's do it! Sure. I don't need sleep so we will not worry about that right now. I came into college and well those were my expectations from high school. I was not about to lower my expectations, so I need to do [all] this. Then I started realizing, no, I need to have a social life. I have a social life now, but I still need to get those A+ [grades] that I said I was going to get. We also need to do the responsible stuff like paying for things, making sure I did my laundry, and was eating okay. Then I would see there were all these different [campus] activities. Then I also needed a job, so putting in my about 20 hours a week of work. I was taking about 18, 19 credit hours both semesters. I am just going to keep piling on this different stuff because I need to be good at all of this stuff. You know, I need to be good at getting a social life. I need to be good at making the, A+ grades. I need to be good at the 5 million different clubs... I just decided to join because I do not back out from things, you know, I'm not a quitter, so we can't quit now. It was just not a good thing. I would say learning all [those] things and figuring out how to acknowledge and embrace my own strengths. Being okay to take them time to focus on you and only you.

Learning About Myself and Others

Last year and especially this year as well as learning how, wanting to be more culturally aware. Well I wouldn't say like I immersed myself in different cultures here. I would say that

I've definitely been trying to learn about some of the different cultures that people bring into MMU and it's been really eye opening of like... these are all the things I really didn't know prior to coming into college. You know, these are the things that I could really take with me and learn regardless of whether that's the culture I'm from or that's the culture I'm going to take with me later. This is going to help me build better relations with people and just have a better, more well-rounded view of just life in general. There's also that part of, you shouldn't be ashamed of who you are... like acknowledge who you are and what... where you come from because that's something that we talked about in our leadership class of the difference between acknowledging where you come from and who you are and using it as a crutch. You know, because it was something me and one of my friends had talked about I feel bad [because I say] I come from a small town so I do not know about X, Y, or Z, you know, I did not know about [gender] pronouns. There is a lot of that different diversity here. I do not know about this, that, and the other. There are a lot of people that you do not get, and they do not get you. There are other people [where you are] on the same page. That is nice. That is fun. I think one of the bigger things was also accepting different quirks, you know, whether it be my quirks or other people's quirks. I want to learn [so] I went to trainings and I asked, "What is the best way for me to ask about these things without offending people." It was a lot of it was figuring out one how to just accept who I am as a person while still allowing myself to grow.

Artifact and Social Media

In our second meeting, Xi Xi brought and shared a picture of a social night out at a campus event with her freshman roommates. *I picked that one in particular because it was one of the few times where we were all together and actually got to do something to where we all just have fun for a couple hours and it was free, which is really nice. I just really liked it because it*

helped remind me about the like really good community that I was fortunate enough to have around me. Whether that was my roommates or other friends that I made on the floor or things like that... or the other people I met at events on campus. That's one of the reasons why I really liked the different activities they have around MMU, but also like I mentioned last session... just the really, really great community that MMU makes sure that they build around here. This picture reminds me of the times we were able to hang out. There are some events and road trips and fun stories from last year that I can remember when I look at the pictures.

Summary of Xi Xi

Xi Xi developed a supportive network of friends and campus personnel during her short time on campus. She had her fair share of struggles her first year; between trying to figure out the right major, and over committing herself in campus involvement opportunities. These were among some of the surprises she shared during her time with me. Her transition surprises are highlighted in the table below.

Table 4 *Xi Xi First-Year Surprise and Sensemaking*

TYPE OF SURPRISE	EXPLANATION OF SURPRISE	CONTEXT ASSUMPTION	CONTENT EXPERIENCE
UNFULFILLED EXPECTATIONS	Conscious expectations are not met through early experience of transition	Xi Xi thought that she could be as involved as she was in high school	Xi Xi became overwhelmed by her involvement activities and had to ask for help
ASPECTS OF NEW ROLE ARE UNANTICIPATED	Expectations both conscious and unconscious about oneself are unmet	Xi Xi assumed she would not need to ask for help in college	Xi Xi learned to ask for help and seeks counseling for well-being
NEW EXPERIENCE/ ENVIRONMENT FEELS DIFFERENT THAN EXPECTED	Aspects not considered prior to the experience were identified by the individual to be important but become noticeable due to the presence or absence and is considered undesirable	Xi Xi started as an engineering major because she was good with her hands and mom suggested it	Xi Xi learned that her lack of experience in engineering and the curriculum were not suitable to her liking
EXPECTATION OF SELF OR SKILLS FROM PREVIOUS ENVIRONMENT ARE NOT MET	What will happen is accurately anticipated but how it will feel is not accurately assessed by the individual	Xi Xi was involved during high school and she knew she would be involved in college	Xi Xi learned that being overly involved was costly on her health, finances, and time
PREVIOUS CULTURAL CONTEXTS FROM PREVIOUS SETTING ARE CULTURALLY DISSIMILAR	Cultural assumptions are brought from previous context as operating guide but fails individual in new setting	Xi Xi was from a small town and it was not as diverse as her college campus	Xi Xi takes the opportunity to learn about herself and others who differ from her through her co-curricular involvement

Xi Xi describes herself as a type A personality, and while that suits her well in academics and making friends, she found that her willingness to overcommit and not wanting to let others down caused her to be overly involved her first year. She quickly learned that having a long list of co-curricular activities was not sustainable in college. The reality of not being able to do it all, like she did in high school or originally intended, left Xi Xi over committed and exhausted her freshman year. Her eagerness over the course of her first year, led her down a path of unhealthy behaviors in which she now seeks counseling to balance her very active lifestyle. She has learned that asking and seeking help are not weaknesses and that she has a community around

her that cares for her well-being. Xi Xi has discovered that self-care is the best care in order to continue pushing towards her goals. She actively seeks counseling and is becoming more comfortable with asking for help.

Xi Xi enjoys the diversity on her campus and expressed that she has had the opportunity to learn not only more about herself, but also other people and where they come from. She shared that her time in the residence hall was fun and allowed exposure to lots of different people who shared common interest through her living learning community. She describes her campus as being a welcoming and open community where learning can happen both in and outside the classroom. The connections with her peers and campus staff made during her first-year assist with holding Xi Xi accountable for her actions and choices. She values her network of support and community and Xi Xi feels she made the right choice to attend MMU. She hopes that she can settle in on a major very soon but at the same time, would not be surprised if she decides to change it one more time, since she is not fully committed to the idea of being a communications major. In the meantime, she plans to continue to explore involvement opportunities on campus, and shared plans to eventually graduate from her university.

Unlike Xi Xi, Cole who you will meet in the following narrative has settled on his major but continues to add additional components and emphasis within his plan of study. His story shares his personal experience transitioning as a first-year student on his college campus.

Cole

Cole and I did not get a chance to meet in person. Observing him during our two Zoom video conference calls he seemed tall and thin. He is a white male with red hair. Cole was born in Chicago but raised for the majority of his life in a large city in the South. His family ventured back to the Midwest when he was two years old but his family are originally from the Midwest

area. His mother and grandparents attended Sunflower University, which classifies him a legacy student of his university. During his college search he had grown to like two other schools in his home state, but his mother found that he could get scholarships at Sunflower State because of his high scholastics and family legacy status. He and his mother decided to visit and tour the university and he got to see all the places his family would talk about as he was growing up. Having recently lost his grandfather during the time he was making his college decision he expressed “the school really preached the family connection and I felt that connection and have seen and experienced that feeling since my first visit to campus.” The family feeling at Sunflower University helped finalize his decision to attend there just prior to his senior year of high school.

Cole has an older brother who just graduated from college. His mother is a special education teacher and dad recently switched his career from pharmaceutical sales to real estate sales. He is a junior by credits (how many) but a sophomore by year and currently majors in secondary education with a social studies emphasis. He plans to add on a history major because he has the time and space to do so in his academic plan. He is involved with the campus ministry organization and the Christian men’s fraternity.

Meeting Cole

Cole was among the four students from Sunflower University (SU) who expressed interest in participating in my study. He secured the final spot for my research and therefore, I had to be more specific with my choice. I had already had two female participants and wanted to ensure there were two male perspectives in my research. While I had a number of female participants interested from this university, Cole was the only male respondent to my inquiry for research participants at Sunflower University. He was open, enthusiastic, and quick to respond

when we were communicating about his participation in my study. After figuring out that our busy schedules were just not going to align to meet in-person we decided to have our meeting using the Zoom video conference software. We met the Friday afternoon before the Super Bowl Game, which sparked the initial friendly candor to discuss sport teams and the upcoming weekend plans. We began with discussing his social media engagement on Facebook and Twitter. He shared that he did not use either platform very much. I requested him as a friend on Facebook and never got added as a friend. From what I could see on his profile, it existed but not much was open for public viewing which aligned with what he shared about his engagement on the social media platform. While he did not engage with social media frequently, he openly expressed the value he places on the social and co-curricular activities he is involved with on his campus in our first conversation. Cole starts his story in the here and now.

Getting Involved and Being Greek

I'm involved in a Christian ministry on campus and I'm involved in a faith-based fraternity on campus. Beta Upsilon Chi or "BUCs." It's big in the South. It started at UT [University of Texas] years ago and so it is really big in Texas. Really big in the SEC [Southeastern Conference] schools, and it is just now making its way up to the Midwest. I joined this past semester - I did not join my freshman year of college. I got involved with the campus ministry first because I... again, I had people who in that close-knit group of friends who had connections. They had brothers and sisters that had gone to this campus ministry before. They were like, "Hey, I heard this is great, we should go," because they're also faith-based people. I was like, okay, I'll go. And then I felt a sense of community there. We have gone on retreats we've done things like that. We have had small group things. That's also another place that friendships grew. Then after about a semester... I mean I was a band kid in high school, and I

am a drummer, so I got involved on the worship team in the band. That was another place that I felt another sense of community and it was another way that I could use my talents and it made me feel... it helped me feel not only more connected to that community but also to like... my past and to home and things like that, which was a good connection.

Joining my fraternity. *The reason that I got involved in Greek life... so I moved off campus and I was taking classes, but I hadn't really started my job yet. I was bored. My friends now do a better job of being like, "you're not in the dorms. We have to text [you], we have to let you know other things that were happening." They started out not doing a very good job of that. They've gotten a lot better, but they started out not doing a great job. My best friend, he was in the fraternity, he was like, "Hey!" and he had been pestering me for a year. He was like, "Hey, you should come to an event, or hey, you should come do this." Eventually he wore me down. I was like, fine, I'll come. Then I went and it was..., it was really good, and I actually really enjoyed it. I felt that sense of community. Then I was a pledge most of last semester and now I'm a full member and it's great. We have an event tonight for our spring rush... so that's what I'll be doing on my Friday night.*

Being Part of Something Greater Than Myself

My entire family is originally from near this area of my college. My mom and her sister both went to Sunflower University (SU). Both of my grandparents on my mom's side went to SU. When we were little, we were moving all over the place. I was born in Chicago and then three months later we moved to Pittsburgh and then two years later we were in Fort Worth. That is where I grew up. I love it there. It is a good town. It is a fun town! I grew up as a Sunflower fan, which has its pain and heartbreak a lot, but that is how I grew up. I grew up with it [this team]. I was originally planning on going to either a smaller state school called Stephen F.

Austin in Texas. I also [considered] going to Texas A and M, but the summer before my senior year, right around the 4th of July, my parents, my mom was like, "you get scholarships because you are a [legacy], you are my son." She began to look into it, and she's like, "you could get a lot of scholarship money because of your grades and your ACT score just because you're like a legacy." We got in the car and we call the school and ask, "Hey, can we go on a tour?" That day we drove up to the town and I was nervous because I had visited these other schools, and I really liked them. I was not for sure how I was going to feel about this. We go on the tour and it was like all these places that I had heard of growing up, and all these places that I'd [seen] when we watched sports on TV, and it had been just instilled in me. I was just like seeing these places for the first time [in person]. We had been visiting my parents' hometown for years, but we never made the 40-minute drive to SU, even though my grandparents loved it, and my mom loved it. I was seeing all these things for the first time and I had recently lost my grandfather - he had passed that last September, and I [was] just like feeling this sort of connection to family that I really liked. That is something that they preach here, a lot at SU, but that is something that I actually felt, and that I have seen and that I have experienced here. After they set up a meeting with one of the academic advisors in the college of education, we [met], and just sat down and had a two-hour long conversation. This meeting had just been scheduled the day before. We talked about why I wanted to be a teacher. I felt cared for in that program. I was like... okay, I can do this! I went home, and I applied and a week later I got in... which [in retrospect] probably was not great for my senior year of high school grades knowing that I had already gotten in [college] and got my scholarships. Yeah, I was in SU and I was through [with high school]. That is why I'm here.

High School and College Preparatory

I felt incredibly prepared. In the state of Texas, they rank the schools academically based on like... test scores. I know that is not a great way to rank schools, obviously, but that is one way to do it. My high school just so happen to be one of the top schools in the state of Texas and it was rigorous. I was in all of the advanced placement classes taking college level material in high school. I know that is something that a lot of schools say this is college level courses, but I feel like I actually felt that, especially when I got to the university level. I had been taking these classes that were as hard, if not harder than some of the classes that I took my first two semesters here [at SU], and I felt incredibly prepared. I remember taking introduction to anthropology, and [my first exam] I was looking at the test and I thought, I could have not been in class and not taken notes and I just could have known all of these [answers]. I felt really prepared coming into college. I feel like that is one of the reasons I have been successful, it is because of the rigor of my high school courses.

Adjusting to College Life

Definitely coming to a place where you do not know anyone, you do not have really any expectations. I remember I came here a couple of days before [classes started], and I lived in the dorms last year. I came a couple of days before the dorms officially opened, and so I was just sitting there alone, and the hallways were empty. I was like, I do not know how I feel, I mean I got dropped off, and now I am just here by myself. I do not know... I do not feel super comfortable. Then [as other students arrived] I was in this environment of friendship, and I felt accepted by people almost immediately because we had this common bond of interests, we liked to watch sports, we like to go play sports. I met my RA (resident assistant) the first night there and not just that night, but over the course of my first year until now he has become one of my

really good friends. I do not live in the dorms anymore. I live off campus this year, but we still take the time to [hang out] and see each other. We go to games together, we play sports together, things like that. Those deep connections that I made just pretty much right off the bat have been some of my closest friends. That is something that I honestly was not expecting, because in high school it took me a while [to make friends]. I hung out with some people my freshman year [of high school]. I had some other people I hung out with my sophomore year [of high school] and there were different groups of people and it took me two years to finally find the group of friends that I wanted and that I stuck with. However, in college I got here, and I met good people and I felt accepted. I felt community and I stayed with that.

Real life, I am a college student and it is not like the movies. *You grow up and you're like college it's just all partying and you know you watch things like Animal House, and you hear all these things about like frats and they're hazing people. There's [going to be] these... just massive frat parties every weekend. Then I got to college and I don't know if it's just the community that I surrounded myself with. I don't know if it was just sort of blind luck, but I didn't really [party], I knew that that went on, but I didn't really experience any of that in a way that I thought I was going to. I'm not really sure why. I mean, I think that it's a positive experience that I didn't, and I mean, I wouldn't change a thing about my experience so far. That is really sort of not my lifestyle, and [it is not] the life that I want to lead, but I just, I was expecting it to be like... WOW! This is even crazier, and it wasn't. I think that's good. I think we all see like those people on social media that... especially for us, like when we're in high school, you see those certain people who are out partying every night of the week and they do those things. You assume, I guess that is what it's like. When really most of the time it's just like*

you're hanging out with three or four people, you're watching a movie, you're playing games, things like that.

Being away from home. *When I first got there, I moved into the dorms a couple of days early and there was like no one there, so it just seemed daunting. All these empty rooms. It was quiet and I was on this big campus where I didn't know anyone. The closest people that I knew were seven hours away at least. That was definitely a low when I started, it started out and was definitely daunting. Another low, I think is just the fall semester is really long and it is not something that you expect. Probably about mid-October I really wanted to go home and just to see my family and be back in some more familiar territory. Being so far away you can't [just leave], because it would be 14 hours round trip, to essentially be there for a day. It just didn't make any sense. Then Easter weekend everyone went home to be with their families. I found a way to make way, but there were a couple of those weekends where just nothing's going on here [on campus]. A lot of people go home and sometimes you're just here by yourself and that's okay.*

Other highlights last spring, my second semester of my freshman year, I didn't have class until like 11 o'clock every day, which..., which was a mistake in hindsight, but just every night we would... I mean, the guys on my dorm floor, we would get together every night. We would just play games, and we would sit around and talk. I think that just those type of experiences and having that every night in an environment that you're never going to experience again was definitely some of the highlights. Adjusting to living on your own is a big adjustment because now all of a sudden there's no one, I mean [not] like my parents, checking in on me, or making sure that I'm okay. For the most part you're doing the responsible things, you're taking responsibility for your actions, you're being thoughtful about what you're doing. I was like an

independent kid in high school, so I got a lot of freedom, but like there's a new kind of freedom when you're not going home to an authority figure every day. You're just going on, so you know you have to find a way to hold yourself accountable and to a standard that you set for yourself. That was a big adjustment. I never had to do that before. I think very quickly you have to learn that if you don't set yourself standards and hold yourself accountable to them, then you're not going to be able to succeed. Being thrown into a new environment with really no safety net where I couldn't go home. I was expected to come in here and be successful. If I wasn't, then that I would have, I mean my brother had a 4.0 up until his spring semester of his junior year of college and I was held to a very high standard by people back at home and by myself. Just being..., I think thrown into a completely new environment, and be expected to succeed like that. I think that was something that was very difficult for me. I think what I've learned is that you can't always please everyone. The only way that you can like be fulfilled in your own work is if you find fulfillment in your own work and not... other stuff..., like someone else's grades or work or what they did. I think that..., that's really the biggest lesson that I learned.

My First Day of Freshman Year

Definitely there were a lot of nerves that first day of classes. I didn't know where a lot of the buildings were. I was like, I'm in Eisener Hall. What's an Eisener Hall? I was definitely a little nervous. It was rainy. It was like all of the bad omens [and thinking] like, this is not going to be good. Then I went to my first class and it was like the quintessential huge lecture hall with one guy in the front and he's talking... and there's 400 people in there. I was like, all right, I don't know if I like this. Then the next one I got to was first-year seminar and my professor, he was just so energetic, and so excited about what he was talking about. There were only like 26 people in there and he was like, "I want you to meet the person next to you." We would like do

icebreaker activities, but it was like bigger than that... where it was like, he wanted [it] to be actually a community of learners. That's a term that gets tossed around a lot in education circles, but I feel like he really went out of his way to make that happen. He had extra-curricular events for us to go to and grow as a community. There was an art show function that we were required to go because it was part of our grade, but we also went together, we spent time together, we read the common read [book] that was part of literature and they hosted a movie screening of that [film version of the book], so we went to that together and things like that. We still have a Snapchat group message of all of us in there. Whenever we all, or whenever someone sees that professor on campus, they like [take a photo] and send it in our Snapchat group. Some of us from that class, we still hang out. That first-year seminar definitely was something that helped me feel more comfortable and helped me meet people on campus.

First-Year Transition and Programming

I did attend a freshman orientation. SU offers a half day and then a three day, like full weekend [orientation]. I only did the half day, because I wanted to go to the earliest orientation possible because you get the best sign up for classes, but the earliest orientation coincided with something that I had to do back home so I could not go for the full weekend. Also being so far away it is a seven-hour drive from here, back home. The long drive in combination with what I had going on back home that I needed to be at that weekend. I only went to the half day orientation. They do a week of welcome here every semester. They did like a trivia night. They had gift basket bingo, which all my friends and I went to because you can go and win free stuff. None of us won because it's bingo! They do more for the freshmen that first week in the... in the fall. I can just remember that they do things like campus wide [for all students at the beginning of] every semester.

When you go for orientation, you sign up for your classes for the first time, you're with your advisor and your advisor shares with you about the SUN communities for first year students. They ask, "Is this something that you were interested in?" and I said yes. We talked a little bit about my interests, and she was like, okay, I recommend these two [SUN communities]. I just chose one. There's like a whole long list of them. It's not something that you're put in automatically. My first-year seminar was an English class with the head of the first-year seminars here at SU. That was great! I mean it was a class, it was a literature class. He was really great at facilitating discussion and building a community just through learning. One of the people [in that class], was also my roommate. There was definitely a connection made there. My SUN community it linked to anthropology and this history of American music class. There were definitely some connections made in there. Unfortunately, because we did not really like the American Music professor and that class was really hard. That forced us to build community, and to be like... we need to get together and study, or we need to get together and work on these things. That was the community that got built, which was not intended, but it was good community building, I think. The first-year seminar had a learning assistant, sort of like a TA [teaching assistant]. I would not say that she was a mentor, but she was someone that could relate to us a little bit more, but I would not exactly call her a mentor. I met with her a couple of times.

Being Part of the Home Team

I think one of the biggest things... I grew up watching the SU games on TV. I grew up wearing the [school gear], we have a family photo album of me like wearing SU shirts from when I was little, little, to like now. I think one of the biggest things was definitely like going to the games. I was not really a big sports guy when I got into college. I was a band kid in high

school, and I liked sports, I followed sports. When I got to college and I was in the stands and I was like a part of that big community and just like feeling that energy, it was something that really helps bring you into that college experience. I think the biggest highlight that I can think of was when we played our rival team. I was sitting outside in the cold and waiting all day to get good seats and then being there. The game was really good, and it was close, and then we won! Then storming the court. I thought that... that was like, that's quintessential, like the college experience kind of thing because... like you don't get that anywhere else. I thought that was something that really definitely made me feel like part of a larger community of not only sports fans, but on SU campus.

Making memories on the field of the home team. *Another highlight... at sporting events... like at the games they'll have [people] like on field and on like the court to do [halftime or timeout] activities for like fans and stuff. One of the ones [game activities], that we have here is called the Qdoba burrito roll. It is where basically... you get to go down on and get out on the field, they wrap you up in a blanket, you roll from like the 15 yard line to the goal line if you win you get free burritos for a year [from Qdoba]. At the big rival football game, I got to go down there, and I was on the field for like 20 minutes and I won! Oh yeah... I did get the free burritos! It was... it was so cool, and so all of a sudden my friend who was the other guy I was competing against, he gets a video of one of this from his friends from back home or something like that was recording it, and they got on TV, they showed it like on TV! I got a video of that and I sent it to my girlfriend who goes to Texas Tech. When I went back home and I was walking around church and they were like, "Where you in some sort of burrito contest?" and I was like, "yes I was!" The dorms didn't serve food on Sunday nights. I could just go [to Qdoba] and I could take a couple of people, we'd go get a burrito and come back. It was just nice. I still have*

one burrito coupon..., I'm not going to spend it. Is that what you have decided to share as your artifact from your first year? I have a free tee shirt that I got at the first football game that I went to. One of the ones that they were throwing out, and I got a free tee shirt. I wear that all the time. I'm a big... I'm a big object person, so I just have little things that remind me of some of the experiences that I've had. Which one would you choose to represent your first-year experience? Definitely the burrito coupon, getting on the field and winning was like so memorable and like one of those moments you typically only get to have in college.

Finding Resources and Support

I think it was just the group of friends that I had. It was like, not a huge group of people, but it was just like, we were tight-knit, and we always went out, and we always ate together. We would always go do things together. We didn't always have the same classes, but we always studied together. We would find ways to just interact and hang out and they're all still living in the dorms and I'm not, but I'm still included. I still get text messages, Hey, come over, we're doing this. Hey, we're going to go play football. Come play with us," those things like that. I think it was just like that tight-knit community that I had that I'm always excited to come back to school. I know like... yeah, it's going to be difficult. Yeah, I'm going to have to study things like that. I'm going to have to go back to work, but it's like, I know that I'm going to get to see all of my friends again. I'm really excited about that. I think that more than anything. I think it's a combination of all of those things. A lot of them are from the residence halls, but then some..., I just met in class. Some I met through my campus ministry, or I met [them] through the SUN community. This is just a whole big combination of all of those things. It is weird to see how like those circles sort of run together... so like I'll know someone from a class, and I'll be hanging out with my other friends and then they'll just sort of show up and they know them. It's

just seeing where everyone's circles sort of overlap each other. I think that's because, I mean, yes, we're a campus of 24,000 people, but also like it's big, but it feels small because it feels like everyone kind of knows someone that you also know. I think that is what's interesting. At the very least.

Connected community. *I do feel that students are getting connected. I feel like I don't know a ton of people because I again, I found my tight-knit community and I'm the kind of person to stick to it. I think to me it seems like a lot of people are connected, but also it's really easy, especially like when you're this young, we all know how to put on a face and be like, okay, I feel like I need to look like I belong. Then when you go home you feel different from the way that I'd feel. It seems like people feel connected, but I know that not all of that is 100% honest and truthful. I know that there's definitely a lot of people out there who don't feel like they're a part of the community and don't feel like that. Then again, I feel like you're going to find that on every campus large and small. The academic achievement center or the tutoring center was a big help because I was in a lot of classes that I didn't have any prior experiences. Getting that little bit of extra guidance from someone who had gone through the class before, understood how it worked and all those different things just made that transition a little bit easier. Someone who just been there before and done it, to just clarify some things. Honestly you leave there with a great sense of competence, because they can only ask you questions. You essentially are teaching yourself and so you're like, okay, I did know everything all along. So that was a big help in the transition for sure.*

Unlikely resources. *Definitely don't think... I did not expect to use and that I didn't expect really to be a big resource at all was the student union. They put on a lot of stuff that is just like fun and it's a good resource, and I mean we're college students, so we do like to get free*

stuff and they do give out a lot of free stuff. That's someplace that like I would go to, I mean even when I lived in the residence halls, that was a place that I would go to on campus and I would..., I would hang. I would go do my homework there and now as a second-year student because I had that connection to that on campus resource, if I [have a moment] between classes and things like that, I will go to the union. I will do things and I will study, and I will get my homework done. That is... like a place that I have on campus that I found last year that I thought was a good resource that I still use, even though I'm an off-campus student. My academic advisor, not only does she help me pick out classes because I have to go to her once a semester. It's nice because I have to go to her and check the classes I want to take, and make sure everything's okay. She helps make sure that I'm not going to like... take a class that I am going to hate or that's going to be too much work. Also, it's just nice to sit there and like just have a conversation. She's from around the same place that I'm from, so there's a little bit of that connection to home and so we can just... she's just really easy to have a conversation with. So that's something, and I always look forward to at least once a semester just going in and talking [about things] with her.

Other academic support. I didn't think I would go to tutoring. I honestly just thought like, I can figure it out. I work as a tutor now. I think that that's the common case, If I'm being completely honest, I have tutored for..., this is my second semester, right? I did not tutor a single male person. I think that's a common attitude among men, especially college age men. Like we might not all be prideful people, but we're all prideful people and I don't know why that is? I don't know why we don't think that we can go [for help]. We don't think that we'll ever need help and don't want to accept help when we need it. I don't know, I just, I didn't think that I would need tutoring and it's okay to need tutoring. That was something that I had to come to the

realization [of], and I didn't necessarily always struggle in high school, but this is a new environment, and sometimes it is okay to ask for help. It is! It's always okay to ask for help if you need it. I think that was something that I didn't think I would ever use that I do, and that I did use.

Lessons Learned

Academically I think... this is going to be the opposite of what you're going to [probably] get a lot, but I think I've relaxed a lot more. When I came in, I was like, I have to do everything. I have to do everything. I have to do everything, work, work, work constantly. You have to find ways and time to relax, to give yourself a break. Especially the longer I got into [the college transition], the more responsibilities I was taking on. I had to devote time to other things than just my academics. I had to find a way to relax... relax my standards a little bit while still not like relaxing them too much and finding a way to just take a break from some of that stress sometimes. I think one of the things that's changed in me personally, I think I'm a more responsible person definitely. Because again, I have to, I have to [get things done]. I'm so far away, I can't have anyone come up and do anything for me. I can't go home and do laundry. I have to find a way to make it on my own. I think over the course of my first year, that was advantageous being so far away..., is that even if I wanted to like go home and take a break from being on my own, I couldn't. I was forced to... you're on your own, you have to make it work by yourself. I think that that really made me a responsible person.

Personal growth. *I feel like I'm just more open also. I think it's the part of being in a place where nobody knows you, right? You get to kind of start over and you get to be more of the person that you want to be instead of the person who everyone thinks that you are. Like I go home, and I'm constantly reminded of like the person that I used to be when I am in my*

hometown. You know, you get what I'm saying? Right? I come back and I'm like, okay, I'm not that. I think I was just reflecting back on that and I was like, I don't like the person that I used to be, and it's just little things. Like just treating people a little bit better. Focusing a little bit less on myself and things like that..., little adjustments bit by bit, you don't [notice], but when you look back you didn't really see it. When you go home, you're like, okay I..., I don't love who I used to be, but I like myself a lot more now.

College Life Realities

I think getting my first..., I think after writing my first paper in my literature class and seeing that like, I put in a lot of work and I was proud of the work that I did. I didn't necessarily receive the grade that, like, I wanted, but I still felt proud of the work that I did. I was a band kid and we always had competitions and they were always like, only be proud of the work that you did, not the result that you get because if you put in like the right amount of work then you should be proud of how doing the best that you could [felt] instead of getting the results that you wanted. I don't think I fully understood that until I actually put my all into something and I didn't necessarily get the results that I wanted, but I was still proud of how..., like how I did and the story that I told.

I think another big thing was just coming back after the winter break and seeing everyone again because like you always hear the stereotype, college kids, they're constantly like going home during the semester, but then when they're at home they want to go back [to school]. I was like, I don't know if that's true. It's 110% true! I always want to come back and I want to see my friends and I wanted to go to games, and I wanted to just be back in that experience again because being here is unlike being anywhere else, this is an experience that is unlike anywhere else. Right? Just missing that sort of experience.

Summary of Cole

Cole is an out of state legacy student at Sunflower University. Although he is more than seven hours away from his family, after a time of adjustment, he now could not feel more at home. He described finally understanding the love his family has for SU. Cole described that feeling as being part of something bigger than himself. While he did not struggle academically his first year of college, he faced other transition issues. The surprises Cole faced during his first-year transition are highlighted in the table below.

Table 5 *Cole First-Year Surprise and Sensemaking*

TYPE OF SURPRISE	EXPLANATION OF SURPRISE	CONTEXT ASSUMPTION	CONTENT EXPERIENCE
UNFULFILLED EXPECTATIONS	Conscious expectations are not met through early experience of transition	Cole thought he would not need tutoring in college	Cole has become a tutor and advocates for students to seek help when they need it
ASPECTS OF NEW ROLE ARE UNANTICIPATED	Expectations both conscious and unconscious about oneself are unmet	Not applicable	
NEW EXPERIENCE/ ENVIRONMENT FEELS DIFFERENT THAN EXPECTED	Aspects not considered prior to the experience were identified by the individual to be important but become noticeable due to the presence or absence and is considered undesirable	Cole described his surprise of feeling part of something bigger than himself when stepped foot on campus as a legacy student for his college visit	Cole had not considered the positive impacts of being a legacy student could have on his college experience
EXPECTATION OF SELF OR SKILLS FROM PREVIOUS ENVIRONMENT ARE NOT MET	What will happen is accurately anticipated but how it will feel is not accurately assessed by the individual	Cole wanted college to feel like a home away from home. His faith and family were important to maintain.	Cole did not realize how much being a legacy student already connected him to a place he had never been and he now feels like he is part of something bigger than himself.
PREVIOUS CULTURAL CONTEXTS FROM PREVIOUS SETTING ARE CULTURALLY DISSIMILAR	Cultural assumptions are brought from previous context as operating guide but fails individual in new setting	Cole shared his involvement with his church in his hometown. This led him to seek opportunities to be involved with his Christian student organization and Christian based Fraternity.	Having the opportunity to continue practicing his faith has become a social outlet for Cole on his campus.

As an out of state student, Cole had to learn a great deal of independence and learn how to utilize the campus resources to navigate through his transition. Cole found a sense of a community through his fraternity and the Christian organization he got involved with over the last three semesters. He also shared how he made connections through his first-year seminar class and

other campus facilitated events. Cole was a band kid in high school who casually followed sports but being at a large division one college, he expressed the joy of attending the college sporting events for SU and describes attending the games as his greatest highlights since he has been in college. He has found a community that he describes as his family on his campus and that makes him excited to return each time he leaves. Cole shared that he felt like SU was home since his first visit and the community he has made since attending has solidified those feelings. He shared a couple campus resources have aided in his successful transition, including the tutoring and student activity centers. He also described certain faculty and staff who supported his transition and continue to be resources for him as a sophomore student, namely his first-year seminar instructor and college advisor. Cole believes he has learned a lot about himself and has become a better person because of his college experience. He describes himself as being more responsible and open. He plans to continue and graduate at SU. When asked if his children would also be SU legacies, he gave a practical and mature answer, "I am not for sure because I would want them to have the freedom to choose like I did, but I will make sure it is on the list for them to consider." Cole shared that his children will grow up watching SU sports, and hopefully the family tradition will continue. Similar to Cole, Cooper who you meet in the next story shares his personal connection and familial experience as an out of state student to his college. His story highlights his personal experience of transitioning as first-year student on his college campus.

Cooper

Cooper describes himself as the oldest son of three and the favorite child of his parents in his family. He is a tall and stout white athletic built male. He is an out of state student who plays football for Grace University. As he reflects on his childhood, he remembers driving

through his college city often as their family would travel to Colorado. Cooper was familiar with the city and excited to come to college in the city he would often pass through growing up. There were two other colleges that he was considering when making his decision but ultimately, he felt at home and was excited to play football for Grace University. Cooper came from a large high school of 1500 students. He shared that his high school was not a college prep school, but “there was a big focus and push for students to attend college.” He played sports in high school and was able to maintain above average grades but describes the academic transition from high school to college as one of his biggest challenges. He initially began as a zoology major but within the last three semesters changed his major twice before deciding on criminal justice. He enjoys outdoor hobbies like fishing and hunting and currently he works off campus as a security guard for a local bar. Cooper enjoys a variety of music genres and tries to attend concerts or work security for those events in town when he can. As a sophomore he returned to live in the apartments located on campus and described his enjoyment of living in the residence hall as one of the reasons he returned to Grace University.

Meeting Cooper

Cooper and I got introduced via email. After vetting a handful of his college peers, he seemed to be the most responsive student I interacted with at Grace University. He was quick to respond with demographic information and the co-curricular activities he had been involved in throughout his first year in college. Cooper secured my third participant spot and I knew I wanted a diverse pool of participants. The other interested students from Grace University were female and I had already begun collecting data from two female participants at other universities. Cooper’s and my schedule also worked out to allow us to meet within the week. I suggested meeting on his campus, and he suggested meeting off campus. We compromised by selecting a

coffee shop in a bookstore in the city. The bookstore-coffee shop is a moderately sized place and prior to our meeting he had not described himself to me. However, all of my outgoing emails share a photo of me and thus, I was hopeful that he would recognize me from the picture in my emails. Thankfully, he was dressed in his college paraphernalia which helped me identify him among other patrons milling around the front entrance. My hair was different from email photo it was styled in a clean bun that and my photo in the emails had my hair down. However, once I noticed his sweatshirt and he saw my face we recognized each other and were able to find a quiet place in the bookstore to get settled in and get to know one another. After the formalities of Informed Consent paperwork and a deeper explanation of my research, Cooper seemed a little nervous, so we began with the background questions in hopes that I would be able to find some commonalities between us and establish rapport. We started with him sharing his engagement on social media. I learned that he did not have Facebook or Twitter. In our time together, I observed him to be a well-mannered and polite young man. He would respond or refer to me as “ma’am” throughout our time together. Once he began to share more about himself, I was able to share in some of his music interest and football. After sharing laughter about him being the favorite child and me growing up as a stepdaughter of a football coach, Cooper seemed less nervous. I allowed for him to choose his pseudonym for his story. He could not think of a name he wanted to be referred to in our first meeting, by the end of our second meeting he decided on the name Cooper. After giving him some time to sign his consent form and think of his pseudonym we were able to begin with some interview questions. He chose the name Cooper and did not give an explanation as to why that was the name he wanted to be referred to for this purpose of this study. Cooper began to share the story about why he chose to come to Grace University, a school that is a quite a way from his hometown.

Why I Came Out of State for College

I was always planning on attending [college], but what brought me here was football. I emailed a couple of coaches and I had actually emailed the offensive coordinator at Grace University and they brought me out on a college visit. I liked the school so much that I decided right then and there that I was coming here. I had always seen the school driving through this city - it is on our way to Colorado. I would always see it as we passed by it from the highway when we would go to visit family. I kept noticing Grace University and I thought I will see if they have a football program. Then I ended up coming here. If it was not here, I was probably going to go to community college in my hometown. I also considered Arkansas or Missouri State.

College Prep and Academic Transition

Our high school... like they pushed college quite a bit, and very hard. I was not, like, the best student. I did not take honor classes and stuff like that, but I finished my requirements. I finished [with] like a 3.5 GPA, which isn't terrible, but... I didn't take the college prep classes and stuff like that. I think that I wasn't really prepared enough for college. I was glad that it was a different level change instead of having taken [the] college prep classes and be thrown into college and it is just easy. I was really glad that it was a challenge [and a] switch [from high school]. Actually, I was challenged enough that I ended up failing two classes I think in the first two semesters, which was a big shock to me since I had not gotten below a C in high school. I was in a really hard class, so it really gave me a different point of view. I thought, "Wow," I need to do better. I need to change and kick in a different gear.

Our coaching staff is really good about connecting us to resources. They now require us to go into our academic resource center. We have to have eight hours signed and logged each

week. The team does study hall hours. We sit down and have somebody who watches us do all our work there. Our academic resource center, which is a student led tutoring system. I got tutored by people my age, people that understood, [or] they could understand what I was going through. People that have taken the class I was in before. They understood that the classes were harder than what I was used to [from high school] and they were just able to... just help with things, instead of [having] someone pointing at me and telling me this is how it is done. They had their own way of doing things different [from the professors], which really helped. That helped me [to] start getting organized. I got more organized and I started dedicating certain times of the day to study. That is when I really just kind of buckled down and started actually doing stuff that people had told me to do.

First-year Struggles

My coaches were a big support in [my first year]. They gave me the tough love that I needed [in order] to buckle down and start getting better grades and start showing up more and just start focusing more. My parents helped a lot. Although, I did not tell them about the grades because I did not want to get yelled at about that really, but they had been really supportive and kept encouraging me even though they know that I had some struggles. I had [made] some really good friends in my corner that really helped me through the transition phase [my first year]. They got me out of the dorms, and we did things and we would go to school activities, or we would go play laser tag or mini golf in town.

Another one was... I did not struggle moving away from my parents as much as I thought I would, I struggled more with just being on my own... like keeping my stuff organized and things like that. I did not quite struggle with the, "Oh, I miss home." It was more like my parents are not here to tell me I need to clean my room, and I would not find time to do it. Or, oh, I [had]

ice cream for dinner again for the third night in a row. Our first year we had... there were three rooms in each, I guess, flat [or] apartment. There were three rooms with two roommates in each room. So, there were six of us in our flat. It had a kitchen, the living room, and two bathrooms. The biggest part of that was just trying to get along with everybody. It was really nice because all six of us ended up being athletes. We understood each other's schedules. We had a problem with one guy. He would stay up playing video games and yell and scream up till 3:00 AM in the morning when we had to wake up for five o'clock practice. That was one of the tougher [situations] to deal with. We all learned to talk to him and be like, "Hey, we have practice in the morning." Or say, "Hey, let's be quiet for the night." We ended up learning more communication than anything in that situation.

First-year Specific Programs

All the fall [sport] athletes had to show up a week early before the start of classes. We got a jumpstart on all the kids that were just showing up for school, or rather just showing up for spring sports or winter sports. We got that one week jump on them. We had to go to all of our orientations. The first week was all orientation, all day from 6:00 AM practice and then we would go eat breakfast at 7:30 AM, and then we would have everything else from 8:30 AM to sometimes midnight with activities that the Resident Assistants (RAs) would put on that night.

Freshman Orientation and First-Year Seminar. *The Orientation really made us get out and get to know people and really get to bond together before we all had to live together. Then we had regular orientation with the entire student body, or the entire freshman class, and that was like the weekend before [classes]. We went in for an hour and we met with our advisors, and we were assigned a first-year mentor. They were... I believe they were juniors and they came in and they talked to us about classes and everything. Like how to adapt to living*

away from home and stuff like that. Time management and study skills. Our teacher that did that [content] and then the first-year mentor would split [us] into groups and do exercises and everything. If I had someone [first-year mentor], that was more relatable and had been in my shoes [as an athlete], that would have been a better match. Like someone who had football practice every day and understood more of my athletic transition. My first-year mentor did not really do that, she had class and that was it. For that [first-year seminar] class, we also on Thursdays went into chapel every week.

Freshmen on-campus events. *One of the big events we had was my first year was a class challenge. The residence life staff, they came together, and they did a class challenge in front of our dorms in the grass. The freshmen would split up into like three different teams and we challenged juniors and seniors and sophomores. We had water baseball [one time], where we had to run on the grass in between a slip and slide and slide into home plate and stuff like that. Sometimes we would play sand volleyball, which was fun. Then we also had a night where they did a pillow jousting [competition]. They did one more night where it was a carnival night. You won tickets and then you got to put it in buckets, and then they had a drawing at the end of the night for like a home cooked meal by the resident life staff or, ice cream or [other giveaway] stuff like that.*

College Exposure and Personal Changes

My grandparents were very religious growing up, so my parents grew up religious, but then they got away from it. My family, we did not go to church every weekend. It was like, [we went on] Christmas and Thanksgiving and Easter that kind of thing. Once I got here, [having that] kind of geared me towards [thinking] I should probably start learning more about this and start going to church. I started going to the chapel and that geared me towards getting to know

God better. Chapel was required on Thursdays as part of our First-Year Seminar class. Being here [in college] you grow, you change, you learn a lot. I feel like I am more outgoing. I have gotten to know more people around the campus, I can say Hey to everybody [when walking on campus]. I have gotten to know [my] teachers and [all of] that just makes me feel more involved and included. Freshman year I was kind of timid and did not know a lot of people, but now I feel like I know more people. I can [and have] really put myself out there more. Then on an academic level, I feel better about going into classes and understanding the work, rather than going to class and not understanding and then just wanting to leave or not showing up because I do not understand it. Now that I understand everything more and understand how college works, I'm not afraid to just go to class and ask questions and be a part of the discussions. I just feel more confident overall in my second year. I have continued to use peer tutoring and the academic success center when I need help. I feel like my decision-making skills became better over my first year. If someone asked me if I want to go out at two o'clock in the morning and go get food now, it is more [to consider] like I have got food in my fridge... or I have a test in the morning. You say no. I feel like my decision making has gotten a lot better. Unlike last year it is not like fly by the seat of your pants again this year. It is a new experience being able to do that and have that freedom. I can make those decisions now for myself.

College Finances

Also, with money, [you] have to find a job and fend for yourself. You do not have that same financial support like [when you were in high school] at home. Our financial aid is like split into two pieces. We have a certain academic scholarship and then the football team gives us an athletic scholarship, but then the rest of it comes out of pocket or through other scholarships. Back home [all of that was different] with your parents making you food every

night. Then also, realizing there is so much more to do than just go to school, go home, have dinner and go to bed. Especially here in the city. You find all the different hole in the wall restaurants, [that] was a cool thing that we did last year, or all the different amusement places to go to and the malls and all that stuff. It was a big change from being in a small town in Missouri and the only thing you did was go to school, go to practice and go home. Balancing that with time and finances and having the freedom was a big change.

Why I Came Back My Sophomore Year

I was able to go home, but I ended up coming back... coming back and staying most of the summer and working here. I had ended up making a lot of good friends. We had a lot of brotherhood bonded bonding from football. The coaches, they felt like father figures. I made a lot of friends that were not athletes by the end of my freshman year. I began to get to know my teachers really well here... it really made it feel different, [like a] home away from home and I didn't have to go home to feel like I was somewhere that I wanted to be. I was able to stay here and if I needed somebody, I could just call one of my buddies and they were there and... or I could call a teacher and they were there to help me through things that I needed to get through.

Artifacts and Highlights from the First year

One of the best memories was from my first football game. Running out on the field and seeing all of our fans in the stands and seeing this kind of sea of red in the stands and hearing our band play. It just felt really cool. That was a really good memory and they actually got a picture of me running out, which was really cool. Another defining moment I can think of was when me and five other people hopped in a car, which we were stuffed in the back seat and we decided at like two o'clock in the morning to go on a McDonald's run and we found a brick and we all signed it and put the date and the location. It was just a fun random night. I thought that

was really cool... and now I have that brick sitting in my dorm room with all of our names signed on it and it reminds me of the really fun night that we had. Was this with your roommates or teammates? No, the [group] they were actually [not my teammates] they were just completely different people. One of them was one of our RAs, one of them was a softball player, one of them was another RA and one of my teammates with us [that night]. I was hanging out with the one RA and then he was there with his friends and then through him I became friends with those three just because that one night we went to McDonald's. If you had to choose between the brick from the night at McDonald's and your first game photo which would you choose? If I had to choose one of the two for my greatest highlight of my freshman year, I would definitely choose the picture of me running out on the field. It was, both an athletic and academic achievement for me. Just being able to say, I played college football and there is a picture of me in a jersey and a helmet and pads that says I was there, and I did it. I played college sports! I will continue to play football until I graduate from Grace University.

Summary of Cooper

Cooper had some struggles academically as he transitioned through his first year of college however, he was able to overcome those hurdles by getting help. He shared in his narrative some surprises he experienced within in his first year of college. These experiences are highlighted in the Table 6 below.

Table 6 *Cooper First-Year Surprise and Sensemaking*

TYPE OF SURPRISE	EXPLANATION OF SURPRISE	CONTEXT ASSUMPTION	CONTENT EXPERIENCE
UNFULFILLED EXPECTATIONS	Conscious expectations are not met through early experience of transition	Cooper thought he would not struggle academically in college, after all he maintained a decent GPA in high school	Cooper failed two classes his first year of college and now actively seeks tutoring and participates in team study hours
ASPECTS OF NEW ROLE ARE UNANTICIPATED	Expectations both conscious and unconscious about oneself are unmet	Not Applicable	
NEW EXPERIENCE/ ENVIRONMENT FEELS DIFFERENT THAN EXPECTED	Aspects not considered prior to the experience were identified by the individual to be important but become noticeable due to the presence or absence and is considered undesirable	Cooper assumed that he would be homesick being an out of state student	Cooper has found a brotherhood among his teammates and father figures in his football coaching staff
EXPECTATION OF SELF OR SKILLS FROM PREVIOUS ENVIRONMENT ARE NOT MET	What will happen is accurately anticipated but how it will feel is not accurately assessed by the individual	Cooper knew he would have roommates in the residence hall	Cooper had to learn to communicate better with others when facing roommate issues
PREVIOUS CULTURAL CONTEXTS FROM PREVIOUS SETTING ARE CULTURALLY DISSIMILAR	Cultural assumptions are brought from previous context as operating guide but fails individual in new setting	Not Applicable	

Being part of the football team gave Cooper many advantages. In our two meetings he shared that being on team made him feel more connected on campus and allowed him to explore the resources he needed to get back on track after failing a couple of classes. He expressed that his support network both on and off campus helped encourage him through harder times and were largely the reason he returned. Cooper has found a brotherhood with his fellow teammates and other students who lived on campus his first year. He and his friends have enjoyed making

memories and exploring the city that seems to have plenty of entertainment options for college aged students. He describes his first-year experience as assisting with his communication and developing him into a more responsible and mature young adult. He has found a home away from home at his University and within his new city. Cooper intends to continue to play football and graduate from Grace University. Like Cooper, in the final narrative you meet Lydia, who is also an out of state college student athlete. Her story shares the unique transition experiences she faced her first year on her college campus.

Lydia

Lydia is an African American student athlete who attends a small private college in the Midwest. She is from Arizona and has seven siblings that she has never met because they are her father's children from a different relationship. While she is aware of them, she shared that she did not interact with them or her father. Lydia comes from a single parent home. While her mother attended college, she did not finish and therefore Lydia is considered a first-generation college student. She chose to come to school out of state because of the scholarship opportunities afforded to her through sports. She was a student athlete in high school and has been participating in sports "all of her life." Although she did not participate in track until she was in high school, she secured a spot on the team at Rolling Hills College with a partial athletics scholarship to assist with attending the school. She is pursuing her degree in Sociology. Currently she works as a resident assistant which assists to pay for her on campus living expenditures. This opportunity among others will be explored in her narrative have allowed her to "open-up, step outside of her comfort zone, and meet lots of new and different people." She has found that the staff personnel within her community on campus at the private college has been most valuable. The experiences throughout her first year being with her teammates, other

student athletes, and peers she met in her first-year seminar class and around campus have kept Lydia engaged and made her want to return her second year. She described one of her most significant first year transition surprises as maintaining finances needed to continue in a four-year private school as an out of state student. That has been a big hurdle for Lydia to face within the last three semesters. At the time of her interviews, she was considering the idea of transferring back to a school closer to home that would be more affordable and provide greater resources and opportunities for her. Additional resources that she identified as important and not available at her current institution included “fraternity and sorority life, a career development center that provides applied learning experiences.” Having a more affordable education with more resources at a public university has sparked her interest and although she would like to, “finish where she starts;” the cost to attend this private four-year college as an out of state student adds pressure and strain on finances for her and her mother. Lydia’s mother also attended college out of state and is supportive of her daughter to gain the education she wants but ultimately has allowed Lydia to make final decisions on whether she will continue at her current college or transfer at the end of her sophomore year.

Meeting Lydia

Upon being provided a contact list from my colleague and liaison at Rolling Hills College, I contacted the students inviting them to participate in my study. This was the first college I received my sophomore student contact list. I reached out to the students just prior to the winter break and got a response from three willing students. All of them were going to be away for the break but had planned to return back to campus early, prior to the start of spring classes. Lydia was the most responsive and the first student to give me availability to meet. We had planned before she left for the holiday to meet up in a couple weeks and she shared her cell

phone number for quick and easy communication. She and I continued most of our communication via text message to solidify our meeting plans. I suggested that for our meeting we go to a coffee shop, hoping that the relaxed and open environment would be comfortable and less awkward for us both. Prior to my arrival Lydia had disclosed that she did not have a car and would need a ride to the coffee shop in town. I was happy to assist her as I felt grateful that she had decided to assist me as a participant in my study and it was my first time navigating the area. I picked Lydia up at her residence hall and she was helpful in guiding me to one of two local coffee shops in town. On the short car ride to Main Street, the only major road in town, we discussed how her holiday break had been and when she would begin classes again. I had some music playing in the background and that began our conversation about her interest in music and soon thereafter we found some common and shared interest of music artists both classic and new. She had initially been reserved on the car ride over, but she soon became more comfortable and began to share more about herself, her interests, and hobbies. Before we began with interview formalities, we took some additional time to get to know each other and chatted over coffee. We found a small quiet table in the back of the coffee shop and I explained my research study in more detail. I gave Lydia the opportunity to choose her pseudonym so that she would have more of a personal connection with her narrative. She chose her middle name in which she shared not many people were aware. She seemed to be a very smart young lady who is inquisitive and genuine. After discussing similar places we liked to shop and our favorite music artists, the two of us began a discussion that was familial, fun, and the start of a great research relationship. We both seemed relaxed and comfortable with direction of the conversation. We shared some laughs and she assisted in clarifying titles and language I had found on the website about some of the first-year programs Rolling Hills College provided. Once the interview began, Lydia started our

discussion by talking about her engagement on social media. She uses Twitter and has a Facebook but described that as being, “for home, people at church back home, you know?” After reviewing both from her first year I learned that while she used Twitter more than Facebook, it was mostly retweet of humor and videos. Once we began the formal interview Lydia began by sharing her high school academic experience and college preparation.

High School Preparation and First-Year Academic Transition

I went to a college prep high school and I took a lot of like AP and honors classes, so [college] was like easy, I guess. Coming here and transitioning to college, it was just like, it was super, super easy. It seemed the same. I didn't really have many academic issues. I think it was just like when it came to test taking, I would blank out, but other than that I did fairly well on them. I had told my mom I don't think I want to go back for spring semester because I'm not being academically challenged. Like it felt like I was breezing through all the work. It was just so easy. I have test anxiety but [student success center director], she gave me a lot of study tips about how to get better at that. That has actually helped me a lot, helped my test scores, and all my grades a lot.

The school offers free tutoring. That has come in handy for me, especially in a couple of my math classes. Both fall and spring semester I was on the honorable mention list and minimum GPA 3.5 and above to make it. That was good academically. I would probably have to say my teammates come in handy too when it comes to academics because there's a couple of them that share the same major as me, and they've taken the classes that I'm taking. Really it is not the work that is hard, I still feel like my classes are about the same as level as what I was taking in high school. I thought it was going to be hard because people that I know that are a couple of years older than me, they were like, “College is hard. You don't want to screw around

and don't procrastinate." I came here thinking like, okay, [I need to] make sure I am on top of everything. Then it was not hard as people say it is.

Being a Student Athlete

I came in April of my Senior year and I signed my letter of intent and to do my financial aid papers. That was like the only time I ever came to visit Rolling Hills College prior to arriving for student athlete move-in. They [my friends] were shocked! They were like, are you serious? You are going to go to the Midwest? I was like, yeah, and it's too late once you sign. My one friend she wants me to transfer to the state school back home. The first week I came out here she was like, "It's not too late. You can come down." My other close friend she just said do what makes you happy. Playing sports pays for my most of my tuition. I have been a student athlete my whole life, so it was not hard to adjust to the schedule. I think the only difference was having more freedom, independence, and I had to have better time management. Every day we would come back from a track meet like super earlier or like super, super late. After that, I had to get myself ready to do homework and all that.

It is nice because you take some of the same classes together [with your teammates] and then maybe study together and help each other out. Our new thing this year is study hall. Study hall is now required for my team. That helps a lot. A lot of them [my teammates] help me. My ACE leader from my first-year seminar was my teammate and my major, was her minor. She and I met during Orientation she was our group leader. She was like a teaching assistant in my first-year seminar. She was really helpful when deciding on what courses to take. My advisor was not as helpful, but [my ACE leader] she had taken the classes and I trusted her, and she told me what I needed to take. She transferred out at the end of last year. We lost our coach, so a lot of my teammates left at the end of the year. My former coach was really helpful mostly with

academics more than with my sports. He was really there to listen and help if any of us struggled. A lot of my teammates left when he left because you come to play sports usually for the coach you sign with. Having a new coach has definitely been different and we have had to replace a lot of our former teammates.

Transition Struggles

I have thought about [changing majors] but then I am not going to be happy with it because the major that I am in right now, it was my second choice because my main choice, they did not offer it here so I had to go with my second option. My main choice was Mortuary Science. They do not have [that major] here. The schools I looked into for that, they did not have sports and I wanted to do sports so, I had to decide. You feel like you're not doing what it is that you want to do. My main thing about transferring is that if I am going to have to pay a lot of money, I want to at least pay for something that I am happy about and something that I know I can look back and be like I actually enjoyed it versus paying for something that I am not really enjoying 100%.

Resident Living and Campus Involvement

I am the student government association (SGA) events coordinator and a resident assistant (RA) in my dorm on campus this year. I was not involved with as many clubs or activities my freshman year. I would find events to go to or volunteer when I could, but I was not as involved due to sports. One of the main reasons that kept me here was because I had got the position to be an RA and I was in SGA. I felt like if I left, it would be on bad terms. I did not want to leave on a bad term because just in case if I ever needed a recommendation or something, I didn't want them to be like, well no, because you left and did not tell anybody... "You applied and you knew that you're leaving." That was kind of the case, but if it was not for

that, I don't think I would have stayed. Although, maybe I would [have returned] because I wanted to finish out my Gen Ed [General Education] credits. I did not want to have to start completely over.

My First Real Job

I had never really worked. Even over the summers in high school, [I got] my first job the summer before I came here. My mom was always like, you need to focus on school and sports, don't worry about working. Last year I got my first job on campus. I worked in the student center at the café most of my first year. It was not a good fit for me, so I quit my second semester. The part time jobs help me pay for my school. Honestly, I knew a lot of people that were already RAs, so they were like I think you should do it. I thought it seemed like it was fun. Also, I liked that my room gets paid for, so I don't really have to worry about that. You get paid every month. I also wanted to do something to push me out of my shell and help me to get to know people. I'm kind of like a people's person, once I get to know you, so being an RA forces me to actually go out of my way meet new people. Being a resident assistant has matured me a lot. Learning how to deal with lots of different people and be patient with them and their very different views or opinions as a leader or facilitator of conflict for my residents. Learning how to live with people different from you has been the most challenging lesson. I lived on campus my first year and I live on campus now as an RA and I kind of realize that, you know everyone is raised different. I realized that I was not sheltered. A lot of people that I met from my freshman class they had no idea about a lot of things. Even just simple things like washing your clothes or stuff like that. My first roommate didn't really know too much about cleanliness. I realized that a lot of other students' parents did everything for them. Versus there's people who like me, my mom did enough to where I had to learn independence at a very young age. My mom taught me

at a young age... I'm not going to be here for the rest of your life, so you have to figure out how to do this. I think that was the main thing that I realized was that I wasn't sheltered, and I cannot really compare myself to people because you don't really know everybody's story.

Culture Shock

It was a huge change and a huge like... shock for me. I think it was just more of being like on my own and then having to have to share like... space. I would probably have to say my transition was easy... but hectic. Academically it was easy. Being a student athlete, it was not much of a transition. Not much had changed. It was hectic because dealing with different, like cultures of people, because everyone is not raised the same. That was something that I had to adapt to like very quickly. I would also have to say [the transition was] like a huge cultural shock, it was different. Where I am from, it is super diverse. There is a lot of Hispanics, Blacks, a little bit of white people. Here it is just like the population is just straight white. It is like..., it is just different. My team is pretty diverse... last year we had about maybe 10 Black people and then we had maybe like 15 to 20 white people. One of our teammates, he's Cambodian. We are pretty diverse in a sense on your team, but not the town.

Financial Considerations

To be honest with you, being an out of state student is way more expensive. My mom and I split the rest of the cost not covered by my sport scholarship. I had my part time job last year and this year I am an RA actually earning my own money. That is something I did on my own. I have to make monthly payments. My mom does a certain percentage of it and then I do the rest. Any other money is my mine, but my mom is always like, "You gotta save and then be smart about your money." I have talked with some [campus] staff and my former coach about the expenses to them and we were trying to figure out how I can stay and afford everything. I found

that especially as an athlete it seems that some students [when struggling] can get more help than others. For me, when I left for the summer break, finances were really like the number one thing where it was like... I might not be able to come back or, I might not be able to finish there.

As far as staying, yeah, I really like it here. I like running track and here is one of the main places that was like, we'll offer you something. I wanted the experience of playing sports in college, and I don't like leaving somewhere where I started. I would rather finish where I started. I told my mom, I was like... I don't think that I will be able to finish. I was like, I may be able to go back one more year, but my junior and my senior year, I can't go back because I can't afford to keep putting her in debt and taking out loans. She told me that I have to do what's best for me and I have to make the smartest decision for me. The smarter decision was to stay in for the first few years and just finish my general education credits or my Associates of Arts (AA) credits and then transfer out, find somewhere cheaper to go. I am looking at places like in New Mexico and stuff, places that are close to home because... a lot of them do like discounts for Arizona residents and you get like scholarships and tuition, like waivers and all that. Essentially, it's that I'm in state, or I'm paying in state tuition.

I think as of right now, if finances weren't an issue, I would most definitely stay. I have spoken with a couple of staff on campus that I trust, and we've gone for coffee or just talked, and they are like don't worry about it. Everything's going to be fine. My supervisor for my RA position, she puts me in the direction of what I need, though. She tells me what I need to hear, not really what I want to hear. My teammates know and I have told them, but they think I'm joking. My coach, he knows, but he said... he was like, when I told him he's like, "That is not an option, you're going to stay." I was like no, I'm not, I cannot afford it.

I would be willing to explore the option to see [if I could stay], yeah. If I don't have to pay out of pocket, my main thing is I do not want to have to work a lot in college. I kind of want to enjoy it. I want to enjoy playing sports and school. I do not want to have to go to class, go to practice, then go to work and do it every single day. And then look back and be like, yeah, I worked just to get a degree.

Capturing the First-Year Experience

Like the other three participants Lydia was asked to bring an artifact to our second meeting. The purpose was to give us a starting point for our continued discussion about her first-year experience. Lydia brought a collage of her track meet stickers. She shared her method of capturing memories from her first year of college. *I did a mix between taking pictures and journaling. I used Snapchat, and [my] memories I have of like a year ago today that pops up of everything [like pictures and videos] that I took of last year. One of my old high school teachers, she gave me this journal to write in every day. And I used that a lot too. It is an open blank journal. I keep items from my [sporting] events. If you had to choose one memorable article to share from your first-year experience what would it be? I keep all of my lane stickers and I write my times on it from the meet and the date. I have all my numbers on a piece of copy paper, and I have my time. You can see the whole season, my times, and how I got better [since my first year on the team].*

Support for Staying in College

My ACE Leader played a huge role [of support] because she was in the same department that I'm in. She experienced some of the same classes. She helped me out a lot, especially with my classes and stuff. My [former] coach, he helped a lot too, more so academically than he did on the team. The head of Student Success, she played a huge role too. My RA supervisor she

played a huge role in keeping me here. Besides the academics, she always would text, “Hey, how are you? Stop by my office, [so] we can talk.” She played a huge role in making me feel like I am actually wanted here, and it feels good to be here. Then off campus, I would have to say my mom played a huge role in [all] these things because she always told me, “I want you to be better than me. I want you to do better, finish college.” That pushed me and drove me to keep going. I cannot quit now. I am already here. My friends, my two best friends from back home, they played a really huge role. One of them tried to get me to come back, but they played a good role and saying, “No, you are there for a reason. You got to figure out what that reason is.” That was a huge play in making me stay here and come back [this year]. Overall, I think it was just the smartest decision to stay, finish out my two years and [Gen Eds], and then finish the last two years somewhere else.

Summary of Lydia

Lydia has grappled with culture shock, financial strains, and issues specific to being a college athlete. In her narrative she shares the many surprises she had to make sense of within her first year at Rolling Hills College. Highlights of Lydia’s first-year transition surprises are shared in Table 7 below.

Table 7 *Lydia First-Year Surprise and Sensemaking*

TYPE OF SURPRISE	EXPLANATION OF SURPRISE	CONTEXT ASSUMPTION	CONTENT EXPERIENCE
UNFULFILLED EXPECTATIONS	Conscious expectations are not met through early experience of transition	Lydia assumed college would be really hard academically	Lydia does not feel challenged by the academics and breezes through her first year
ASPECTS OF NEW ROLE ARE UNANTICIPATED	Expectations both conscious and unconscious about oneself are unmet	Not applicable	
NEW EXPERIENCE/ ENVIRONMENT FEELS DIFFERENT THAN EXPECTED	Aspects not considered prior to the experience were identified by the individual to be important but become noticeable due to the presence or absence and is considered undesirable	Lydia understands college is an investment, but with the help of scholarships and her desire to play sports in college she decides to attend a college that does not have her major	Lydia learns that finances as an out of state student might not be worth the investment she and her mother are facing, accruing debt for her to play sports but not get other resources and supports she needs
EXPECTATION OF SELF OR SKILLS FROM PREVIOUS ENVIRONMENT ARE NOT MET	What will happen is accurately anticipated but how it will feel is not accurately assessed by the individual	Lydia was a student athlete in high school	Lydia wanted to work with the coach that recruited her, but he left at the end of her first year and she now has to adapt to a new coach and teammates
PREVIOUS CULTURAL CONTEXTS FROM PREVIOUS SETTING ARE CULTURALLY DISSIMILAR	Cultural assumptions are brought from previous context as operating guide but fails individual in new setting	Lydia is from a large diverse city, she has been exposed culturally due to the location she grew up	Lydia is now in a small town that has a culturally homogenous population and she experiences culture shock by the lack of diversity on campus and in the town

When deciding to attend her college Lydia signed with a specific coach who is no longer there and half her teammates from her first year have left. While she was initially excited to play sports in college these unexpected situations have left Lydia questioning whether being a college athlete is the most important factor in her education. She shared that there are other factors that play into feeling comfortable in a learning community like the physical location, the relationships with her peers and roommates. She described her challenges of adapting to having

a roommate which was a struggle for her having grown up not having to share space as an only child with her single mother. Additionally, being from a single parent home, she describes her adolescent years as helping her to become independent and responsible prior to college, and she observed that these lessons she had learned growing up were not universal for her peers.

Lydia experienced what she describes as “culture shock” in her transition to college. She is geographically far from home. She grew up in a large, diverse, city in the West, but now resides in a small, homogenous, Midwestern town that is culturally white-dominant. That change was noted and observed during her first-year transition.

Lydia has also faced challenges financially since beginning college. She shared hardships of attending a private college out of state. She expressed worries of going into debt and not truly being happy with her overall college experience. Participating in athletics stagnated her opportunities for involvement her first year and she has only begun to get involved her sophomore year with work and activities outside of her team. She shared that these new engagement opportunities of being on SGA and being a Resident Assistant were the two biggest reasons she decided to return her sophomore year. While she has found specific persons on her campus both peers and college personnel helpful during her transition, Lydia shared that overall she is not getting everything she would hope for out of her college experience. She has friends back home in other schools paying less for more resources and support provided on their campuses. At the conclusion of our final meeting she shared that she had applied to a couple schools closer to home and was waiting to hear on whether she had been admitted. She is not planning to return for her junior year of college or graduate from Rolling Hills College.

Summary of Sophomore Participant Findings

These narratives share the perspectives and reflection of each participant regarding their first-year transition experiences. Their specific surprises were highlighted within the summaries of each narrative providing insight on those experiences and how they each made sense of them during their transition. While each participant had unique insight to share there were a couple shared commonalities among the four students. During our interviews I learned that each student had scholarships to attend their universities. Xi Xi had an academic scholarship, Cooper an athletic scholarship, Cole a legacy scholarship, and Lydia had an athletic scholarship. Each of them expressed scholarships being a factor in why they chose or became interested in their particular universities. Throughout my two interviews with each of the students they also shared the wavering decision of choosing a major. Of the four participants, three of them had changed their majors since beginning college, and while Cole had not changed his major, he did add an additional by component to his degree by choosing to minor in history. Each participant seemed to share challenges in deciding their majors and the best fit for them and their futures. After meeting with each participant twice I was able to develop the narratives in this chapter. Upon drafting each narrative, I emailed each participant a copy of their story. Amid the COVID-19 crisis finding an appropriate time to contact these students for any additional information seemed miniscule in the scope of the global pandemic and the quick academic transitions they were facing on their campuses. I had emailed them all prior to the outbreak in the United States for their input and got responses from two of the four participants. Xi Xi sent back one edit for her story, and Lydia responded with “I love it, it is so good!” I did not receive edits back from the two male participants regarding their stories. Once, I had given each participant time to review

and edit their narrative I began to analyze my findings and inference some conclusions from the data that was collected. The analysis and conclusions are shared in the following chapter.

Chapter 5

Conclusions, Implications, and Recommendations

Reflecting back on their experiences as freshmen, Xi Xi, Cole, Carter, and Lydia described transition surprises that they encountered in their first year in higher education. I found some commonalities within their journeys and some unique and circumstantial transition issues. Stories they shared about their first-year transition included significant events including making the college choice, financial impacts, unexpected transition issues, academic struggles, academic support, community building, and self-care. This chapter will discuss conclusions drawn from the common themes shared among these sophomore students emerging from the findings found in Chapter 4 of this research. The discussion will conclude with exploring implications for this research that can be relevant for practitioners looking to aid in the retention of their first-year students.

Conclusions

To learn more about how first year experiences influence freshman retention in higher education, this study explored three research questions: 1) How do sophomores describe their first year in college, 2) How do sophomores make sense of their first-year transition experiences, 3) How do sophomore participants describe the influence of their first year in college on their persistence to degree completion at their university? Theoretical works of Louis (1980) and Schlossberg et al. (1995) provided a lens to analyze and interpret each students' narrative of their first-year transition and to help me understand more about what they expected, how they made sense of the unexpected surprises, and how those encounters influenced their decision to return for their sophomore year.

Unexpected transition surprises

College readiness is based on the previous educational experiences of the individual (Edmunds et al., 2017). Students have their own ideas of what college life will consist of; these ideas form from their previous academic settings, their cultural contexts, and social experiences. When the reality differs from the persons expectation Louis (1980) described this as surprise. In his work with organizational theory Louis (1980) found that these surprises occur when an individual is new in a setting. These surprises can be both positive and negative however, adaptation for the individual will occur regardless whether the surprise is deemed desirable or not by the individual. In their narratives, each student described their first-year transition differently based on their previous educational experiences, former social and cultural contexts. They each shared unexpected transition surprises along the way and adapted to return for a second year of study.

Xi Xi shared her experience in being overwhelmed with the many co-curricular activities she was involved with her first year. Her involvement led her to seek additional support from friends, university staff, and a college counselor. Cole reflected on his transition being a long distance away from home and living in a city that was familiar, but essentially new to him living on his own. While this was an initial struggle in his transition his reflection of that time seemed positive and was viewed more as a learning experience for him to become a more independent adult. Cooper shared that while he had been a decent student in high school, he faced unexpected challenges academically within his first year. In contrast, Lydia described her ease of transition academically but struggled to adjust to losing a key person figuring in her decision to attend her college, the new situation of living with a roommate, and experiencing what she described as “culture shock” on her campus and within her new college town. While each of

them faced different transition issues throughout their first year, each of them had gained insight and grown from their experiences. There were themes that the group of participants shared that were both positive and negative surprises. Exploring these unexpected transition issues for each participant illuminated implications for practitioners who assist with first year retention efforts.

Academic surprises. Xi Xi felt that she was both prepared and underprepared for her transition into college. She described wanting to maintain an active co-curricular lifestyle alongside her academics. She felt that she had good study skills and maintained good grades within her first year of college and thought that her selected major would be suitable to her interests. In reflection, she acknowledged that she had little knowledge about engineering before attending college and was surprised that she struggled with her initial major as an engineer. She learned that while she was good at math and science, the curriculum as an engineer was not what she was truly passionate about. Xi Xi has changed her major multiple times since entering higher education. At the time of our interview, she was a communications major. Academically, she has struggled to find the right major fit for herself since beginning college. Xi Xi was surprised to learn that she had many new academic interests in college and was feeling the pressure of not being settled in on a major as a sophomore in college. Like Xi Xi, other participants shared facing surprises from unexpected sources that affected their academic success in their first year.

Cole and Lydia faced challenges within the first year of college, however academics as such, did not seem to be one factor causing most of the issues shared in the stories of their transitions. Cole and Lydia shared a sense of ease in their academic transition to their colleges. Both came from college preparatory high schools and initially felt that the academic transition was not as challenging as anticipated, based on stories and anecdotes from friends, family, and

high school educators. While academic rigor was not an issue for Cole or Lydia, finding their footing in terms of their personal approach to college life brought both of them to seek assistance when they felt it necessary to perform optimally in their academics. Lydia successfully sought assistance with test anxiety through her campus Student Success Center. Cole wanted to ensure that he made top grades in his classes and turned his social connections with peers from his classes into sessions of informal study groups for tutoring and mutual help. Cole observed that not many male students at Sunflower University utilized the tutoring services the campus provides, and he thought that he too would not need to seek support academically. When he wanted to hone and enrich his academic performance, however, he described intentionally seeking out and using his social connections to create positive opportunities providing tutoring support not only for himself, but for his peers, as well.

Cole and Lydia were both surprised by how prepared they were academically their first year of college. Of the four sophomore students sharing their stories with me, Cooper faced the greatest academic transition issues when he transitioned into college.

Cooper seemed to be most surprised by his poor academic performance his first year in college. He had assumed he would be an average college student but struggled academically resulting in two failed courses within his first year. He was surprised when he failed these courses as he had maintained above average grades during his high school years. Cooper believed that the same amount of time and effort would be sufficient in college, however it was not. As a student athlete he had to maintain his grades to be eligible to play football, and when Cooper faced his academic challenges his coaching staff assisted to get him back on track. He had to put in more study hours, seek peer tutoring, and get a better schedule to manage his time.

While academic transitions were different for each student, each had positive and negative experiences within their first year. The negative experiences led to finding support that helped them with academic success and personal growth. These four sophomore students had to adapt to their new academic environment. Like Cooper, the other participants utilized resources on their campus and first-year specific programming that was facilitated by their colleges to aid in their transition.

First-Year Programming & Co-Curricular Involvement

Social engagement is shown through a student’s involvement in coursework and co-curricular involvement (Kahu, 2013; Kuh, 2007; Kuh et al., 2008). Social engagement for first-year students can be accomplished in a number of ways. Universities facilitate experiences and students decide on the ways in which they want to get involved. As noted in Table 3, Chapter Four, each student participated in programming facilitated specifically for first-year students on their campuses. For reference to provide insight to the discussion of this theme I have included Table 3 from Chapter Four below:

Table 3

Participant first-year specific programming and involvement

Participant	Orientation	First-Year Seminar	Residential Living	Living Learning Community	On-campus first-year mentorship
Xi Xi	x	x	x	x	x
Cole	x	x	x		
Cooper	x	x	x		x
Lydia	x	x	x		x

These shared experiences assisted in their first semester college transition. Goodman et al. (2006) described these programming activities as a transition strategy. Each participant attended

first-year programming that was facilitated for the transition of new students to their particular college campuses. Additionally, each of them shared the ways they decided to get involved and engage with other students and program opportunities on their campuses. These were factors that aided in the student's ability to cope and find support during their transition (Evans et al., 2010).

All the sophomore participants were required to live on campus as first year students. Additionally, each of them attended an orientation program on their campuses and were enrolled in a First-Year Seminar course their first semester that played a role of significance in building community and establishing relationships among them and their peers. Attending orientation, living on campus, and being enrolled in a First-Year Seminar course were the three common factors that each participant shared in the transition of their first year. These facilitated activities provide frameworks for first year students to find a sense of community while also gaining the skills necessary to assist in their college transition (Bragg & Taylor, 2014; Conley, 2007).

First-Year Seminar courses when coupled with other social programs like a new student orientation can aid in student engagement. Xi Xi, Lydia, Cooper, and Cole shared that they experienced positive and negative outcomes within these required programs. However, each of them also either made a friend or connection with a peer, faculty, or staff member through these programming efforts. They each had unique experiences within the university facilitated activities and found pieces of these transition programs both beneficial in some experiences and others non-essential to their first-year transition. Lydia, for example, did not find her experience with the content of the orientation to be an essential part of her transition, however, the relationships she made during that activity were of great importance to her. Braxton (2013) learned that students who had better social integration within their first year were more likely to

persist. While their experiences varied, the basic outcome of building connections occurred within the constructs of these programs.

Understanding the ways in which each of them were exposed to the university first year programs, as well as activities helping them to choose their social involvement was key to understanding these four participants' persistence to their second year. While each of them had different co-curricular involvements based on their interests, religious beliefs, cultural identity, and athletic ability they each sought additional ways to get involved on their specific campuses to build their own experiences.

Xi Xi transitioned into her first year and struggled to balance her academics alongside her many co-curricular activities. While she had maintained an active schedule of involvement throughout high school, she assumed that college life would afford her the same opportunities. Her college campus had a number of college involvement opportunities and mentorship programs, many of which she wanted and tried to participate. Xi Xi quickly learned that maintaining her co-curricular schedule, school, work, and study schedule was not balancing. She found herself overwhelmed and exhausted mentally. She was surprised that she could not maintain her active co-curricular schedule in college and had to eventually seek counseling to help her balance her new college life.

Lydia and Cooper both are college athletes and found it hard to participate in co-curricular activities outside of sports especially within their first year. Lydia described the long days and travel involved with being an athlete and how that impeded her opportunity to do more than attend campus events or volunteer at times with campus organizations. As a sophomore, she had gotten more involved by becoming a resident assistant (RA). She also assisted with her campus student governing planning committee. She shared that these opportunities were the

reasons she decided to return her second year to her college. Cooper echoed the sentiment of Lydia and shared that his time commitment as an athlete limited his opportunities on his campus to get involved. However, he found that when he could attend programs and events hosted on campus they were engaging and facilitated community with his peers or residence hall members.

Lydia and Cooper both participated in sports in high school and were not surprised that their time would be focused on sports as their co-curricular involvement. Both shared that they wanted to be college athletes and they both chose to attend their respective colleges to participate in sports. As sophomores they were finding ways to take advantage of other opportunities outside of sports when they can manage. Cole loved to attend college sporting events and found that his involvement within his first year was primarily with one student Christian organization.

In his freshman year, Cole found himself slowly integrating and taking advantage of involvement opportunities on his campus. He enjoyed attending his university's sporting activities. He became involved with a Christian based organization on his campus his first year. Through his involvement there he was able to participate as the worship drummer and at the time of this writing, as a sophomore, decided to pledge with a Christian fraternity based off of the connections he had made with other college men from his student organization. He enjoyed his social time on his campus and described his community as a family. He shared that building a group of friends through these opportunities allowed relationships to develop faster than he had experienced in high school. He was surprised to find a group of students that shared many of his same interests. He attributes his close-knit friendships to the commonalities and shared values among his group of Christian friends. These friends and relationships he developed within his first year continued to be his networks of support his second year. Cole was not alone in his experience and development of relationships and continued support from campus co-curricular

resources. Each of the participants described surprises that they faced in their transition year as related to building their networks of support.

Networks of Support

Each student participant had commonalities among their off-campus network of support. They shared that their networks of support included parents and friends from home. These were the people that encouraged and motivated them to continue to push forward. Each of them shared commonalities among their off-campus support. Each also shared their experience of finding friends, departments, programs, faculty and campus staff that they have to assist them when facing issues or making decisions. Similar to the participants in Friedlander et al. (2007) study, these four sophomore participants attributed social support as contributing their adjustment in college life. Among all participants their off-campus support seemed to overlap and echo one another in naming family and childhood friends as their supporters. However, each student participant shared the unlikely places and people they were able to find on their campuses that were unique to their experience that provided them extensions of their off-campus support.

Off-campus support. Xi Xi shared that the support of having two older siblings and her parents who would check in and ensure that she is taking care of herself contributed to her persisting her first year. Cooper shared that while he faced some challenges academically his parents were there to encourage him and keep him motivated to continue to reach his goals and stay in school. Cole shared stories of his long-distance girlfriend, church members back home, and his parents as his top supporters since he had been away from home in college. Lydia spoke of her mother and two childhood friends in both of our meetings as people who provided her

guidance and encouragement to continue to pursue her studies. These off-campus supporters and structures were ones that each participant had prior to attending college.

As Xi Xi, Cole, Cooper, and Lydia shared their transition struggles, they also talked about any of their family, friends, significant others, or other supporters who encouraged them to overcome the challenges they faced. The off-campus support that each participant had from their home-based networks did not change. The surprises the participants seemed to face was in building their on-campus networks of support. Each shared specific campus departments, friends, roommates, campus personnel and faculty, teammates and even buildings as structures of support that expanded their networks of resources. These supports were all unique to them and their college campuses and first-year transition experiences.

On-campus support. Each student expressed how they had utilized unexpected resources within their first year to assist in their transition. Xi Xi shared that going to counseling was something she would not have sought without the push from her significant other, roommates, and friends. While she continued to struggle with asking for help and going to counseling, her counselor has been an unlikely support she would not have thought she needed prior to her college transition. Xi Xi had also shared that she had developed relationships with her engineering advisor and with individuals at her campus job her first year. She was most surprised that her on-campus network was observant, and faculty cared enough to suggest to her to seek help or assist her when she faced struggles her first year. She created deep friendships with her roommates and floor mates from her Living Learning Community that she shared have sustained through to her second year of college. Unlike Xi Xi, Cooper was not unfamiliar with where he found his on-campus community.

Cooper described how close he had become with his teammates and the coaching staff in such a short amount of time. He seemed to be most surprised by how quickly these relationships formed. He shared he had found a brotherhood amongst the other football players and described the coaches as “dads.” In both of our meetings he called his team his “family.” He was positively surprised by how these relationships made him feel like he had found a home away from home on his campus and in his new city. Cooper shared that having his football family of support as an out of state first year student was the reason he returned to campus for his second year. He also shared that he will continue to play college football until he graduates from Grace University.

Unlike Cooper, Cole did not have the benefit of being on a team and having an instant community when he arrived on campus. However, he still found his place at Sunflower University and described the places he utilized to build his on-campus network of support.

Cole shared the unlikely places he found support within his first-year transition. Cole described how his advisor and the student center assisted him with providing support. The student center hosted a number of memorable and free events for entertainment. He and his advisor share a special connection. He enjoys checking in with her each semester and has built a special bond based on their connection to his hometown. You can infer from his dialogue about their meetings that he trusts and respects her advisement. Cole also shared his Christian student organization and fraternity are social connections where he had found his place on campus. He developed a community at Sunflower University and shares the familial experience with Cooper in finding a home away from home on his college campus. Cole has maintained these relationships and continued to use these resources as a sophomore on his campus. Unlike Cole,

some of the initial support Lydia had her first year no longer exists and she has struggled to maintain relationships and her on-campus network of support.

Lydia described her first-year seminar instructor, track coach, teammates, and campus personnel as being integral parts of her on-campus network of support her first year. However, at the end of her first year she experienced the loss of part of her community when her track coach took another position at another college. This resulted in losing not only her track coach but also some of her teammates that she considered mentors. She shared specifically that an older teammate who had also been her First-Year Seminar mentor and had shared some sociology classes with her was among the teammates she lost at the end of her first year. Although she experienced loss on her team, she did find support through campus personnel including her resident assistant supervisor and the Director of Student Success who had been her First-Year Seminar instructor and had assisted her with test anxiety her first year. Lydia, unlike the other sophomores, had not seemed to sustain the close relationships with her peers and roommates through to her second year. However, her first year she was surprised to learn of the campus staff she could go to for help. From our meetings, it seemed that Lydia had a greater sense of connection with campus staff when she faced challenges and struggles. Naming both her RA supervisor and her First-Year Seminar instructor often in her narrative indicated that these had been important persons she found on her campus that extended her on-campus network of support.

The Role of the Five Forms of Surprise on Retention

Louis (1980) Surprise and Sensemaking organizational theory identified the following five forms of surprise: aspects of the new role are unanticipated; environment or experience feels different than expected; expectations of self or skills from previous environment are not met;

previous cultural context is dissimilar in new environment; and, aspects of new role are unanticipated. These five forms of surprise assisted in the understanding of the lived experiences of the first-year transition of the four sophomore student participants in this study.

Understanding the contrast of their expectations versus their realities played a role in the adjustments these students had to make throughout their first year. We see this example in Xi Xi's narrative where she considers aspects of her new role as a college student and how they differed from her expectations of time management informed by her time in high school.

Additionally, because this new environment felt different for Xi Xi she had to seek out help in understanding how to balance her new life as college student through counseling services provided on her campus. This demonstrated two forms of surprise that she encountered, aspects of her role in the new environment were not met and, expectations of self and skills were not met in her new environment. She shared that she continues to go to counseling and the lessons she learned, her first year, are ones that continued to help her navigate as a sophomore.

Similarly, emergent from these narratives, Cooper and Cole experienced positive surprises as it related to building their communities on campus. They shared that as out of state students that they had grown close with peers, faculty and staff. These relationships were sustained through to their sophomore year and allowed them to look forward to return to their return on campus. Cooper and Cole's positive surprises related to their experiences and environment felt different from what they expected, they were able to build communities on campus without difficulty.

Lydia also experienced four of the five forms of surprise and her reflection of these experiences seemed to greatly impact on her first-year transition experience. Her "culture shock" was more severe than anticipated and demonstrated that culturally dissimilar

environments can be difficult to adapt to within the first-year transition experience. Another form of surprise she encountered was in her academic transition where she anticipated more challenge from her coursework than she experienced. Her unfulfilled expectations and the new campus environment differed from what she expected, thus resulting in Lydia's decision to explore transferring to another college closer to home.

Experiences that were contrasting to expectations resulted in both positive and negative surprises throughout transition. How these four participants made sense of their individual experiences through previous contextual knowledge, assumptions of their new role, and anticipations of how their new environment would feel made each of them adjust to college life. Doing so allowed them to explore resources that were provided on their campuses, deepen relationships, and find networks of support. Analyzing this data through the lens of how they made sense of their surprises allowed me to understand the role their experiences played on their return for their sophomore year. This data provided a deeper insight on the first-year student experience and how the transition assists in the student's decision to persist at their university for their sophomore year.

Although providing required first-year programming for students has created both positive and negative experiences it allowed for similar learning-based, high-impact practices for the first-year students on the specific campuses. These experiences were all executed differently but the outcomes of building connections through strife or new experiences was an outcome that each participant experienced. Each of the participants shared in developing their network of support through their campus involvements and their responses in this research indicated that required programs for students within their first-year transition can be critical to their transition and factor in their decision making to persist.

Implications

Universities implement a number of programs to address the transition of their first-year students. Understanding whether these initiatives are accomplishing the goals universities are aiming for can be done best through exploring the student experience as told by the students themselves. Administrators look to best practice models that have become national standards of practice for first-year programming on college campuses (Tinto, 1999). However, college administrators could use “institutional specific data to identify potential factors involved” that attribute to their first-year student attrition (Mertes & Jankoviak, 2016). This narrative data contributes to this literature. Lydia, Xi Xi, Cooper, and Cole participated in programs informed by national best standards of practice and programming within their first year however, they had unique experiences based on how their particular college chose to implement practices. Additionally, the opportunities that each student chose to participate and engage in provided insight that assisted to understand their overall first year college transition.

Importance of Support

While each participant was able to expand their networks of support, they each shared unique experiences that were both positive and negative when trying to build or sustain these relationships. The structure of social relationships is referred to as social integration (Wilcox et al., 2005). As found in this study, students can underestimate the stressors they will face in college during their transition and having social supports in place aids in their accountability and willingness to persist at their college. This is similar to the Klem and Connell (2004) study which further solidified the finding that students who perceived a supportive educational environment were more likely to be engaged on their campus. This was evident when looking at Lydia’s experience with support on her campus compared to the other sophomore peers and their

experiences as it related to support during their first-year transition. The students in this study shared that their success and persistence to their sophomore year were impacted by the social supports that they had formed with roommates, teammates, and student organizations with which they were involved. This provides further validity to the study conducted by Friedlander et al. (2007) that found that social support did impact adjustment to college for students. The participant narratives in this study spotlighted the importance of building and sustaining relationships to provide additional support to their network and their retention to their sophomore year. Sustainable relationships provide additional infrastructure for accountability and sense of belonging on college campuses. It is important to ensure that students not only have avenues of building relationships throughout their first year but having venues that allow them to sustain these relationships factor in their decisions to persist at their college.

Academic Student Concerns

Post-secondary education is provided to assist in the learning and development of students beyond high school. Universities are seeing more diversity among the academic background and foundational skills their students begin with their first year (Conley, 2012; Fike & Fike, 2008). Xi Xi, Cooper, Cole, and Lydia experienced unique challenges academically that led them to seek help and utilize resources provided on their campuses. Each of these students shared their assumptions of what coursework would look and feel like based off their previous academic settings. While some of them were pleasantly surprised by their academic transition others were faced with harsh realities academic. Nonetheless each of them had to make adjustments in their academic expectations and new roles as college students at their particular college. Their narratives indicated a level of caring about coursework and grades that they felt they needed to address in order to persist with their dreams of completing their college careers.

Their response indicated a commitment to performing well in academics and influenced their decision to stay, leave, or change majors at their universities.

University expectations versus the college student perception. This study further examined the varying definitions of what students consider college ready versus the reality of a college ready student on each individual campus (Bragg & Taylor, 2014; Conley, 2012). Managing the academic expectations of new students and the university's definition of academic success as shown in this study can cause contrast in the student experience. Experiencing incongruence of the student expectations and the college definition of academic success when they are not one in the same can cause the students to have academic concerns during their transition (Camara, 2013; Conley, 2007; Lombardi et al., 2011). Similar to the varying levels of academic expectations student bring along within their first year, each new student can bring varying levels of independence and life experiences that can aid or hinder in the success of their adjustment to become a college adult.

Students do not know what to expect academically. Based on their secondary preparatory students face individual challenges during their transition. College efforts to assist students with their academics and provide interventions throughout the first year to meet unique academic challenges would contribute to smooth transition. Student expectations of academics may not meet the reality of higher education expectations, especially in terms of all of the social-emotional factors that can influence academic success (Dymnicki et al., 2013; Tinto, 2017).

Balancing New Life as a Student and Adult

While students enjoyed their co-curricular involvement opportunities all shared positive and negative experiences with balancing time for academics, co-curriculars, and their new daily lives as adults. Co-curricular involvement provided engagement opportunities for students

immersed in their college campus and can assist in the facilitation of relationships that build affinity to their college campus (Kahu, 2013; Kuh, 2007). In this study, participants found that balancing academics, co-curricular involvement, and functions of life (i.e: laundry, cooking, relationship management) gave them a sense of growth and greater independence toward becoming an adult. While they encountered positive experiences in their transition and involvement opportunities, each participant had unique challenges within their first year as an independent adult. Students are receiving the message universities send to Freshmen encouraging them to get involved. However, students are not guided through how to manage the multitude of opportunities available on their campuses along with the many other responsibilities as a first-year college adult. Understanding the holistic transition of first year students is important to aid in their success when navigating to these adjustments (Pancer et al., 2000; Parker et al., 2006).

Challenges were faced by each of the four participants when trying to balance their life as a new student and adult. They each had to navigate their assumptions versus their reality socially, culturally, academically in order to make adjustments through the transition of their first year to return for their second year of studies. These narratives provided additional insight for practitioners and other constituents interested in enhancing the retention of first year students. The stories in this research provide guidance and implications for future practice, programming and implementation strategies for transition programming, first year initiatives, and practices that aim to assist this population of students in the future.

Recommendations

The data collected from these narratives provide perspective from four different students representing four different higher educational settings including a private and a religious

affiliated college. The study provided a better understanding of the common and college specific challenges first-year students encounter during their transition. The data informs college administrators, college personnel and faculty, students beginning their first year of college, as well as secondary educators, counselors and administration. Conclusions and implications from this study allowed for specific recommendations that can be used for future practice and for the development of first-year initiatives that can yield in the retention of this population.

Sustaining the Impact of First-Year Programs for Retention

The stories of these students and their transition provided insight on the importance of building relationships and developing networks of support within their first year. While universities have specific first-year program initiatives that aid in the success of this learning outcome it is important that the students be provided continual interactions to strengthen and promote these connections that can be sustainable throughout their collegiate experience. The connections made within their first year can be critical to their persistence (Gerdes & Mallinckrodt, 1994).

Assessing the learning outcomes in required first-year programs and developing additional ways students can not only build but also sustain connections with faculty, staff, and peers throughout their first year and subsequent years in college would be a benefit to students. While universities seem to have a structure for the first-year student experience providing program initiatives with similar learning outcomes for each year while a student is in college could assist in providing ways the students can continue to sustain the relationships and networks of support in order to persist (Dwyer & Cummings, 2001; Friedlander et al., 2007; Klem & Connell, 2004).

Universities should continue to assess student engagement and begin to assess sustainability of connections. Evaluating social support that is provided by the university could lend insight into the unique social challenges students face on their specific college campuses (Harper & Newman, 2016; Braxton et al., 2013). University personnel understand that support is needed for both the academic and social experiences for their students, using student feedback to assess the success and implementation of these initiatives and programs. This could lend greater insight on ways to improve these structures of support. Additionally, universities could address the loss of these supports when campus faculty and staff leave, or a department or program is dissolved. Assisting in facilitating transition of support that students shared through a particular connection could provide greater sense of belonging for student on their college campuses.

Student Expectations Versus College Life Realities

As these narratives show, students enter with varying expectations of what college life will consist (Gallo, 2017; Tierney & Sablan, 2014). This includes assumptions about both their academic and co-curricular engagement (Pancer et al., 2000). While universities operate on the assumption that their institutions provide an array of opportunities for these different students, this study showed that college is not a one size fits all. When students are being recruited to the university it important to understand what their expectations are versus the reality of what college life will look like for that student. Having incongruencies between the student expectations and the campus environment as it relates to academics, resources and social engagement could cause disparities within the first-year experience for a new student (Harper & Newman, 2016). Alignment of expectations could be strengthened during the recruitment, orientation, and first-year transition programming. Messaging should be consistent from the time of recruitment through the day in which the student arrives on campus.

Providing insight on the resources, campus cultural, social activities, and the academic level of rigor are conversations that each college should be transparent about when recruiting students. Additionally, college and career counselors at the high school levels should assist in having transparent, in depth conversations with the students regarding their needs versus their wants, and what colleges can provide (Conley, 2007; Lombardi et al., 2011). Families and the students' network of supporters could also assist by helping the students research the best college fit. Many students may opt out of college visits, however, it is important to encourage the students to visit the campuses they consider if possible before making their final decision. Encouraging students to participate in the pre-college events like Orientation, and pre-college summer camps on the campus could assist in ensuring the students are making choices for the right fit for college (Bragg & Taylor, 2014; Conley & French, 2014).

Understanding that not all students have the same levels of experience academically or socially can assist in determining what colleges are the best fit for the student. Once the student has arrived on campus having support to meet the expectations of academic rigor and social engagement could provide assistance for students struggling their first year. Providing new student programs that are consistent with the recruitment messaging for the students can share in the responsibility of ensuring the students they have made the right decision. Having personnel like college success coaches who can assist and intervene would be helpful for both the student's academic transition and their social independence in college (Edmunds et al., 2017; Tierney & Sablan, 2014). With appropriate support, negative surprises can become positive avenues for growth and retention.

The Role of the University to Assist in the Transition to Adulthood

It is important to understand the additional factors that students face within their transition to college. Looking at the transition through a binary lens of academic and co-curricular activities, overlooks the aspects of the transition many experience toward becoming independent adults (Becker & Luthar, 2002). This can include managing their time, emotions, relationships, and daily functions of life. Understanding that each student arrives to campus with varying level of experiences as they relate to adulthood could assist in the programming and ways universities assist them in their transition. This study showed that each sophomore student had to make adjustments in their new college adult lives. Their varying levels of context as it related to their independence allowed for them to have both positive and negative experiences based on their prior assumptions. While many students are required to participate in first-year programming on their campuses, universities could add additional components to these initiatives to assist with specific themes to assist student transition to adulthood. We know that students who can manage their stress, emotions, and are more self-aware have smoother transitions to college (Brackett et al., 2011; Romanelli et al., 2006). Universities could assist the students in providing programming that helps with learning how to become an independent adult. Topics for programming could include, nutrition, healthy lifestyle habits, managing stress and relationships, basic finance and budget management skills, and general life skills such as laundry, and life organizational skills. These programs would not only benefit the students in their transition, but the skills gained from these programs could assist them as they persist through college. Navigating these basic life skills and knowing the resources provided on campus and within the community could yield positive results when retaining students who face challenges with these specific issues throughout their college journey.

EPILOGUE

Having a purposeful sample in which the student participants had engaged in first-year specific programming efforts showed that while the initiatives were implemented differently on the four campuses their impact did yield positive results to aid in the transition of these students. This is notable as practitioners continue to look at ways to increase the retention of first-year students and want to know if efforts and funds should be invested in these activities. This was not a surprise to me as a practitioner who has spent the majority of my career advocating for this population of students and first-year specific programming initiatives. It was evident however, that while the students at some institutions had greater opportunities and resources on their campus within their first year, it is left to the student to continue to build and sustain the foundations from their first-year experience. Sustaining relationships and being connected to resources through that first year was essential in the success of these students. However, if the student experienced a lack of connection to the campus, peers, and did not find programming or resources to aid in this gap resulted in feelings out of being out of place, and considerations of transferring to another college. I believe that providing specific programming that is immersive for students each year could assist with students who missed the opportunity within their first year to build an affinity with the university, their peers, and explore the resources available to them. However, as I mentioned in my recommendations, universities also have to be sensitive to the fact that their school cannot address all the needs of all students. If we are recruiting for numbers and not retention, the national retention rates will continue to be slightly above average.

It is important to note that addressing retention of first-year students in a post-pandemic world will be essential in determining the long-term effects of the losses college and universities have faced due to this crisis. First-year students in particular will be a vulnerable population to

retain as they did not have the opportunity on residential campuses to immerse themselves for a full year. They were not privy to enjoy programs and attend classes for the remainder of the spring semester. This will likely test the strength of the relationships they built before the pandemic outbreak in the US. Additionally, understanding the impact of the first semester programming for first-year students and the lasting effects those initiatives have in developing an affinity for the university could factor in the decisions these new students will have to face as it relates to returning for their second year of post-secondary studies. The lasting impressions of the first-year student experience for this pandemic academic year could determine whether the learning outcomes of these first-year programs are sustainable. While many practitioners and faculty shifted the classroom and co-curricular programming experiences to a virtual format, students across the US are concerned with lack of student experiences they had this semester. This has resulted in some universities providing refunds for student fees for the lack of the on-campus experiences they were able to provide.

As I began to think about the implications of this study, I wanted to know how my study participants were affected by this quick and unexpected surprise as students on their campus. Previously, Lydia was the only participant who grappled with whether she would return to Rolling Hills College to complete her studies. However, after following up with each of the students, I learned Lydia has decided to stay at her college. She explained that she had been elected as chief of staff for the Student Government on her campus and her track coach was able to assist with gap in finances that caused her and her mother angst. She seemed to be in high spirits and was excited about her return to serve as an elected student official on her campus her junior year. While I did not receive responses back from the other three participants, I am sure they as well as their networks of support have questions of whether to continue at their current

institutions in such uncertain times. The impact of COVID-19 on the retention of first year students will continue to be of great interest in the US as we see the impact of this pandemic has on Institutions of Higher Education in the coming years.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

Campus Site Email Invitation

Subject: Doctoral Study Campus Site

Hello,

My name is Shareika Fisher and I am currently a doctoral candidate at WSU in the Educational Leadership Program. I was given your contact information from **Contact Name** who works on your campus. I am searching for potential campus sites for my dissertation research. I am slated to begin work on my research in the next few months; with data collection beginning this fall. I am trying to gauge interest of my potential campus sites in which I would like to study and Midwest Metropolitan University has made the short list. My research interest focuses on retention of First-Year students with a qualitative approach to collecting data. I was hoping that I could meet or schedule a conference call to see if Midwest Metropolitan University would be interested in potentially partnering with me in order to utilize your campus as my research site.

I would be happy to meet in person or chat over the phone at your earliest convenience to discuss this opportunity in greater detail. Thank you for your time and consideration and I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study is to explore lived experiences of sophomore students who were retained between their first and second year at their university. The sophomore participants will reflect on their first-year student experiences to provide a deeper understanding of retention from the student perspective, often an unlikely voice in Higher Education. This research will explore

the ways in which the sophomore participants make sense of their college transition and how they responded to surprises during their first-year experience as a student on their campus.

Research Questions

- How do sophomore participants describe their first year in college?
- How do sophomore participants make sense of their first year transition experience?
- How do sophomore participants describe the influence of their first year in college on their persistence to degree completion?

Methodology: Narrative Inquiry

Sample: Sophomore students in their first semester 1 student from each campus site will be selected.

Proposed Timeline: Data collection beginning late fall and continuing through New Year.

There could be multiple interviews with the students. Some interviews could be conducted virtually, and I am offering compensation for the students as part of participation. The compensation is \$50 for each participant.

Let me know if you need further information. I have more background and theory that I can summarize as well if necessary.

Shareika Fisher

Assistant Director of First-Year Programs, Student Success

Wichita State University

1845 Fairmount, Box 152 | Wichita, KS 67260

Office: 316.978.3708

APPENDIX B

Protocol Questions

Introductory Questions:

Tell me about yourself?

What made you decide you wanted to go to college?

What brought you here?

Please tell me about your college readiness – ways you (felt) (were) prepared for your first year university experience?

Research Question 1: How do sophomore participants describe their first year in college?

1. Please tell me about your college readiness. What were some ways you prepared for your first year of college?
2. Share some highlights from your first year as a student on campus.
3. How did you capture your first-year college experience (pictures, scrapbooks, and/or social media)?
4. How did your experience differ from what you initial thought college life would be like?
5. What (Who) was helpful during your transition in college your first year?
 - o Why was the resource helpful?

Research Question 2: How do sophomore participants make sense of their first-year transition experiences?

6. Tell me about your transition during your first year.
7. Reflecting over your first year of college what are some changes you have seen within yourself personally and academically?
8. Please share some memories that were defining moments in your first-year of college?

9. What was the most difficult change you experienced in your first year of college?
 - What did you learn from this?

10. What was your most surprising realization within your first year of college?

Research Question 3: How do sophomore participants describe the influence of their first year in college on their persistence toward degree completion at the university?

11. How did your experiences; the changes and the transition prepare you for your second year?

APPENDIX C

Narrative Analysis Tool

Condensed Story for Narrative Analysis
Summary: abstract or highlights of the event
Orientation: setting of the story (environment, others involved, time frame)
Complicating Actions: actual events of narrative can be physical or spoken statements that move the story ahead.
Evaluation: the point or reason of the narrative, may be specific, clearly stated, or implied (Internal evaluation revealed while the story is taking place or external evaluation take place outside immediate action of story)
Resolution: result or conclusion of narrative
Coda: Narrator points out relevance of story by connecting it with other events or actions that fall outside of the story frame (does not always have to be present)

Note. Created from Labov, W., & Waletzky, J. (1997). Narrative analysis: Oral versions of personal experience. *Journal of Narrative & Life History*, 7(1-4), 3-38.