

Literature Review:  
Exploring the relationship between student engagement and two-year college transfer rates

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**Abstract**

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The master's Thesis entitled, *A literature review: Exploring the relationship between student engagement and two-year college transfer rates*, suggests transfer students are more likely to persist if two- and four-year institutions collaborate to engage students with accurate and timely advising and support with emphasis on how course credits transfer and financial aid. Factors associated with transfer student engagement are highlighted, including building a transfer-oriented culture, learning communities and focusing on engaging students in the classroom. Nationally, policy makers are increasingly encouraging enrollment at community colleges as a path toward increasing educational attainment, yet researchers note transfer rates are low. Authors also note a lack of research on community college students; most studies are performed with traditional-age students at four-year campuses. There is less research examining why transfer-ready students don't transfer. Best practices are highlighted, along with recommendations for further research.

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## **Introduction**

Researchers have studied student engagement extensively in the context of retention and persistence in higher education, and much is written in the literature about the dismal rates of persistence among community colleges students who intend to transfer and earn a bachelor's degree but fail to enroll at a four-year institution. However, there appears to be little research focused on how student engagement affects a student's decision to actually transfer from a two-year to a four-year institution. The literature tends to focus on studying engagement on the two-year or four-year campus, but there is little attention paid specifically to how engagement at the two-year school affects a students' ability to successfully navigate the process of crossing the transfer divide to enroll at a four-year school.

This Thesis examines the literature about the relationship between student engagement at the community college and persistence to actually transfer to a four-year institution. Questions to be answered include:

- Are students who are engaged more likely to transfer?
- What are the key factors that contribute to a transfer student's level of engagement?
- What other factors contribute to student decisions to transfer?

## **The Transfer Issue**

Too many students who begin their academic careers at community colleges never transfer. Stephen J. Handel, director of the National Office of Community College Initiatives at the College Board and former director of transfer-enrollment planning and outreach for the University of California System, said, "The number of students 'lost' in the transfer process

represents both a waste of individual talent and a failure of America's higher-education establishment" (Handel, 2007).

Handel prefaces this statement by saying policymakers and educators have been concerned about this for decades, then cites a 2003 U. S. Department of Education report that indicates only half of the community-college students who indicate a desire to transfer to a four-year institution eventually succeed, and an earlier the American Council on Education report that showed only about a quarter of potential transfer students actually transfer (Handel, 2007).

Most of the studies on transfer students preface their reports with data that describe the chronically low transfer rates in the U.S. This data is drawn from different sources, or from different slices of the same sources, so the numbers vary, but the theme is consistent: transfer numbers are too low and need to improve.

The Public Policy Institute of California (Moore & Shullock, 2010) notes that educational attainment is increasing in 10 other countries among the Organisation of Economic Co-Operation and Development nations while it is dropping in the United States. Korea, Canada, Japan, New Zealand and Norway all show significant increases in educational attainment for their younger generations, while in the U.S., the 25 – 34 age cohort is less educated than the 35 – 44 cohort in 2010, which illustrates the trend toward decline.

Tinto (2011) examined 2003 National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) to determine nearly 6 in 10 four-year college entrants earn a bachelor's degree within 6 years, while only a little over 1 in 10 public two-year college entrants do.

Roksa (2006) found that approximately three-fourths of community college entrants aspire to transfer to four-year institutions, but only about 25 to 40% make the transition.

Particularly in light of the high number of students from underrepresented groups who enroll in community colleges, and the tremendous demographic challenges the country faces, Handel declares we must do a better job of building the transfer bridge (Handel, 2007). His article highlights how building the transfer bridge between community colleges and universities helped the University of California system meet its objectives for increasing the diversity of its student population, and that Harvard, Stanford, Princeton, Amherst and Cornell were focusing on recruiting transfer students as a way to diversify enrollment.

The Public Policy Institute of California notes President Obama set a goal for the nation to lead the world in educational attainment, which is bringing increased attention to the importance of community college completion rates at a time when enrolling at a community college rather than a four-year institution with intent to transfer is considered problematic (Moore & Shulock, 2010), particularly for Latino students. To illustrate growing expectations for community colleges, Lester, Leonard, and Mathias (2013) also pointed to President Obama's American Initiative that promotes community colleges as a pathway for workforce development and economic recovery, along with the GI Bill, which provides benefits to veterans and their families who are attending community colleges in large numbers. More recently President Obama has suggested community college education should be free to everyone.

Alfonso (2006) tapped the National Education Longitudinal Study and other national databases to follow a cohort of 12,144 8th graders over 12 years to evaluate what she termed the baccalaureate attainment gap between two- and four-year institutions. Her study involved a highly complex statistical model to control for factors the literature points to as potential reasons for lower rates of persistence among community college students. For example, the literature suggests two-year persistence rate is lower because community colleges enroll more first

generation, low income and minority students than do four-year schools. Alfonso (2006) controlled for these factors, as well as students' expectations to earn a bachelor's degree during their senior year of high school. After applying controls for these factors, she found that simply by enrolling in a community college, students' probability of earning a bachelor's degree decreased by a range between 21 and 33 percent.

Alfonso also attempted to correct for self-selection into two-year and four-year institutions, which had a greater negative impact than expected. As a result of this analysis, she suggests that making enrollment in community colleges more readily available through tuition reductions or by opening new institutions may end up diverting students away from four-year colleges and inadvertently reducing baccalaureate attainment.

The Public Policy Institute of California (Moore & Shulock, 2010) studied a cohort of more than 250,000 California community college students who enrolled in 2003-2004 to determine 70 percent of those who intended to earn a certificate or degree had failed to complete after six years. Most dropped out; 15 percent were still enrolled; 23 percent transferred to a university. The Institute connects educational attainment to job creation, estimating California could create jobs for a million more bachelor's degree holders than the state is on track to produce and jobs that require some college but not a bachelor's degree are also on the rise (Moore & Shulock, 2010).

The 2011 and 2008 NCES reports show that 40 percent of college students begin at two-year institutions and a third of them intend to pursue a bachelor's degree (Chrystal, Gansemer-Topf, and Laanan, 2013). Schuetz (2008) claims more than half of all post-secondary students start in community colleges, including disproportionate numbers of adults, first generation, low income and other underrepresented groups. Not counting those students who did not indicate an

interest in earning a certificate or degree, 47 percent of those who began in 1995-1996 failed to earn a credential after six years. National transfer patterns, coupled with the potential difficulties students have making the transition to four-year institutions, combined with public pressure to improve graduate rates, suggest four-year institutions should better understand transfer students once they arrive on their campuses (Crystal et al., 2013). The literature also suggests four-year institutions, two-year institutions and state systems of higher education should better understand why two-year college students never reach four-year campuses.

The underlying question is not if there is a problem with students transferring, but what policies and practices might be engaged to increase student transfer. Student engagement is explored as one approach to increase student transfer from the community college to the four year university.

### **Searching the Literature**

The body of literature reviewed for this project was gathered through searches of academic databases and mining bibliographies of papers identified through these searches. All searches were performed through EBSCO Host using four databases: Academic Search Complete (EBSCO Host), ERIC, PsycArticle and PhycInfo. These databases provide access to a comprehensive body of literature in higher education.

The first search used the Subject Terms “transfer students,” “community college” and “student engagement.” A second search used the same three terms without selecting a field “Subject Term” or any other field.

A further search used the Subject Terms “transfer students,” “community college” and “indicators.” This search yielded many resources including many state accountability reports

that looked at persistence and graduation rates as metrics but did not measure factors that contribute to student engagement.

An additional search using the Subject Terms “transfer students, “community college” and “college choice” yielded a large number of publications, including a wide array of choices made by students, including why high school seniors select community colleges. This search identified research about factors outside of student engagement. In total, 113 articles were identified as a result of these combined searches.

The breadth and quality of the literature on community college students is a theme that surfaced in the literature, which is described in a section later in this Thesis.

### **Definition of Student Engagement**

For this literature review, the term student engagement is defined as:

Meaningful involvement by students in academic programs and campus environments that strengthen their commitment to persist to earn a bachelor’s degree.

It is important to note there is not a consistent definition of student engagement in the literature. Rather, the term is defined by the activities and patterns of behavior that indicate a student is engaged. Definitions tend to vary with the focus of each study.

The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), a long-running annual survey administered at hundreds of colleges and universities that is managed by the NSSE Institute for Educational Practice at Indiana University, provides this definition:

Student engagement represents two critical features of collegiate quality. The first is the amount of time and effort students put into their studies and other educationally purposeful activities. The second is how the institution deploys its resources and organizes the curriculum and other learning opportunities to get students to participate in activities that decades of research studies show are linked to student learning.

(<http://nsse.iub.edu/html/about.cfm>)

A definition is offered by the Education Resources Information Center (ERIC), an online library of education research and information database sponsored by the Institute of Education Sciences (IES) of the U.S. Department of Education, which is considered the primary database for education literature. The ERIC definition of student engagement is:

Meaningful involvement by learners in their own education or training. Indicators may include active participation in instruction and other school activities, desire to succeed, willingness to expend efforts to achieve, and persistence in the face of obstacles.

Lester, Leonard, and Mathias (2013) say engagement is not about what students “bring” to college but what they “do” in college, as far as behavior, pursuing opportunities and the nature of the overall environments that support or inhibit retention and graduation. What is important about this definition is that it points out institutions can inhibit engagement as well as encourage it.

Schuetz (2008) offers a definition of engagement as “a state of interest, mindfulness, cognitive effort, and deep processing of new information that partially mediates the gap between what learners can do and what they actually do” (Schuetz, 2008, pg. 18).

It is also important to note there are several synonyms for the term “student engagement.” For example, the ERIC Thesaurus prefers the synonym “learner engagement” over “student engagement.” Student engagement is often divided into two components: academic engagement and social engagement, which are also referred to as academic integration and social integration. For purposes of clarity, this paper will use the terms “student” and “engagement.”

The definition selected for this literature review provides a simple guide for evaluating how the literature explores the links between student engagement and the persistence of students who intend to transfer from a two- to a four-year institution.

### **Importance of Student Engagement**

Vincent Tinto (2011) sites research that found all students, regardless of race or ethnicity, were more likely to be satisfied and persist if they have more formal and informal social connections with faculty, staff and peers; students were more likely to leave if they experience social and academic isolation. These connections are referred to as engagement in the literature.

Several researchers refer to Tinto’s Student Engagement Model as a foundational theoretical construct (D’Amico, Dika, Elling, Algozzine and Ginn, 2014; Crystal et al., 2013; Lester, Leonard, and Mathias, 2013; Shugart & Romano, 2008; Townley, Katz, Wandersman, Skiles, Schillaci, Timmerman, and Mousseau, 2012), including Bailey and Alfonso (2005), who observe Tinto’s work forms the conceptual basis of much of the research on persistence and graduation.

The Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE), managed by the Center for Community College Student Engagement at the University of Texas at Austin, makes a clear statement about the importance of student engagement:

“The research findings are unequivocal. Student learning, persistence, and attainment in college are strongly associated with student engagement. The more actively engaged students are—with college faculty and staff, with other students, with the subject matter they are studying—the more likely they are to persist in their college studies and to achieve at higher levels. This connection has been emphasized in a number of major studies and reports on the undergraduate experience.”

([http://www.ccsse.org/center/about\\_cccse/focus.cfm](http://www.ccsse.org/center/about_cccse/focus.cfm))

In 2006, the CCSSE completed a major research validation study. The authors indicated this study was the first to examine the relationships between student engagement and a variety of student outcomes, including academic performance, persistence and attainment in community colleges. The report concludes that student engagement matters.

<http://www.ccsse.org/aboutsurvey/docs/CCSSE%20Validation%20Summary.pdf>

Student engagement is most often studied as a factor that affects retention and persistence in the literature on higher education. Scheutz (2008) refers to the work by Pascarella and Terenzini, two often cited researchers on student engagement, who assert that because individual effort, which is one way of describing engagement, is a critical determinant of the impact of college, then it's important for colleges and universities to shape their academic, interpersonal and extracurricular offerings to encourage student engagement.

Vincent Tinto (2011) observes there has been so much research on retention and persistence, it may be among the most studied topics in the literature over the last 30 years.

Lester et al. (2013) agree there is a robust body of research that supports the concept of student

engagement as an important component of student success, saying there is strong empirical support for this notion, particularly for traditional populations, which are students who begin their college experience at four-year institutions. Thus the literature is clear: student engagement a highly important component of student persistence and success.

### **Academic and Social Engagement**

In examining the literature, the dominant conceptual framework that guides much of the research commonly divides student engagement into two categories: social engagement and academic engagement. This stems from Tinto's (1975) foundational article that described the Longitudinal Model of Dropout. Both terms are defined by student behavior: Academic engagement refers to what happens in class; social engagement focuses mostly on activities outside of class that enhance students' commitment to persist. The basic tenant is: the more students interact with other students and faculty in class, and the more campus activities they participate in outside of class, the more engaged those students will feel. The opposite of engagement is isolation. Students who feel isolated are less likely to persist (Tinto, 2011).

Lester et al. (2013) describe academic engagement as including academic challenge, student-faculty interaction and active and collaborative learning.

Nora, Barlow, and Crisp (2006) says social engagement is one of the most important factors in persistence. The authors find financial aid can affect persistence because if students don't work, they can become more fully engaged in the social components of campus life, including interacting with peers and attending social functions. She also observed students who don't work have more time to fully engage in academic activities in and outside of the

classroom, including participating in study groups, finding time to work with a tutor, and meeting with professors after class.

### **Transfer Students Engage Differently**

Studies have found that transfer students tend to engage differently than traditional students (Crystal et al. 2013; Lester et al., 2013; Bailey & Alfonso, 2005; D'Amico et al., 2013). This is because they are less likely to have time to become involved in campus activities outside of the classroom due to work and family obligations. Social engagement for these students tends to stem from classroom activities (Bailey & Alfonso, 2005; Crystal et al., 2013; D'Amico et al., 2013; Lester et. al, 2013; Tinto, 1997).

Most studies that focused on student engagement among transfer students studied students who had already successfully transferred to a four-year institution. The characteristics observed of students in these studies would also apply to these students before they transferred, e.g. when they were enrolled at the two-year institution, although the quality of research on transfer students is a point of contention in the literature (Bailey & Alfonso, 2005; Alfonso, 2006).

Crystal et al. (2013), through a qualitative study conducted at a single four-year institution, found traditional-age transfer students who choose to live in residence halls, a fraternity or sorority, or joined a club, were socially engaged. Those who lived off campus found it difficult to make friends and felt isolated unless they joined a club or organization. This observation both reinforces the notion that social engagement outside of the classroom is important component for persistence of transfer students once they are on a four-year campus, as

well as the observation that social engagement for transfers may best be accomplished through activities within the class or associated with coursework related to students' major area of study.

Lester et al. (2013) interviewed 31 transfer students at a four-year university and found these students viewed classroom activities as central to their collegiate life and developed a sense of belonging through their classroom experiences. Some students wanted to participate in more campus activities but didn't have time, while others viewed extra-curricular campus activities as a distraction. Other students valued social engagement but experienced it largely through their involvement with family, church or other organizations off campus where they found encouragement and support such as childcare, which served to help build students' commitment to persist.

Ellis (2013) observed that transfer students "talk of interaction with peers, but this interaction focuses around academic endeavors through honors programs, departmental major activities, or clubs associated with their field of study. They expressed a desire for the university to promote more social interaction with their peers (Ellis, 2013, pg. 80)." They also said they want those activities to be timed with consideration of their work and life schedules (Ellis, 2013).

D'Amico et al. note "the classroom is the place community college transfers were likely to engage both socially and academically, due to their experience in commuter two-year college settings" (D'Amico, 2013, pg. 375). They found activities these students engage outside of class at a four-year institution are directly related to their majors.

D'Amico et al. (2013) also observe that despite the common use of Tinto's student integration theory, some authors question the empirical support for its application to some types of institutions, including two-year colleges. They cite Tinto's acknowledgement there are

questions about the parallels with non-traditional students and his assertion the model includes elements that address the potential external commitments of these students.

Bailey and Alfonso (2005) are among the critics. They confirm the focus on social and academic integration is the dominant theoretical perspective on retention and, after an extensive review of the literature on persistence at community colleges, determined the theory is most appropriate for traditional students at four-year institutions, concluding empirical research on community college students has been inconclusive at best. They say more work needs to be done to understand commuter students and the needs of those who work and attend part-time.

More recently, researchers are modifying the traditional student engagement model in ways that address these concerns. Rather than simply criticizing the dichotomy of social and academic engagement, D'Amico et al. (2013) highlight research that indicates social integration can be influenced by what's termed as "socially-oriented academic integration," which demonstrates the relevance of a connection between the two concepts. They go on to describe "socio-academic integrative moments" in the classroom that bridge the social and academic realms, including studying with peers and interacting during class time, which were associated with persistence in a qualitative study at two community colleges. Observing that engagement is occurring as a blending of the traditional social and academic engagement, they "recommend a revision of Tinto's framework for community college students that does not consider academic and social integration as distinct constructs" (D'Amico et al., 2013, pg. 374).

"Student belonging" is another approach to student engagement that gets away from the dichotomy of academic and social engagement to focus on what contributes to a student's sense of belonging, which leads to student engagement. Lester et al. (2013) refer to "student belonging" as a more nuanced perspective on student engagement that involves students ethnic,

racial and other groups engaging in group specific, selective experiences that contribute to their sense of being part of a larger community. They highlight the experience of Latino students who experience a smoother transition to college if they have a sense of belonging with their group. For some groups, belonging means not giving up their sense of identity to assimilate into the dominant culture.

In describing her theoretical framework for exploring how the campus environment can enhance student engagement, Schuetz (2008) says, “a sense of belonging tends to make innate growth tendency more robust and may be particularly important in fostering engagement in orientations and other early campus experiences. Belonging tends to arise from supportive and caring relationships where one’s thoughts and feelings are valued (Schuetz, 2008, pg. 23).”

Tinto (2011) in his more recent work describes “sense of belonging” as a sense of membership students feel based on their perception of their involvement in a variety of settings and the social and academic support they receive from faculty, staff and students. Belonging is valuable whether it’s with a sub-group and may exist even when students don’t feel the same level of belonging to the overall institution. The degree to which a form of involvement is relevant or meaningful to the student will affect how engaged they become.

Townley et al. (2012) take “sense of belonging” to a deeper level in defining “Sense of Community” (SOC). They report student emotional engagement has been conceptualized in the literature as “sense of belonging,” saying the depth of students’ emotional engagement in social and academic activities in school affects their academic achievement. The more students identify with and feel welcomed by an institution, the more they feel included, the greater their level of social and academic success. Sense of Community is closely related to sense of belonging, but the latter term describes a much more interdependent and active relationship between students

and a college community. SOC describes a bonding with the group and a sense of personal and collective well-being. Components of Sense of Community are described as membership, influence, integration and fulfillment of needs, and a shared emotional connection (Townley et al., 2012).

While this body of literature sheds light on student engagement and persistence of transfer students, there is a chorus of criticism about the lack of focus on transfer students and the quality of the studies that have been performed on them (Lester et al., 2013; Monroe & Richtig, 2002; Bailey & Alfonso, 2005; Eggleston & Laanan, 2002; Alfonso, 2006; Tinto, 2011; Flaga, 2006). Bailey and Alfonso (2005), in their critique of the literature on community college student engagement, found most studies take place at four-year schools and are usually performed by four-year faculty. They also find fault with the predominance of single-campus studies in the literature. The problem with single-institution studies is that it's difficult to determine whether the retention strategy being studied is generating results, or if some other institutional factors bias the outcome.

This tendency toward single-institution studies also helps explain why there has been so little attention given to what happens to students who become transfer ready at a community college but do not transfer to a four-year school.

Monroe & Richtig (2002) observed that while many studies have focused on student characteristics and the nature of institutions as they relate to transfer, few have looked at the factors that positively or negatively affect transfer students' decision-making processes.

This type of critique surfaced as a theme in the literature, a topic more thoroughly explored in a later section. Indeed, the lack of studies on how engagement of transfer students

affects their decision to transfer required a more abstract approach to the research questions by emphasizing correlations between engagement and the likelihood students will transfer.

Yet, despite critiques of the literature on transfer students, and a lack of studies that directly correlate student engagement and transfer behavior, a substantial body of literature strongly suggest that students who are engaged are more likely to transfer.

### **Student engagement and persistence to transfer**

The Center for Community College Student Engagement offers the following best practices that colleges may use to encourage students to be engaged. These practices can be measured with the Community College Survey of Student Engagement, so they can be used by college administrators as indicators of student engagement. Colleges that engage students:

1. Encourage student-faculty contact
2. Develop reciprocity and cooperation among students
3. Encourage active learning
4. Give prompt feedback
5. Emphasize time on task
6. Communicate high expectations
7. Respect diverse talents and ways of knowing

([http://www.ccsse.org/center/about\\_cccse/focus.cfm](http://www.ccsse.org/center/about_cccse/focus.cfm))

These indicators of engagement for community college students are backed by extensive research. As of 2007, CCSEE had surveyed more than 700,000 students from about 550 different community colleges in 48 states, British Columbia, Palau and the Marshall Islands.

On the CCSEE web site, each question on the survey has a link to a bibliography of independent studies that back the question and its relationship to student engagement. CCSEE provides substantial information for institutions interested in engagement.

In 2006, the CCSEE completed a major research validation study to conclude student engagement matters. The report indicates first to-second-term persistence and first-year-to-second-year persistence were the most common measures of persistence used in the study. Actual transfer is not measured as part of the standard survey process. To explore persistence, the validation study tapped into data from the Florida Department of Education on 4,823 students who had taken the CCSEE. This data included a measure called “Transfer-Ready Status,” defined as completion of a cluster of courses at a community college that prepare students to transfer. The report also drew on data from the “Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count” project, which followed 1,623 students at 24 colleges to measure completion of degrees and certificates, but the report does not indicate if bachelor’s degrees are included in this completion measure.

<http://www.ccsse.org/aboutsurvey/docs/CCSSE%20Validation%20Summary.pdf>

While the CCSEE provides clear guidance on institutional and teaching practices that encourage engagement, and a tool for measuring whether students are engaged, the work does not measure transfer behavior, such as how many students who are ready to transfer actually transfer. The completion measure cited in the CCSSE validation study followed only 1,623 students from 24 colleges across the transfer divide, compared to the CCSSEE survey sample over time of more than 700,000 students from 550 colleges. This continues the theme observed in the literature: research on transfer students takes place at the two-year level, or the four-year

level. Lester et al. (2013) recognize that instruments, such as the National Survey of Student Engagement, which survey's students at four-year schools, and the Community College Survey of Student Engagement, which focused on two-year college students, focus on experience as it exists at a community college or four-year school, but do not take into account the impact the transfer experience may have on student engagement at the new institution.

### **Factors that affect engagement with an emphasis on supporting transfer**

Relatively few studies focus on persistence of community college students compared to the wealth of literature on student engagement. Of those that do include transfer students, many focus mostly on students who successfully crossed the transfer divide and are showing success at their four-year institution, or students yet to transfer. There are several studies that look at graduation rates, which include transfer as a variable, but these studies generally do not look at how factors such as engagement come into play. Other factors correlated with the likelihood students will transfer will be covered in a later section, such as number of credits completed the first year, stop-out behavior and proximity of a four-year campus to the homes of transfer students.

Within the existing body of literature, some consistent themes emerge around what factors involving engagement will affect the likelihood students will transfer. As opposed to “student engagement” in classroom or social activities, this theme could be described as “engaging students” with the express intent to support their efforts to transfer. In other words, if an institution wants to enroll transfer students, show them you care. Because of the complexities involved with “showing you care” -- such as ensuring students understand how credits transfer, helping them overcome the cost differential for tuition between two-and-four year schools, and

adjusting to a new administrative and social culture -- showing transfer students you care about them requires a significant amount of effort. As Handel (2007) put it, you also need to put money behind the effort, which is not a huge investment, but not insignificant.

Monroe & Richtig (2002) are among the few researchers to look at what affects transfer students' decisions to transfer. The authors surveyed 481 students from 10 of Michigan's 28 community colleges to gain insight into what affects their decision to transfer. A location within commuting distance was clearly the dominant factor. Among students who had already decided to transfer, the availability of an academic program was most important with location being the second. For undecided students, location was most important with financial aid rating high as a concern.

Monroe & Richtig (2002) also asked students how their community colleges could better support their transfer decisions as well as what four-year institutions could do better. Themes that emerged were as follows:

What community colleges could do better:

- Improving counseling and advising
- Availability of transfer information
- Communicating with universities

What four-year schools could do better:

- Communication with students
- Acceptance of transfer credits
- Communicating with community colleges

These students clearly observe a lack of communication and coordination between institutions in their “system” in the transfer process, a theme echoed throughout the literature (Ellis, 2013; Townsend, 2008; Laanan, 2006; Handel, 2007; Chrystal et. al, 2013).

Chrystal et al. (2013), one of the few studies to examine “mechanics of the transfer process” in their single-institution study conducted at a four-year school, identified best practices for how institutions can facilitate the transition of transfer students, which include: strong articulation agreements, accessible resources to examine transfer credits, timing of the transfer process, and access to advisers. Accessible resources included user-friendly information available online to inform students about which courses transfer to meet major and graduation requirements at students’ intended transfer institutions. Timing of the transfer process refers to the tendency of transfer students to apply in spring rather than fall, which is when freshmen apply.

The studies by Monroe & Richtig (2002) and Chrystal et al. (2013) effectively touch on the major themes that surface in the literature about factors that affect two-year college students in the transfer process which are: advising, clarity about transferring academic credit, financial aid and transfer-going culture. Several studies look at one or more of these factors, but few touch on all of them.

### **Advising**

Chrystal et al. observed that “inadequate or confusing information can deter students from engaging in the transfer process, while easily accessible and accurate information may encourage them to pursue a four-year degree” (Chrystal et al., 2013, pg. 15).

Ellis (2013) observes the challenge in describing how students see a “bureaucratic maze” when trying to transfer, which she posits is a result of four-year institutions’ “lack of receptivity to transfer students.” Policies for advising and financial aid, evaluation of transcripts and articulation agreements, all form the basis of the maze.

Lester et al. (2006), who interviewed 31 transfer students at a four-year university, found students are more successful if better informed through effective advising and campus visits, among other factors. The authors observed frequent academic advising sessions in small-group settings both with peers and professional advisers are crucial for community college students who are preparing to transfer to four-year schools. They recommend that advising programs of four-year schools transcend institutional boundaries, for example having four-year faculty and staff regularly visit the community college campus to interact with students.

Monroe & Richtig (2002) heard a chorus of support for improving advising in her survey of 481 students from 10 of Michigan’s 28 community colleges. Students reported advisers were not well informed and, in many cases, advisers recommended courses students later found did not transfer. Students complained advisers were difficult to schedule.

Ellis (2013) found that “professional development of personnel on transfer and university policies was the number one recommendation” for what could be improved from 78 transfer students from 30 community colleges who had transferred into Texas public four-year schools. This applied to staff in admissions, financial aid, transcript evaluation, schools and departments and administrators who all need to be on the same page and see the big picture. They want one individual in charge of transfer and suggest best practice suggests that person should have been a transfer student during their academic career. Communications needs to be more responsive and faster. Students want four-year staff to interact with two-year staff and be present on the

community college campuses. In summarizing student views, Ellis wrote that “Information regarding all aspects of the transfer process must be easily accessible on community college and university campuses and on all websites. This information needs to be accurate, timely, comprehensive, and include all deadlines” (Ellis, 2013).

Crystal et al. (2013) also suggest accessible advising resources should include user-friendly information available online to inform students about which courses transfer to meet major and graduation requirements at students’ intended transfer institutions, a sentiment also heard from students surveyed by Monroe & Richtig (2002).

Some California community colleges have established transfer centers on the campus where counselors are trained in articulation issues and advisers from four-year schools can visit to help staff and students stay current on the kinds of information important to transfer students (Handel, 2007; Karandjeff & Schiorring, 2011; Inciong & Over, 2008; Johnstone & Schiorring, 2008; Kozeracki & Inciong, 2008; Mery & Johnstone, 2008; Mery & Schiorring, 2008 [1]; Mery & Schiorring, 2008 [2]; Over & Kozeracki, 2008). Transfer Centers are an important component of an effort to improve transfer articulation between California two- and four-year public institutions that resulted in a 33 percent increase in transfers between 1998 and 2005 (Handel, 2007). Karandjeff & Schiorring (2011) emphasized the importance of local outreach efforts that involve having advisers from local four-year universities visit the community college to promote their programs.

Bailey and Alfonso (2005), in their extensive review of the literature, say the research indicates advising and counseling programs can play an important role in retention and graduation, but most of the studies have been performed at four-year institutions. The authors point out the body of research supports the notion that formal counseling would be particularly

important for community college students, who have fewer sources of informal advising, but the large majority of studies are on four-year campuses and those studies conducted at two-year schools, while promising, do not provide the detail necessary to make it possible to judge validity.

One behavior among transfer students that is consistently observed in the literature is their persistence and tenacity in seeking out information from a variety of sources (Monroe & Richtig, 2002; Ellis, 2013; Karandjeff & Schiorring, 2011; Chrystal et al., 2013) and their tendency to ask, ask and ask again (Ellis, 2013; Karandjeff & Schiorring, 2011). Given the research looks mostly at students who transferred to a four-year school, this may be a trait required to successfully cross the transfer divide.

### **Transferring academic credit**

One factor that clearly disenfranchises transfer students is being told courses they completed and paid for will not apply to their degree. Townsend (2008) observed that by far the most frequent frustration in the application process for transfer students was the transfer of course credits. In comparing transfers to native students, Townsend (2008) observed that while first-time college students may be concerned about whether and how many of their dual enrollment or dual credit courses or advanced placement courses from high school will be accepted, they took these courses prior to their college attendance. Transfer students are already in college, have earned course credits and want all of these credits to transfer. When courses don't transfer, students feel their college tuition money and time have been wasted (Townsend, 2008, pg. 71). Townsend observes this experience is unique to transfer students.

Concern about the availability of transfer information was a top concern among the 481 students from 10 of Michigan's 28 community colleges surveyed in the Monroe & Richtig (2002) study, including comments focusing on not having to retake courses. These students called for greater ease in finding information in publications, web sites, catalogs and other materials about what courses transfer, including lists of which courses transfer.

Chrystal et al. (2010), in their qualitative study, interviewed 22 students who transferred from the same community college to Iowa State University and found the primary concern of transfer students was the efficiency with which their credits would transfer and apply to degree requirements at the four-year institution.

Ellis (2013) performed a careful analysis of how credits transferred for 78 students from 30 community colleges into Texas universities, along with a qualitative component to measure student views about topics including the transfer of credit. She found students have a deep understanding of how credits transfer and the limitations involved. Students understood and were not distressed by credits lost because they changed majors, took a course outside the degree plan to pursue a topic of interest, or because they were over the limit of transfer credits allowed. However, they were distressed when perceived promises made through core curriculum courses, common course numbering systems and articulation agreements were not honored. They were also distressed by bad advice, having to retake courses for no apparent reason, and when they were not provided reasons when credits weren't accepted.

### **Financial Aid**

Lester (2006) says, at the time the study was written, the difference in cost between attending a community college and a four-year college is a factor students must consider during

the transfer process. California community colleges charge \$18 per credit, while California State Universities charge a minimum of \$1,356 a year for part-time students and \$2,334 for full time enrollment, as well as charge fees that average \$582 a year.

Townsend (2008) found financial aid influenced transfer students decisions about which four-year school to attend. A major concern among students during the transfer process was uncertainty about the amount of financial aid they would receive and the length of time required to work through the financial aid process. The concern about timing was echoed by Ellis (2012), who reported two students who were in their second semester at one university were still waiting to learn if they had received financial aid.

In a large-scale investigation of student transfer in California funded by the California Community College State Chancellor's Office, the Center for Student Success of the Research and Planning Group for California Community Colleges, and the California Partnership for Achieving Student Success, researchers found receipt of a student loan increased students' transfer odds by more than 15 percent, although only four-percent of the transfer cohort received loans. Researchers concluded financial aid is best studied on the context of other student support programs and by ethnicity (Research Planning Group for California, 2010).

Although most of the research on how financial aid affects engagement is conducted at four-year schools, it is reasonable to assume many of the findings apply to transfer students while they are still enrolled in community colleges. Nora et al. and Tinto observe the amount and type of aid is important (Nora, Barlow, and Crisp, 2006; Tinto, 2011).

Nora et al. (2006) found the higher the level of financial aid in the form of grants and scholarships, the more likely students will be engaged in college and persist. Students with high loans were more likely to drop out than those with other forms of aid. Low income students are

less likely to borrow, and some ethnic groups are less likely to borrow than others, particularly among Asian, Hispanic and African Americans (Nora et al., 2006). Tinto (2011) says when students receive lower forms of financial aid, such as loans, they are more likely to enroll at a community college, so they are less likely to persist.

Tinto (2011) views financial aid as having a secondary effect on persistence and retention because the more aid a student receives, the less they have to work, so they can spend more time on activities that lead to engagement.

### **Transfer-going Culture**

While few studies directly describe creating a “transfer-going culture” as a way to increase student engagement with a focus on encouraging two-year college students to transfer, the concept is worthy of including because so many studies call for practices that are consistent with this approach.

Handel (2007) draws on years of experience as head of transfer-enrollment planning and outreach for the University of California and director of the National Office of Community College Initiatives for the College Board. He writes about data from California that indicates students are more likely to transfer to a University if they attend community colleges that have developed a culture of promoting transfer. He says four-year colleges and universities that take responsibility for creating a supportive culture for the transfer experience increase transfer success. Practices such as staffing transfer centers on two-year campus with advisers from four-year campuses make a difference, along with orientation programs, honors programs, and building administrative links between two- and four-year schools. A transfer-going culture was an important component of a program focused on improving transfer rates that resulted in a 33

percent increase in full-time transfer enrollments in the U.C. system in between 1998 and 2005. A prime objective of this program was to increase diversity in the U.C. system. Between 1998 and 2005, enrollment of transfer students from underrepresented groups in the U.C. system increased by an average of nine percent a year, while the overall increase in enrollment for community college transfer students was four percent. Enrollment of African American, Chicano, and Latino students grew 64 percent, 75 percent, and 63 percent respectively (Handel, 2007).

Karandjeff & Schiorring (2011), in examining the transfer patterns of students in career and technical education tracks in California, observed that practitioners in community colleges emphasized the importance of enhancing institutional practices that contribute a broader “transfer culture,” which is described as an institutional effort to create the expectation for and support toward the achievement of transfer that permeates all aspects of students college experience, regardless of whether they are traditional or career and technical oriented students.

In a large-scale investigation of what supports transfer students in California, researchers found creating a “robust culture of transfer” and a “student focused environment” to be key institutional elements that promote transfer success (Research Planning Group for California, 2010). Individual qualitative studies of seven community colleges with “higher-than-expected transfer rates” cited a range of factors that contributed to success, including strong support services that facilitate transfer, faculty who promote transfer in classes, articulation agreements, strong relationships with four-year universities including regular visits from four-year advisers, among others (Inciong & Over, 2008; Johnstone & Schiorring, 2008; Kozeracki & Inciong, 2008; Mery & Johnstone, 2008; Mery & Schiorring, 2008 [1]; Mery & Schiorring, 2008 [2]; Over & Kozeracki, 2008). Each of the reports include comments from faculty, staff and

students about the prevalence of messages encouraging students to transfer throughout the institution, including in the classroom, through events like transfer fairs designed to support transfer, well-staffed transfer centers, counseling practices, and posters and flyers across campus.

Monroe & Richtig (2002) highlights the importance of building relationships between universities and community colleges, not only to share information about transfers, but to keep advisers and students updated about changes in course requirements, admissions procedures and deadlines. Students wondered why universities didn't contact them with mailings encouraging them to enroll as they did when the students were seniors in high school.

Ellis (2012) found among 78 students from 30 colleges who transferred to Texas universities that, first and foremost, they wanted community colleges and universities to be more collaborative. They indicated community colleges should do more to encourage students to transfer and universities need to reach out more. One-stop student services shops with all the relevant information about transferring were recommended.

Lester et al. (2006) suggests programs that overlap educational sectors have the potential to help students manage the transition from one institution to another more easily. "Imagine a transfer program with faculty and staff from the four-year institution housed in the community college. Students would have an opportunity to interact with four-year institutional representatives regularly before they enter the new institution. Statewide efforts can assist both financially and legislatively in supporting new programs that transcend institutional boundaries" (Lester et.al, 2006, pg. 59).

Drawing on observations from a three-year project researching a documentary about community colleges, John Merrow, who also reports on education for the NewsHour with Jim Lehrer, shares a range of observations about the challenges community colleges face in their

missions. In his concluding recommendations in a *Change* magazine article, he says, “Make a concerted effort to connect with the students, instead of creating a distance. As Willy Loman’s wife, Linda, says in *Death of a Salesman*, “Attention must be paid.” The kinds of at-risk students who turn to community colleges especially need to know they matter. Caring is not enough to get students over the many hurdles they face, but when they know that someone will try to move mountains for them, they won’t just disappear” (Merrow, 2007).

### **Other factors outside of engagement that affect student decisions to transfer**

Location of the transfer institution was clearly an important factor among the 481 students from 10 of Michigan’s 28 community colleges surveyed by Monroe & Richtig (2002) to gain insight into what affects their decisions to transfer. Among students who were undecided or not intending to transfer, location was the most important factor that would affect or change their decision. Among those students already intending to transfer, location rated second after academic program.

Micceri & Wajeih (1998) found far more community college students apply to four-year institutions close to their homes than first-time-in-college (FTIC) students who apply as freshmen in Florida. Community college students are also less likely to apply to multiple institutions. The authors recommend recruiting students “as close to home as possible” because yields are higher for both FTIC and community college students (Micceri & Wajeih, 1998, pg. 8).

Townsend (2008) found in a qualitative single-institution study that the distance of a four-year campus from a transfer student’s home was an influential factor. From the perspective

of a practitioner in higher education for many years and having compared notes about factors that affect transfer student decisions, location is consistently a top factor.

There are many studies on state systems of higher education that examine persistence of students across the transfer divide, but most measure only completion rates and do not examine any factors that may contribute to engagement and persistence. Bailey and Alfonso (2005) observed this, indicating that available national or even multi-college data do not have good measures of institutional practices designed to promote retention and completion.

Best practices identified for how institutions can support the transition of transfer students include strong articulation agreements (Crystal et.al, 2013; Alfonso, 2006; Handel, 2007).

Chrystal et al. (2013) also emphasized the timing of the transfer process, referring to accommodating a tendency of transfer students to apply in spring rather than fall, which is when freshmen apply.

Wood and Palmer (2013) studied 9,354 African American male students enrolled in 260 community colleges with intent to transfer, using data from the Community College Survey of Student Engagement, to evaluate what effects the level of engagement among African American male students. They found those who experience more interactions with diverse peers had a “greater perceived likelihood of transfer.” They recommend college professionals increase inter-group dialogue, understanding and interactions, particularly in the classroom (Wood & Palmer, 2013).

In looking at data on enrollment patterns related to persistence, Roksa (2008) found that continuous enrollment has the strongest effect: students are six times more likely to complete associate degrees if they remain continuously enrolled compared to those who interrupt their

enrollment. Alfonso (2006) also cites continuous enrollment as a significant factor, based on an extensive review of the literature. Other factors Roksa (2008) found to increase the odds of completing an associate's degree include being a woman, having high test scores, not delaying entry to the community college after high school, and enrolling full time. Factors that lower the likelihood of completing the associate's degree included having children and taking remedial courses (Roksa, 2008).

Shugart & Romano (2008) observed students in a community college system enrolling 50,000 students often did not complete a plan for their education until they were nearing completion of their degrees. Moving this activity up to the beginning of their education helped students feel connection and direction, which led to greater engagement and persistence. As part of a theory-driven re-organization of student-support strategies and practices to improve retention, the college system provided intensive academic planning support early in students' careers with an emphasis on teaching them skills for academic and life planning, which included planning for transfer (Shugart & Romano, 2008).

A study of more than a quarter-million students in the cohort entering the California Community College system in 2002-2003 and followed for six years (Moore & Shulock, 2010) examined where students get stalled in their progress toward a degree or certificate, differences between demographics groups, and what patterns of enrollment behavior are correlated with persistence. Indicators of persistence included passing a college-level math and English class early, taking a college success course, and building academic momentum by completing 20 credits the first year. Students who frequently withdraw from courses and register late were less likely to persist.

Learning communities are cited as important tools for engagement and persistence of transfer students (Shugart & Romano, 2008; Lester, 2006; Tinto, 1998; Zhao & Kuh, 2004; Townley et al., 2012; Mery & Johnstone, 2008; Kozeracki & Inciong, 2008), but none carry learning communities over the transfer divide. Bailey & Alfonso (2005) refer to the 2003 National Learning Communities project at The Evergreen State College, which published an extensive review of more than 100 studies, both published and unpublished, including many conducted by institutional researchers at colleges. This project provided strong evidence that learning communities strengthen retention as well as academic achievement. Mery & Johnstone (2008) document how Skyline College, a two-year college in California, employs learning communities as a centerpiece of institutional efforts to provide information, support and encouragement for students to transfer. Their study is part of a larger research project examining seven California community colleges with “higher than expected transfer-rates.” which also highlighted the use of learning communities at San Diego City College (Kozeracki & Inciong, 2008).

Falconetti (2009) compared persistence of transfer students at their four-year schools, compared to “native” students, those who began as freshmen at the same four-year schools. She found community college students are more likely to drop out. Among the factors examined was whether students completed all their lower division requirements prior to transfer, particularly language requirements.

Karandjeff & Schiorring (2011) found considerable variation in transfer rates among career and technical education students, particularly among different ethnic groups.

## **Suggestions for improving practice and best practices**

Suggestions from the literature fall into two broad categories – those that can be initiated by a single institution and those that involve a system of colleges and/or universities.

Suggested best practices for how institutions can facilitate the transition of transfer students often include a combination of effective articulation agreements, accessible resources to examine transfer credits that are accurate and up-to-date, and access to effective advisers (Crystal et al., 2010; Handel, 2007; Townsend, 2008; Falconetti, 2009; Monroe & Richtig, 2002).

Townsend (2008) suggests two-year schools establish partnerships with the four-year schools that receive the bulk of their transfers to develop co-admission policies that promote early admissions, and develop programmatic articulation agreements focused on making sure two-year college students know which courses will transfer. Additionally, Townsend observes articulation partnerships are enhanced when faculty at two- and four-year institutions communicate, so two-year faculty know what the four-year faculty expect from students who've taken specific courses. Wood and Palmer (2013) suggests social ties among students who transfer to local institutions can help them traverse institutional contexts, leading to smoother socio-cultural adjustments at the four-year institution. It is reasonable these ties would help students navigate the transfer divide as well.

Laanan (1996) made policy recommendations based on a study of students enrolled in an honors program designed for students intending to transfer to UCLA from 20 Los Angeles community colleges. The study, performed on students who had successfully transferred to UCLA, compared academic performance of students in the program against students from the same 20 community colleges who were not in the honors program and were enrolled at UCLA. Based on observations of more than 800 students, Laanan suggests effective practice to

encourage transfers includes offering workshops for students while in community college to inform them about the types of transition to expect – larger classes, increased challenge, campus culture, etc. -- and hearing about these changes from current four-year students who made the transition. Linkages that get students to experience the campus where they will transfer are recommended to make students and their advisers aware of how the administrative offices work, experience classroom environment and student culture, and to meet professors.

Lester (2006) notes the most successful transfer students are those best informed. Those who receive good counseling on what to expect, understand the transfer process, and have visited four-year campuses to learn about different campus settings and academic standards, are more likely to succeed. The author suggests there is potential for success with programs that transcend institutional boundaries, such as embedding four-year staff and faculty in the community colleges, as well as giving students the opportunity to interact with students before they transfer.

As an example of best practices, Eggleston & Laanan (2003) highlight a program the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign developed to provide academic, personal and financial support to prospective transfer students through open houses, advising sessions, course articulation resources on the internet, and campus visits and tours. Eggleston & Laanan (2003) also point to a program launched in 1985 at Vassar College in Poughkeepsie, New York, which sought to increase the persistence and matriculation of transfer-ready students from area community colleges by housing them on campus during the summer while they enrolled in two college-level courses, which introduced them to the rigor of university work and provided familiarity with the campus before their official academic careers began. By 1998, 64 percent of the 255 students who completed the program transferred to four-year colleges, 97 percent of those earned a bachelor's degree and 33 of them later enrolled in graduate school.

Handel (2007) takes a step back to advise on how institutions communication about transfer. He says focusing on the mechanics of transfer, rather than on what students care about, makes the process of transfer look like an obstacle course. He says students care about whether they have the academic ability and whether they can afford to attend a four-year school.

Institutions focus on the mechanics of transfer, such as whether or not a campus enrolls transfers, how many, what courses that will and won't transfer, whether students can enroll part-time, etc.

Taking a higher education system view, the Public Policy Institute of California (Moore & Shulock, 2010) recommends analyzing longitudinal cohort data on entering freshmen to identify the enrollment patterns of successful students and milestones that separate those who persist from those who don't. They say the research literature contains much about how enrollment patterns are associated with student progress and degree completion.

The data for California Community College students (Moore & Shulock, 2010) showed students were more likely to make progress and complete a certificate, degree, or transfer if they followed certain patterns, including:

- passing college-level math and English early in their college career (grade C or better)
- taking a college success course
- gaining momentum through credit accumulation by enrolling full-time and continuously, completing at least 20 credits in the first year of enrollment, earning credits during summer terms, and avoiding excessive course withdrawals and late registration.

In their research, Moore & Shulock (2010) documented certain enrollment behaviors that increase student chances of success but found few students are following those patterns. They suggest creating programs that encourage students to pursue these enrollment patterns to increase

persistence and graduation rates. Analyzing differences in this data based on race and ethnicity may also suggest new approaches to supporting students.

Having identified milestones in enrollment patterns, the Institute recommends that state-level authorities create funding models that reward each community college based on its share of students who meet these milestones rather than funding colleges based simply upon on enrollment (Moore & Shulock, 2010). Once these enrollment patterns and milestones are identified with data, they recommend doing more qualitative research to determine what practices help students succeed. Colleges should compare notes about best practices supported by data. Colleges should also share information about common policy barriers identified through this research process.

Shugart & Romano (2008) suggests policies should be in place to determine whether students are college ready before they start taking classes, and remedial courses should expedite students' transition into college-level courses. This is reinforced by the experience of the Valencia Community College System (Shugart & Romano, 2008), where student affairs and curricular restructuring included ensuring student's academic preparation was evaluated and that students in developmental education followed a specific sequence of courses. They also made a strict rule that even if a student were delayed through this evaluation process, no student would begin a course if they could not be in their seat for the first class meeting at the beginning of a term.

Moore & Shulock (2010) recommend state policies should be adopted to encourage community college students to complete transfer degrees before they transfer (rather than transferring with a lower number of credits), which was a factor also examined by Falconetti (2009) in her evaluation of persistence rates comparing transfer student to native students in the

Florida higher education system. State systems of higher education should work together to identify and address education system policies and state policies that impede transfer (Moore & Shulock, 2010]. In particular, public four-year institutions should have room to provide access to transfer students (Handel, 2007).

Shugart & Romano (2008) found that integrating learning communities into courses students were most likely to take early in their academic careers led to 80 percent retention for the most at-risk students in the Valencia Community College system (Shugart & Romano, 2008, pg. 37). The college also established a program that encouraged students to create an academic plan at the beginning of their educational careers and encouraged them to build skill in developing their academic and career plans as they progressed, including planning for transfer to a four-year college. While the program was too new to have longitudinal results, the early findings suggest that encouraging students to plan their educations early led to stronger student engagement and retention. These programs were developed after a thorough review of data revealed a correlation between which courses students take most often as freshmen, and which courses students are most likely to fail. The interventions described above were part of a comprehensive and holistic reengineering of student services and delivery of the curriculum, based on theory developed through a review of the literature (Shugart & Romano, 2008).

Bailey and Alfonso (2005) say learning communities are an attractive option for community colleges because students can be engaged in a more intensive way than is usual for normal classes. They say this is because learning communities offer greater potential to engage students in class, which works for commuter students who don't stay around campus to engage in extracurricular activities. The authors refer to the 2003 National Learning Communities project at TESC, which published an extensive and thorough review of more than 100 studies,

both published and unpublished, including many conducted by institutional researchers at colleges. This project provided strong evidence that learning communities strengthen retention as well as academic achievement.

Kozeracki & Inciong (2008) say scheduling linked classes, coupled with support services “such as tutoring, counseling, and supplemental instruction, has been shown to be very effective at many institutions in helping to engage and retain students and, as a consequence, allow them to meet their goals (Kozeracki & Inciong, 2008, pg. 12).

Bailey & Alfonso (2005) point out learning communities often combine a group of courses that may be difficult for part-time, non-traditional student to schedule, and that they are most effective when taught by full-time faculty who mostly work during days so they may not be offered at night, so they may be working for traditional students. The authors comment that many of these studies are at single-institutions and are difficult to verify.

Tinto (1997) found learning communities increased quarter-to-quarter persistence at South Seattle Community College, which he attributed to encouraging the creation of supportive peer groups among students, shared learning and active engagement in knowledge creation. Bailey & Alfonso (2005) point out Tinto was also involved with a 1995 study at LaGuardia Community College that showed there wasn't an increase in retention.

Wood and Palmer (2013) suggest fostering academically oriented social involvement among students who intend to transfer to build an “enclave of transfer-ready students who can then perform as a network of support at the community college to comprehend transfer policies, articulation regulations, transfer services, and key institutional personnel” (Wood & Palmer, 2013, pg. 283).

Lester et al. (2013) bring best practices down to the faculty level, saying academic engagement among transfer students can be defined as faculty exceeding expectations by writing extensive feedback on papers, paying special attention to progress and helping with class material outside of class. They also found engagement increased with the significant and continual high-levels of challenge on assignments.

In a large-scale investigation of student transfer in California, researchers performed both qualitative and quantitative studies to determine which community college practices support the transition from two- to four-year institutions (Research Planning Group for California, 2010). The project -- supported by the California Community College State Chancellor's Office, the Center for Student Success of the Research and Planning Group for California Community Colleges, and California Partnership for Achieving Student Success -- included qualitative studies at seven community colleges with higher-than-expected transfer rates, along with an analysis of data generated by following a cohort of nearly 150,000 students for nine years. Six key institutional practices that promote transfer success were identified, which include: robust transfer culture, student-focused environment, intense commitment among employees to the institution, strategic high school relationships, strong relationships with four-year institutions, effective use of support services, and significant student swirl (Research Planning Group for California, 2010). The latter term refers to the finding that student success was associated with attending multiple community colleges before transferring to a four-year school. The authors found that adequately staffing transfer centers increased transfer success. Community colleges that build relationships with four-year institutions that receive their transfer students, including hosting regular visits from four-year staff and students, was associated with success, as was building and maintaining articulation agreements and making sure faculty and advisers

understand them (Research Planning Group for California, 2010). The qualitative studies featured comments from faculty, staff and students about the prevalence of messages encouraging students to transfer throughout the institution, including in the classroom, through student support services and on posters and flyers across campus (Inciong & Over, 2008; Johnstone & Schiorring, 2008; Kozeracki & Inciong, 2008; Mery & Johnstone, 2008; Mery & Schiorring, 2008 [1]; Mery & Schiorring, 2008 [2]; Over & Kozeracki, 2008).

### **Concerns of the literature on engagement and persistence**

Given the importance of student engagement and retention, and the number of researchers who have turned their attention toward it, comparatively few articles exist in the literature that focus specifically on the effect of student engagement on decisions of two-year college students to actually transfer to four-year universities.

This observation runs counter to what researchers who are looking at community colleges say about the importance of improving transfer rates. However, there is also a chorus of voices rising to criticize not only the amount of research on two-year institutions, but on the quality of that research.

Lester et al. (2013) notes the two leading research instruments on student engagement, the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) and the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE), look at the experience as it exists at only the two- or four-year schools and do not consider the impact the transfer experience may have on students' sense of engagement after they transfer. Taking that consideration a step further, the surveys also do not examine the correlation between engagement and whether students transfer or not.

Monroe & Richtig (2002) note that many studies have looked at the impact of student-related characteristics such as age, race, socioeconomic status, and others have examined institutional factors like size, cost and programs of study related to transfer, but few have examined the factors related to the actual decision to transfer. The authors site the fact that a relationship exists between these factors and transferring has been demonstrated. “However, the specific conditions surrounding these factors that positively and negatively affect students' decisions to transfer, or how community colleges and universities may be able to affect the decision-making process, is not clearly identified” (Monroe & Richtig, 2002).

Most of the literature on transfer students and engagement uses only student subjects who have already successfully transferred to a four-year school, or only community college students. Few follow the same cohort of students across the transfer divide and collect data on both sides, and fewer look at the mechanics of the transfer process as it affects persistence.

Bailey and Alfonso (2005) present a critical analysis of the state of research on persistence at community colleges. They found that among 2,321 articles published between 1990 and 2003 in five mainstream higher education journals, only 8 percent mentioned community colleges.

Bailey and Alfonso (2005) write: “The majority of retention research published in mainstream education journals is written by university-based academics, and these researchers have so far largely overlooked the community college sector. Through beyond the scope of this report, it is an interesting point that researchers – who are usually preoccupied by the experience of minority, low-income and other underserved students – continue to neglect a sector of higher education that enrolls nearly half of all undergraduates and even larger percentages of underserved students” (Bailey & Alfonso, 2005, pg. 26].

Bailey and Alfonso's 2005 report was part of the "Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count" project, an initiative supported by nine foundations and the U.S. Department of Education. The initiative is designed to support research about, and at, community colleges as part of strategies to increase student success.

The Community College Leadership Program at the University of Texas at Austin, in doing research to validate the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE), say that at most 10 percent of all higher education research studies use community college samples. The report says community colleges have relied on student engagement research primarily conducted on students attending baccalaureate-granting institutions and the CCSSE validation study offers much-needed research conducted in community college settings.

<http://www.ccsse.org/aboutsurvey/docs/CCSSE%20Validation%20Summary.pdf>

Eggleston & Laanan (2002) indicate more research needs to be done to better understand important components of the transfer student experience, observing there are studies about how to support transfer students, but not much there about understanding the elements that hinder or enhance academic performance, persistence and graduation rates among transfer students.

Monroe & Richtig (2002) observe many studies have looked at why high school students choose colleges, but few have looked at why community college students select colleges, and transfer students are a much different audience than high school students. The author says 52 percent of all higher education students are enrolled in community colleges in the U.S., making them the largest single group of higher education students. They also point out that community colleges serve traditionally underserved populations that otherwise might not attend college at all, and nationally 30 percent of those students are minorities (Monroe & Richtig, 2002).

Researchers are also critical of the quality of research conducted at community colleges. Bailey and Alfonso (2005) say too many studies involve single institutions, which make them difficult to generalize to because findings may be based upon distinct features of the institution being studied. They also criticize the dominant theoretical perspective of student engagement, which is described in this Thesis above, because it is based primarily on studies of traditional students who attend full-time at residential campuses. They also cite a lack of national data on the effect of institutional practices on retention, and cite many empirical issues within the literature that call into question whether conclusions reached were based on causal relationships.

Alfonso (2006) extends the critique in a later study, saying most studies on community college persistence do not control for educational expectations of community college students, non-traditional attendance pathways that include stopping out and returning, and the factor of self-selection between two- and four-year schools. Furthermore, not all studies control for student demographic factors, such as race and ethnicity, age and socioeconomic status (Alfonso, 2006).

Tinto (2011) echoes these views in more recent work, saying studies don't distinguish between voluntary drop out, such as those who leave because they are not engaged, and involuntary, due to a family commitment or obligation. Also, they don't look at stop out or system completion, which means the research doesn't follow the student to see if they persisted to complete a degree at another institution. Tinto (2011) also argues that too many studies focus on one component of engagement, such as financial aid or campus climate, and as a result there is not a comprehensive model or actionable steps that can be taken to address retention at one institution.

Flaga (2006) notes a lack of studies of nontraditional-aged students compared to traditional aged students, as well as on similarities and differences between the transition experiences of native students and transfer students.

There is a chorus of agreement in the literature about the important role community colleges play in the U.S. higher education landscape. Considering the sheer numbers of students enrolled in community colleges, it is surprising these gaps in the literature exist.

One topic not examined in any of the literature reviewed for this Thesis is why students who qualify to transfer don't take the step and enroll at a university. Studies on students who successfully transferred provide clues that seem promising, but nobody appears to have interviewed or surveyed transfer-ready students who stopped out. While the gap in research on persistence of community college transfer students is recognized, the lack of research on what happens at the point students are ready to transfer then don't is not recognized.

### **The transfer-divide: Systemic Issues**

A couple of global themes arose from the literature. One involves the how the individual parts of the "higher education system" work together and the other is about how researchers identify transfer students for the purpose of studying them.

### **System view vs. individual institutional views**

During a 1994 speech, Alexander Astin, founding director of the Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA, said when he began to read the literature on higher education he was surprised to find most scholars approached the field of higher education from an individual institutional perspective rather than from a systemic perspective (Astin, 1994). He observed that

if thousands of educational institutions are each doing their individual thing, it does not make for a coherent or effective system of higher education. He expressed concern that colleges and universities are preoccupied with their individual welfare, focusing on raising as much money as possible, recruiting the best students and faculty, and promoting their reputations. Educational institutions forget they are part of a larger system that proclaims its mission is to educate our nation's citizenry. Commenting on the impact higher education should have on the future of the nation's democracy, Astin placed the dichotomy of "individual institution perspective" versus "higher education system perspective" into the context of serving poorly prepared students; most institutions avoid these students because they are less likely to contribute to measures of excellence. He observed this makes sense from an individual institutional perspective, but makes no sense from a higher education system perspective (Astin, 1994).

Astin's comments reinforce the observation that literature on student persistence for transfer students focuses on students at the four-year institution or two-year institutions (Lester et al., 2013; Monroe & Richtig, 2002; Bailey & Alfonso, 2005) rather than following transfer students from their two-year institution across the transfer divide.

Monroe & Richtig (2002) said that "criticism regarding students transferring from community colleges to senior institutions has largely been aimed at community colleges, assigning the responsibility of transferring on the community college rather than looking at how community colleges and four-year institutions can work together to increase transfer."

The former director of transfer-enrollment planning and outreach for the University of California System, Stephen J. Handel, said, "Community-college leaders are quick to point out that the number of students admitted to four-year institutions is out of their hands—that they are judged on a metric they do not control" (Handel, 2007, pg. 39).

Handel (2007) notes this is changing, listing examples of institutions taking responsibility for transfer students that include “blue-chip” schools such as Amherst and Cornell. These institutions are now putting money into scholarships to support community college enrollments in part to increase enrollments of low-income students and to diversify their enrollments.

Monroe & Richtig (2002) observe that within the Michigan higher education system, where many institutions have similar offerings, schools compete with each other for students rather than foster a sense of urgency to meet the needs of all students in the state. Optimum communication between two-year and four-year institutions will support admissions procedures rather than create barriers for transfer students (Monroe & Richtig, 2002).

Ellis, in the closing statement of her study on students who transferred into Texas universities said, “Successful transfer students implore community colleges and universities to move beyond competition and into collaboration for the benefit of students and for the future of Texas” (Ellis, 2012, pg. 84).

The underlying theme of these comments, and others like them in the literature, is that difficulties are created for community college students when institutions do not work together in a systematic way to make the transfer process easier to navigate.

### **Identifying transfer students**

There is not a consistent metric in the literature to identify community college students who intend to transfer. For example, Moore & Shulock (2010) identified a degree seeker as a student who enrolled in six or more units during an academic year, however these students may be pursuing certificates and vocational degrees as well as transfer degrees. The authors drew this definition from the literature as one element that could improve the federal methodology for

calculating community college graduation rates. Monroe & Richtig (2002) asked students whether they intend to transfer in a survey, rather than selecting indicators from secondary data.

Ellis (2012) defined an intended transfer student as one who earns at least 12 credit hours in one full time semester or two or more part time semesters at a community college, and continues his or her education at a public four-year institution in Michigan.

Clotfelter, Ladd, Muschkin, and Vigdor (2013) said completing 10 courses, averaging 30 credits, within four years is an indication a student intends to transfer, in addition to considering whether a student completes a transfer degree (Clotfelter et al., 2013).

## **Summary and Conclusions**

The literature reviewed suggests community college students who are engaged are more likely to persist and transfer to a baccalaureate institution, although there is limited research that specifically explores the relationship between student engagement and whether or not students actually cross the transfer divide. Transfer students are more likely to engage through the classroom, as opposed to extracurricular activities, and the literature suggests ways to increase engagement for transfer students in the classroom as well as through activities related to their majors. Outside of the classroom, they benefit from advising and academic planning supports that are focused on the needs of transfer students and readily available on their two-year campuses. The literature does not point to specific indicators for how student engagement contributes to transfer success, but there is evidence that shows the more two- and four-year institutions collaborate to engage students by building connections with well-informed advisers and targeted resources, the more likely students will transfer. Creating a transfer-going culture further contributes to transfer success. While there is not a clear causal effect demonstrated in the

literature between a) these practices, b) the level of student engagement they foster and c) transfer success, there appears to be a strong association between these factors. This is an area that would benefit from further research.

An unexpected outcome of this thesis was revealing a troubling disconnect between the increasingly intense national spotlight pointed toward community colleges as a gateway to educational attainment and an ominous dark spot in the research literature about persistence of community college students across the transfer divide. As national policymakers, including the President of the United States, promote community colleges as great equalizers, the literature that exists casts a shadow on the transfer pathway, showing that simply enrolling in a community college significantly lowers the likelihood a student will complete a bachelor's degree.

The lack of research on community college transfers and the bias in the literature on student engagement toward studying students at traditional four-year institutions is well documented. Within our national system of higher education, which includes a wealth of research scientists, the question of how well community college students navigate the challenges of the "transfer divide" is a topic that appears to have fallen through the cracks, with relatively few exceptions. Researchers study students at four-year or two-year institutions but seldom collect data on students at more than one campus, except for research projects oriented toward higher education-system accountability that look at transfer as a variable without considering factors that contribute to whether students transfer or not. This observation reinforces Alexander Astin's observation that our higher education system is largely composed of individual institutions concerned with their own welfare rather than with a broader systematic priority of educating our nation's citizenry (Astin, 1994).

Looking through the lens of student engagement, some clear best practices surface for supporting students through the transfer process. First, student engagement is an extremely important component of student persistence for all students including transfers. Second, the process of transfer is so complex and individualized for each student, the literature suggests providing a high level of (what I'll term) "customer service" in the advising process is what will best support students across the transfer divide. Third, when two- and four-year colleges partner to support transfer students, transitions between institutions are smoother. These kinds of practices, I conclude, can help extend a sense of student engagement across the transfer divide. This is an area that would benefit from further research.

The literature also suggests ways this high-level of advising customer service can be accomplished without breaking the bank. For example, this Thesis points out that transfer students are most likely to enroll in a four-year college nearby their two-year college. Townsend (2008) suggests two-year schools establish partnerships with the four-year schools that receive the bulk of their transfers to develop co-admission policies that promote early admissions, and develop programmatic articulation agreements focused on making sure two-year college students know which courses will transfer (Townsend, 2007). Wood & Palmer (2013) add a social component to this, suggesting that cohorts of students who transfer to local institutions establish social ties that traverse institutional contexts, which can help smooth social and cultural adjustments at four-year institutions. They might also help them navigate the transfer divide.

Four-year institutions interested in supporting transfer students can focus their efforts on local community colleges, rather than implementing these recommendations in partnership with a larger universe of many colleges, which could be expensive and logistically challenging. The literature suggests transfer students are most likely to attend local four-year institutions, which

suggests programs between two- and four-year schools that support transfer students are likely to increase transfer rates. In a large-scale research project that involved seven qualitative studies of California community colleges with higher-than-expected transfer rates, each campus had formed strong relationships with nearby four-year institutions (Inciong & Over, 2008; Johnstone & Schiorring, 2008; Kozeracki & Inciong, 2008; Mery & Johnstone, 2008; Mery & Schiorring, 2008 [1]; Mery & Schiorring, 2008 [2]; Over & Kozeracki, 2008). Whether these practices significantly increase transfer rates in other geographic areas where two- and four-year colleges collaborate to strengthen transfer pathways is an area that would benefit from further study.

The practices discussed above are consistent with Handel's [Handel, 2007] advice to establish a transfer-going culture on community college campuses, including establishing transfer centers with staff specialized in transfer issues, providing print and online resources designed to answer common transfer questions, and where four-year staff and faculty regularly visit to engage transfer students. This practice, as part of a larger system-wide program built with the goal of increasing transfer rates, has met with documented success in California. The Research Planning Group for California (2010) study that involved seven qualitative studies of community colleges reinforces this recommendation, showing that promoting a transfer-going culture, which includes adequately staffing transfer centers and building strong relationships with nearby four-year institutions, increases transfer success. This study and others suggest policymakers and higher education leaders in California are exploring research questions and implementing practices that are consistent with the recommendations of this Thesis.

This Thesis also points to learning communities as vehicles for enhancing engagement of transfer students through classroom experiences because the classroom is where transfer students engage. Strong partnerships between two- and four-year schools could allow for learning

communities to continue across the transfer divide, from the last quarter at the community college to the first quarter at the four-year institution. There was no evidence of such programs found in the literature, but it is reasonable to assume such programs would maintain a high level of student engagement across the transfer divide, particularly if advising and financial aid staff were integrated into the program to ensure students also receive the logistical support the literature suggests is beneficial to their success.

One area identified that would greatly benefit from additional research is identifying differences between students who are transfer-ready but do not enroll at a four-year school, and those who actually transfer to a four-year campus. Transfer-ready students who do not transfer have fallen into a gaping hole in the literature.

This raises the specter of identifying which community college students are transfer students. I did not expect to find that so many researchers use secondary data indicators, such as the number of credits students take their first year, to identify transfer students for both state- and national-level studies. If transfer students are as important to our nation's future as the authors cited in this Thesis suggest, then it seems reasonable to implement a practice for all community colleges ask students whether they intend to transfer when they initially enroll. Because students may opt into or out of a transfer pathway during any given quarter, the question about whether they intend to transfer should be asked during each term's registration process. If this was a common practice nationally, and this data could be shared, we could more accurately track our efforts at supporting transfer students. It would also help schools in the "system" better deliver services to students who intend to transfer.

In closing, students who are engaged are more likely to transfer and there are practices that appear to effectively build engagement to support students across the transfer divide, but there is a need for additional research in this area.

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