

Transfer Student Experiences: New School Who Dis?

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Abstract

Nearly 30% of U.S. undergraduate college students will transfer at least once in a six-year period to a new institution. A vast majority of these students transfer to and from public institutions, however, this research diverges and explores the transition of lateral transfer students to a highly selective private institution in Illinois. In doing so, this study adds to the literature on transfer student experiences and enriches the discussion of lateral transfer students. The current research uses a variety of data collection methods such as, artifact analysis, interviews and an ethnographic observation. Results from the study suggest that transfer students at the research institution overall have a similar experience as non-transfer students, except for issues concerning, credit articulation, affect and balance, housing, and perceived availability of their academic advisor. Through an analysis of institutional data, policies, and interviews, some key issues may be attributed to the decentralization of the institution and the resources that are available for administrators to manage the increase of transfer students. One question that came from this study and requires more investigation is the role of housing on the transfer experience. These findings help bring depth to the literature of lateral transfer students to private highly selective institutions by analyzing the internal processes and policies that directly influence the transfer student experience. This research further corroborates previous literature that transfer students are not a homogenous group and institutions should evaluate the programming and support that is available for their transfer student body.

Keywords: Lateral Transfer, Social Belonging, Credit Articulation, Articulation Agreements, Organizational Theory, Housing, Administrative Resources, Private Institution

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Research Question

How are transfer students' transition to a private highly selective institution in Illinois facilitated, and how do they experience belonging – academically and socially – at their receiving institution?

Introduction/Background

The past two decades in higher education have seen a shift in not only the demographic of students attending but also the pattern that students are taking to complete their degrees (Li, 2009). Longanecker and Blanco (2003) explain how public policy has shaped a new trajectory for higher education in terms of student attendance and non-traditional paths. Examples of non-traditional paths in attaining a collegiate degree are transferring from one institution to another or stopping at one institution and resuming after a period of time. There are many non-traditional paths or “swirling” patterns that transfer students may take during their undergraduate career (Bahr, 2012). As these students transfer they increased the diversity amongst the post-secondary demographic of students, this diversity includes an older student population, an increased number of first-generation and low-income students, and students from other marginalized identities (Conrad & Gasman, 2015). However, there is a disparity in providing adequate resources to the rapid growing demographic of transfer students (Adelman, 2006; Kodama, 2002; Tobolowsky & Cox, 2012). Transfer students face a special set of challenges when adapting to a new institutional environment; some of these challenges are centered around adjusting to a new academic and social environment (Laanan, 2001).

Moreover, there is plenty of literature describing why transfer students leave institutions and go to a new college or university (Nuñez & Yoshimi, 2017; Tobolowsky & Cox, 2012). Little is known about a transfer student’s experience once they arrive at their new institution and how they navigate a new institutional environment (Chin-Newman & Shaw, 2013). This is particularly true with regard to four-year to four-year transitions – otherwise known as lateral transfers (Li, 2009). This research study will explore the following questions: how are transfer students' transition to a private highly selective institution in Illinois facilitated, and how do they

experience belonging – academically and socially – at their receiving institution? The university that will guide this research study has a few institutional characteristics which are important to identify. First, this institution, North Lake University (a pseudonym) does not have an issue with student retention; the average six-year graduation rate for full-time students is ninety-three percent. North Lake University also does not have a rich history of accepting many transfer students. However, in the last three years, North Lake University has doubled the number of transfer students every year and in the fall 2019 the institution enrolled close to 200 transfer students. This study seeks to uncover the major obstacles and barriers that lateral transfer students face in navigating a different institutional culture and attempts to establish best practices regarding lateral transfer students' facilitation to a private highly selective institution. Best practices can be used to inform institutional policies and procedures in ensuring a more seamless transfer for a growing demographic of the student body.

This paper will first provide a literature review with two domains. The first domain will look at governing bodies from the federal government to individual institutions through the lens of organizational theory. Organizational theory provides a framework to help organize and analyze various factors that influence a transfer students' experience to a new institution. This domain will provide an understanding of how public and private institutions are affected by federal and state legislature. Additionally, the domain will also give information about the different institutional responses regarding transfer student credit. This relates to the manner in which private institutions facilitate transfer students and provide information about their academic status at their new institution. The second domain, frameworks for transition and socialization, will describe transfer students' social integration to a new institution. Two different social theory frameworks – Nancy Schlossberg's transition theory and John Weidman's

undergraduate socialization approach – will act as the guiding frameworks to understand social belonging. To enrich the conversation, the paper will also address a study about undergraduate housing as a method for transfer students to create social networks. Investigating the role of housing, this study will see how transfer students find a social community, outside of academics, at North Lake University.

Following the literature review, this paper will describe data collection methods used, such as artifact analysis, student and administrative interviews, and an ethnographic observation. The artifact analysis includes existing data from North Lake University, institutional policies as well as data from the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES). The use of these methods provides a breadth and depth of knowledge of the transfer student experience. The results from these methods are then summarized, analyzed, and interpreted. The research study concludes with a discussion of limitations, next steps and ideas for further research.

Literature Review

The following literature review provides readers with frameworks that examine factors which influence transfer students' facilitation to their receiving institution. Some non-student factors that influence the transfer student experience include agents, procedures, and policies. Using organizational theory helps analyze how governing bodies and institutional responses may help or hinder a student's transition to their receiving institution. Additionally, the research study will use two social frameworks to describe transition for undergraduates in an attempt to create a language to talk about transfer student transitions (Li, 2009; Nuñez & Yoshimi, 2017). Finally, the research paper will also discuss the role of student housing in transfer students' transition to a new institution (Utter & DeAngelo, 2015).

Governing Bodies Through an Organizational Theory Lens

This domain details the various governing bodies that impact transfer students' facilitation to a receiving institution from an academic perspective. The key governing bodies are the federal government, state government, regional accreditation agencies, and the individual institutions themselves. Each governing body also matches with different concepts of organizational theory. The three main approaches that this research study will use are rational, natural and open systems (Davis & Scott, 2007). Furthermore, using organizational theory provides an insight to the complexities of social interactions within higher education (Manning, 2018). This is particularly true when looking at the different institutional responses to transfer credit policies from the perspective of public and private institutions in the state of Illinois.

To analyze these structures within North Lake University, this paper uses Davis and Scott's (2007) definition of organization as a "social [structure] created by individuals to support the collaborative pursuit of specific goals" (p. 11). Therefore, North Lake University can be

considered an organization using this definition as it serves individuals by following its mission, vision and goals. However, it is through the various departments, units, and individuals that North Lake University is able to execute on specific goals. These departments and agents do not exist within a vacuum and create complex social structures between each other. To better understand the intricacies of these formal and informal structures, organizational theory facilitates an understanding of these institutions and how they influence transfer students' experiences to their institution. These governing bodies may belong to more than one system, which continues to emphasize the complexities within organizations. Outlined below are the three perspectives of organizational theory that will analyze governing bodies and provide the necessary context to understand the academic transition that transfer students face.

Rational System

The rational system speaks to two functions within an organization: goal specificity and formalization. Goals are deemed specific if they are clear and “unambiguous” so that a direct decision can be made (Davis & Scott, 2007, p. 28). Formalization, on the other hand, is the way that “rules [govern] behavior” (p. 29). By these definitions, the federal and state governments and individual institutions can be considered under the rational system. This section will describe how goals and formalization at these three different levels contribute to transfer students' academic transition and experience to their new institution.

Federal and State Government. The reauthorization of the Higher Education Act in 2008 requires that all institutions publicize “policies of the institution related to transfer credit from other institutions” (Higher Education Act, 1964 & rev. 2008). How the federal government formalizes this piece of legislation is by tying the publicity of this information to the disbursement of federal aid (Higher Learning Commission, 2019). Having this information on a

public website can help prospective transfer students better understand how their current course work may match with a new institution. Because this is the first step many transfer students may take, it is important to understand how a prospective transfer student may receive this information. While institutions are required to provide this information on a public webpage, depending on the institution type more information may or may not be available.

Individual Institution. At the institutional level an example of goal specificity is wanting to enroll a specific number of transfer students. Davis and Scott (2007) would say that the formalization of such a goal would be the way that admissions trains its recruiters to standardize behaviors and expectations (p. 37). Another example of goal specificity and formalization are policies and structures at a given institution because they “specify what tasks are to be performed” and provide the institution with a direction (Davis & Scott, 2007, p. 36). The rational system therefore takes a look at “actions performed by purposeful and coordinated agents” (Davis & Scott, 2007, p. 36). For this study, it is important to understand all aspects of the transfer student experience. Analyzing what messages and information transfer students receive before coming to campus and how this information may conflict with students lived experience. Furthermore, under the rational system another category that could be considered under goal specificity is why more transfer students are being enrolled.

Reasons why institutions choose to enroll more transfer reasons are usually to increase funding and improve attrition rates. Cheslock (2005) explains that transfer students tend to enroll in upper-division courses which may allow departments with lower enrollment rates to fill up classes and therefore use up resources that would otherwise be wasted. The way that this is formalized is through the articulation process from the registrar’s office. As long as this process is standardized, and transfer students’ transfer credits are honored then true formalization is

accomplished. However if otherwise transfer students' credits are not honored students may have longer times to degree than their non-transfer student counterparts (DeLauro et al., 2017; Li, 2009; Tobolowsky & Cox, 2012). This process may affect a transfer students' ability to find a strong academic and social group and therefore it is valuable to understand the articulation processes. While the rational system looks at an organization's goals, the follow section describes how behaviors and actions also contribute to the complexities of transferring in higher education.

Natural System

The natural system acknowledges an organization's structures but does not place as much importance on them like the rational system (Davis & Scott, 2007). Natural systems "pay more attention to behavior and [...] the complex interconnections between the normative and the behavioral structures of organizations", in doing so the natural system approach allows for a better analysis of stated goals and enacted goals (Davis & Scott, 2007, p. 60; Tobolowsky & Cox, 2012). Stated goals are the "professed or official goals" of a given organization while an enacted goal looks at where resources are actually placed and how these resources are helping support the organization's goal within a certain environment (Davis & Scott, 2007, p. 60).

State Government. The Illinois Board of Higher Education and the Illinois Community College Board in conjunction with the Illinois General Assembly, created the Illinois Articulation Initiative Act in 1993. The purpose of the Illinois Articulation Initiative Act (IAI) (1993) is to streamline the credit transfer process within the state of Illinois specifically for two- and four-year public institutions (Illinois Articulation Initiative Act 1993, 1993). Section 5 of the IAI (1993) in particular details the responsibilities of all public institutions in the state of Illinois (Illinois Articulation Initiative Act 1993, 1993). The emphasis of responsibility is placed on

catering toward freshman and sophomore students (Illinois Articulation Initiative Act, 1993). This articulation act is a stated goal for Illinois to improve its in-state higher education system. Seeing this piece of legislation is primarily concerned with in-state students and public institutions, it will be interesting to observe any effects it may have on North Lake University. Understanding the relationship between statewide articulation acts the the private school sector provodies background to the acadmeic standards that instiutions have in the state of Illinois.

Individual Institution. The state of Illinois mandates that *public institutions* offer a General Education Core Curriculum (GECC) (Illinois Articulation Initiative Act 1993, 1993) [emphasis added]. Institutions are required to submit their GECC for review, however some institutions are receiving only institutions (Illinois Transfer Portal, 2019). The GECC is part of the Illinois Articulation Act (1993) in an effort to streamline in-state transfer students (stated goal). Unlike the federal government, where formalization of their policy is direct and has financial implications for higher education institutions; Illinois does not have a streamlined process to make institutions follow the GECC. Receiving-only institutions will accept full GECC packages but may not offer a full GECC – making it difficult for students to transfer out without full general education requirements.

Private institutions are not mandated by the Illinois state government to adhere to statewide articulation agreements, but private institutions may choose to enter in articulation agreements with other institutions (Li, 2009). Without formal agreements between different institutional types, it is up to the institution’s registrar office and department heads to work collaboratively to determine which courses are acceptable for transfer credit (Li, 2009). Due to a more subjunctive approach it is possible that students transfer to a private institution may experience longer times to degree than an individual transferring a public institution that has to

meet specific state requirements (Li, 2009; Simone, 2014). Understanding the process of articulation can provide greater insight to a students' academic transition to their new institution. For this research study to answer the question of academic and social integration for transfer students, it is important to analyze what the institution is saying, what the institution is doing and how these two points may or may not align. It is also important to analyze how transfer students and administrators understand these messages and goals, since each stakeholder may have different perceptions of the messages from the institution.

Open System

Similar to the natural systems perspective, the open system perspective also deemphasizes “formal structure and attention to how the organization actually does its work” which allows for interpretations of how external organizations can influence one another (Davis & Scott, 2007, p. 93). The open system perspective speaks closely to the various policies that influence transfer students, from multiple points of view (Tobolowsky & Cox, 2012).

Organizational Responses. The open systems perspective helps facilitate a better understanding of the context in which federal and state policies affect public and private institutions. Longanecker and Blanco (2003) provides a historical overview of the autonomy that higher education institutions have from the government which has fostered “tremendous growth” (Longanecker & Blanco, 2003, p. 52). This is particularly true with regard to the federal government other than the Higher Education Act. The Illinois state government on the other hand has more direct control over public institutions through the IAI mentioned earlier. This is unsurprising since nearly seventy-five percent of students in the United States who do transfer do tend to transfer from one public institution to another public institution (DeLauro et al., 2017). Currently there are roughly twenty private institutions which are a part of the Illinois Articulation

Initiative Act (1993) (Illinois Transfer Portal, 2019). This is relevant to the current research study because North Lake University is a private institution. Being a private institution gives North Lake University more control over which courses a student may articulate and leaves more room for variation per student. As a whole, private highly selective institutions have different enrollment patterns than public institutions and therefore have some flexibility in the types of students they will enroll (Cheslock, 2005). North Lake University is unlike most private institutions considering it has started enrolling a large number of transfer students starting in the fall of 2017. By the fall of 2019 nearly ten percent of the incoming students were transfers.

Research on transfer student success to private highly selective nonprofit institutions shows that students have better rates to degree than those who attend less selective institutions (Melguizo & Dowd, 2009; NSC Research Center, 2019). Understanding the workflow and process from when a student gets their acceptance letter to matriculating to graduation can provide greater insight to any barriers that transfer students may face academically or socially. For example, Tobolowsky and Cox (2012), use organizational theory to examine the efficiency of an organization and the different social actors involved; the study found that the policies and procedures for transfer students that were in place at their institution of study were not being applied consistently by staff and faculty. The results from Tobolowsky and Cox (2012) indicate that the institution should reassess the allocation of resources “and revise any institutionalized policies and practices that limit its ability to meet the needs of [transfer students]” (p. 408). Often times reallocating resources for institutions is difficult, Manning (2018), attributes this characteristic to higher education since it is a “mature industry”, meaning that creating change is difficult due to strongly established structures (p. 1). This is particularly important given the institutional background of North Lake University and helps further contextualize the processes

that are in place for transfer student facilitation. While using organizational theory can aid in the understanding of the current condition of North Lake University, another important aspect to consider is institutional context (Titus, 2004; Tobolowsky & Cox, 2012). The current policies in place, along with the history of the North Lake University in themselves create cycles which may perpetuate further inequalities if the process are not adequately addressed (Davis & Scott, 2007, p. 106; Tobolowsky & Cox, 2012). The complexities and decentralization of higher education the United States trickles down to the individual students and impacts their transition to a new institution.

Overall, using organizational theory as a framework allows for a more comprehensive understanding of the internal and external environments that significantly influence a transfer student's experience. The following domain will further explain the internal complexities of transfer student's identities and how they interact with the new institutional environment.

Frameworks of Transition and Socialization

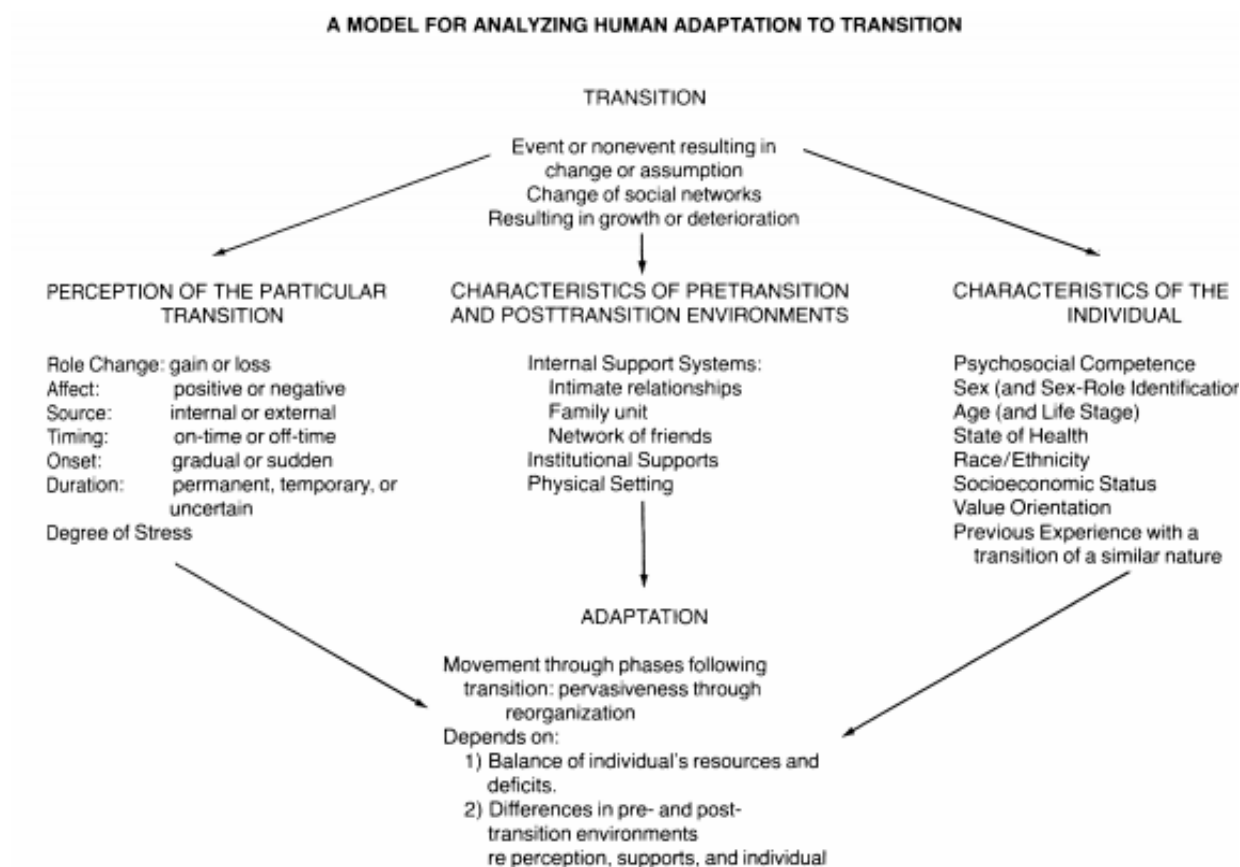
Just as first time college students need time to acclimate to a new environment, transfer students also go through a transition period when they first arrive at their new receiving institution (Adelman, 2006; Laanan, 2001; Nuñez & Yoshimi, 2017). Transfer students also battle the social stigma of being a transfer student. Majority of the literature on the stigmas of being a transfer student pertain to vertical transfers, however, the stigma of transfer students is still an important topic to cover (Chin-Newman & Shaw, 2013; Laanan et al., 2010; Chrystal et al., 2013). The literature suggests that people feel that community college students are not adequately prepared academically to handle coursework at a four-year institution (Chin-Newman & Shaw, 2013). Laanan et al. (2010) found that the stigmatization had negative effects on a students' *academic transition* to a four-year institution [emphasis added]. What this research

study seeks to uncover is if lateral transfer students face the same stigmatization and what implications it may have on academic and social belonging.

To better understand a transfer student's transition, this section provides a discussion of what transition means and the multiple factors that can influence transition. Using Nancy Schlossberg's (1981) transition theory, the research study will examine the social factors that influence a student's transition to higher education. Though this theory is not specific to transfer students it does lay a foundation and language to talk about transfer students' facilitation into a new institution. Additionally, John Weidman's (1989) theory of socialization for undergraduates also provides additional support to understand the interactions between the individual and the organization. In this section, will also briefly describe the influence of student housing on transfer students by looking at a case study by Utter and DeAngelo (2015). All three pieces of literature provide a launching point for the current study and seeks to enrich the conversation of transfer students by using multiple perspectives.

Schlossberg's (1981) Transition Theory

Schlossberg's (1981) transition theory gives readers a rich understanding of the intricacies of what a transition is and the factors that influence the significances of a transition on a particular individual. This framework will help the current study understand the social considerations administrators at North Lake University should pay attention to when thinking about factors that might affect a transfer student. Figure 1 provides readers with a robust definition of transition and details the three main points that categorize transition: perception of transition, characteristics of the environments, and the characteristics of the individual (Schlossberg, 1981).

Figure 1*Schlossberg's Model for Human Adaptation to Transition*

This framework in particular is helpful in determining if a student has made a successful transition to their new institution or if additional support is needed. A successful transition is defined as “a stable new life organization and a stable new identity” (Schlossberg, 1981, p. 6). Another useful aspect of this framework is that it takes into consideration pre-transition changes such as events and changes in social networks which leads to some type of growth or regression. What can be particularly useful is the category of perception of the transition; by gaining a deeper understanding of the source and onset of the transition administrators can be better prepared and think of support systems to put in place for transfer students. Using this framework will help expand the current literature transfer student transitions and provide insight to the

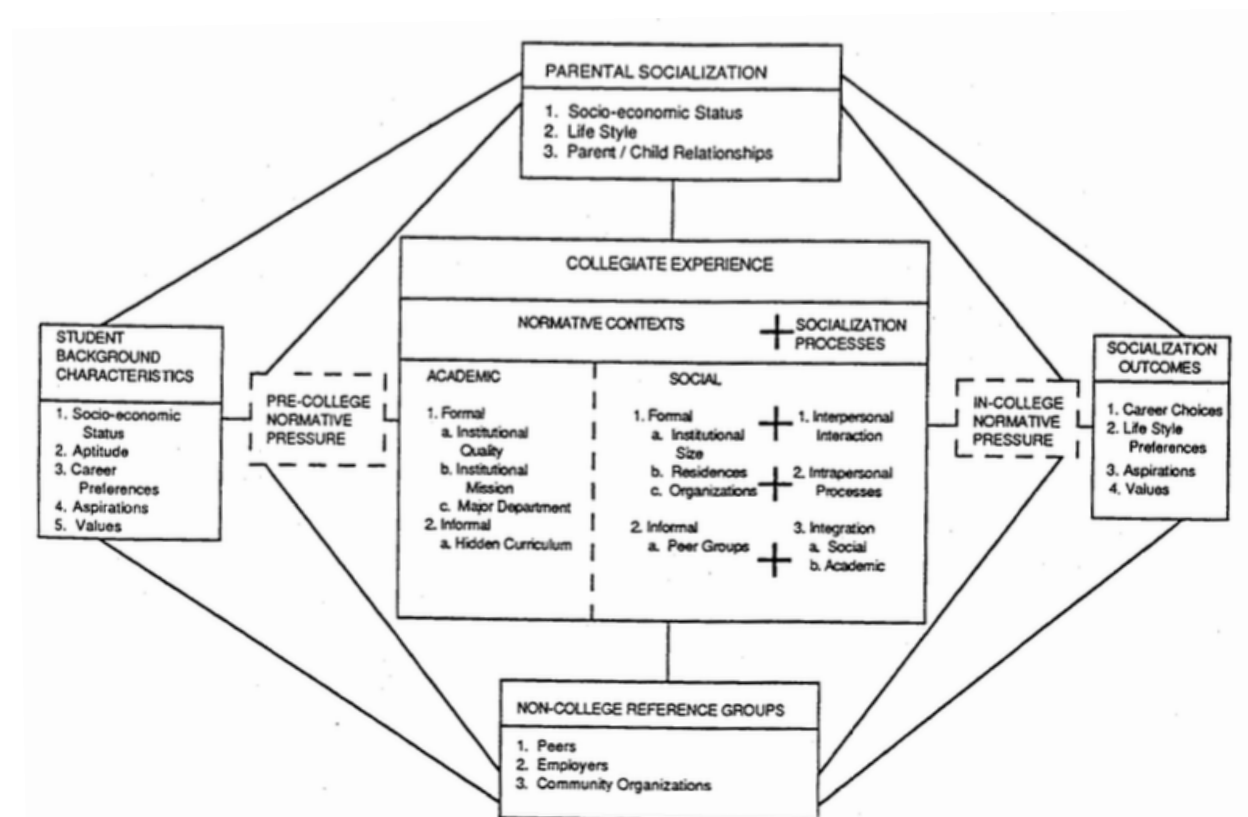
reasons why lateral transfers happen. As mentioned previously, majority of the literature is still based heavily on transfer students who come from community colleges – due to the lack of access to information – administrators at four-year institutions may not be equipped to adequately support lateral transfer students.

Weidman's (1989) Undergraduate Socialization Approach

Although research on transfer students places them under a special category it is still important to acknowledge that transfer students are still undergraduates and face some of the same difficulties with socialization as non-transfer students. Figure 2 shows Weidman's (1989) intricate conceptual model of undergraduate socialization. The three main points to draw attention to are student background characteristics, college experience, and socialization outcomes. Similar to Schlossberg's (1981) model, this map also pays special attention to the individual characteristics of a student as well as the emotional effects that the socialization process may have – this is denoted by the “plus” signs in the box of “collegiate experience”. This model provides more depth in understanding a student's personal experiences and provides more depth for potential socialization outcomes. An advantage of this framework is that it also lives on a continuum, meaning a student's socialization and outcomes can change during their time at university (Weidman, 1989, p. 299).

Figure 2

Weidman's Conceptual Model of Undergraduate Socialization



To understand individual differences in the lateral transfer experience, this framework can identify what particular academic or social experiences may influence a better transition and socialization to North Lake University. The following section describes how the two frameworks in this section can be applied to housing and transfer students' social transition.

Transfer Students and Housing

Schlossberg and Weidman's frameworks provide key information for administrators to better understand the social transition for lateral transfer students. Examining students' academic and admissions records can provide pre-transition information and help residential hall directors identify student needs/resources to facilitate a successful transition. Through residential programming and collaboration with other academic programs, administrators can learn more

about a student's specific social, academic, and career outcomes to further connect transfer students with the appropriate resources and develop connections on campus.

This section will summarize a case study discussing the role of housing in lateral transfer students transition and socialization to a public research institution (Utter & DeAngelo, 2015). Utter and DeAngelo's research looked at twenty-seven lateral transfer students who were either sophomores or juniors, who had varied living experiences at their new institution. Overall, students who participated in the research said that the timing of being accepted to school starting caused stress in finding housing options. Additionally, those who chose to live off-campus later regretted their choice and wished that they had stayed on campus. Looking at Schlossberg's (1981) and Weidman's (1989) frameworks alone it is unsurprising that the off-campus students felt a lower sense of belonging than the other participants who go on-campus housing. Utter and DeAngelo prefaced their work with understanding the importance of acknowledging lateral transfer student's experiences at their previous institution and how that may affect their transition. Their work demonstrates how, once transfer students arrive on-campus, they are placed in a housing community that may not provide them "immediate social connection" (p.186). Understanding student's pre-transition living arrangements and social expectations can provided administrators with a greater understanding of what a student may need. Living off campus tends to be more isolating and external support systems, such as peer or community relationships, are more difficult to build and manage. However, research suggests that intentional residential life programs can help students increase their sense of belonging on campus. Braxton and McClendon (2001) looked at first-year students and residential programs that can help increase sense of belonging. Their study suggests to house students by academic, career, or other interests and to place them in a residential hall which "provide opportunities for residents to

interact socially” (Braxton & McClendon, 2001, p. 66). While lateral transfers are not new to higher education they are still new to their receiving institution and therefore the recommendations may still be useful. Also, by allowing transfer students to select housing related to academic, career, or other interests administrators are also using key elements from Schlossberg and Weidman’s theories by using student’s future outcome goals to help students become agents of their own transition.

As mentioned previously this study seeks to expand on the literature related to lateral transfer students’ transition to a private highly selective four-year institution in Illinois. By using the work of Utter and DeAngelo’s (2015) this paper seeks to better understand the influence of housing on transfer students’ socialization to their new institution. What this literature does, in relation to the current research study is help identify potential gaps in the overall literature about lateral transfer students and how housing could be a major factor in helping students adjust to their new institution. By describing the current condition of transfer credit policies in the state of Illinois and understanding the processes of transition and socialization – this study seeks to add depth to the understanding of lateral transfer students’ facilitation to a private highly selective institution.

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