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Transfer Student Experiences at Stanford University and the University of California, Berkeley

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The University of San Francisco

TRANSFER STUDENT EXPERIENCES AT STANFORD UNIVERSITY AND THE
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, BERKELEY

A Master's Thesis

Presented to the Faculty of the Department of Leadership Studies

School of Education

University of San Francisco

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

Organization and Leadership

by

Rachael Madison

November 1, 2017

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Rachael Madison
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under the guidance of the Thesis Committee,
and approved by all its members,
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of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Organization and Leadership

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DEDICATION

“I can do all things through Christ, who strengthens me.” Philippians 4:13

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ABSTRACT

Elite institutions have a long history of serving students from high socioeconomic status families. Transfer students who begin their college career at community colleges are typically from low-income, first-generation, and underrepresented minority status families. This population of students has historically been underrepresented at elite colleges. The purpose of this study was to examine the community college transfer student experience at two elite universities, one public and one private, and how institutional programs and structures affect the transfer student experience. The study gathered information from eight community college transfer students, four from each elite university, interviewed in one-on-one semi-structured interviews. Four university administrators, two from each university, were also interviewed to gather information on the transfer student experience from the institutional perspective. This study provides insight into the transfer student population and their particular needs. The study also identifies ways in which universities can create stronger programming and more inclusive systems for transfer students to enhance their university experience and the likelihood of their success at elite institutions.

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CHAPTER I

THE RESEARCH PROBLEM

Statement of the Problem

Nearly half of all students embarking on post-secondary education start at a community college (Melguizo, Kienzl, Alfonso, 2011). Community colleges are the largest U.S. post-secondary network within higher education (Handel, 2012). These open-access colleges serve significant numbers of students from low-income, first-generation, and underrepresented racial minority backgrounds (Handel, 2012; Wang, 2016), providing students access to affordable post-secondary education. In many cases, the community colleges serve as a stepping stone for students aiming to transfer to a four-year college to complete their undergraduate degree. Although the community colleges were originally created to prepare high school graduates for delayed entry to four-year colleges and to separate students who were deemed capable of traditional college from students who were inferior candidates for higher education (Beach, 2010), the purpose of these colleges has evolved to provide expanded access by serving as a critical point of entry for disadvantaged students pursuing their post-secondary studies. As a result, community colleges are heavily populated by underserved students who are largely absent from sectors of higher education including the elite institutions.

Although community college students represent a significant share of students in higher education, they comprise a small portion of students enrolled in elite universities, particularly those from low-income backgrounds (Dowd et al., 2008). Elite higher education institutions are defined as “private, selective, or highly selective colleges and universities that have high costs of attendance and typically lengthy histories serving predominantly upper and middle upper socioeconomic status students” (Lee, 2013). Attending an elite university typically provides

students with superior educational resources, direct pathways to graduate school, higher post-graduate earnings, greater social status, and greater overall economic power (Hillman, 2012; Hearn & Rosinger, 2014; Wang, 2016). The disconnect between elite universities and community colleges has several implications, including a lack of sociocultural diversity on elite campuses and reinforced social class stratification through the higher education system.

Background and Need

Various researchers have explored how educational systems are contributing to and perpetuating social class inequalities, through social class reproduction (Astin & Oseguera, 2004; Lee, 2013; Hearn & Rosinger, 2014). Inequalities within higher education are connected to the K-12 system where students of higher socioeconomic status are generally enrolled in school systems with more resources and greater opportunities for pre-college preparation and entry into selective institutions. Consequently, students of higher socioeconomic status typically attend highly selective or elite universities, whereas students of lower socioeconomic status attend less selective institutions including community colleges, resulting in a stratified higher education system.

Given the small number of transfer students entering elite universities, there is limited information about the community college transfer students' experience at these universities. By studying how transfer students experience elite universities, higher education as a whole can better understand the challenges these students face at elite institutions and can use this information to improve institutional structures and programs to better meet the needs of transfer students, which will help address inequity and the stratification in the higher education system.

Previous research documents the various challenges transfer students face when they transfer to four-year universities (Townsend & Wilson, 2006; Townsend, 2008; Tobolowsky &

Cox, 2012; Walker & Okpala, 2017). Research has also documented the growing concern over institutional structures that pose challenges for transfer students (Miller, 2013; Tobolowsky & Cox, 2012; Walker & Okpala, 2017). Collectively, these studies highlight the need to better understand the community college transfer student experience and the factors that affect their experience. Most previous studies were conducted at large public research universities, and thus there is lack of information about the transfer student experience at elite private universities.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is threefold. First is to explore the community college transfer student experience at elite universities. Second is to examine how institutional structures and programs at the universities affect the transfer student experience. Third is to examine the differences between the experience of transfer students attending a public elite university and those attending a nearby private elite university.

Information for this study is obtained through interviews of community college transfer students from Stanford University and the University of California (UC) Berkeley. The students, four from each university, describe their experiences at their elite university, including how institutional factors such as orientation, housing, and academic planning affects their experience. Information is gathered from interviews of four administrative staff members, two from each university, to understand the transfer student experience from the institutional perspective.

Research Questions

This study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What are the common themes and experiences among community college transfer students attending the two elite universities?

2. How do institutional differences between the public and private universities affect the community college transfer student experience?

Significance of the Study

Equitable access in higher education is essential to the vitality and sustainability of a democratic society. Providing opportunities for students to attend universities based on academic ability rather than socioeconomic status is critical to achieving equitable access in higher education (Dowd et al., 2008). Because community college transfer students come largely from minority and lower socioeconomic status backgrounds, the lack of such students at elite universities is a serious concern in terms of addressing inequalities in higher education, enabling social mobility, and promoting the civic ideals of equal treatment and opportunity (Dowd et al., 2008). The results of this study will help inform stakeholders of higher education institutions and policymakers as to the importance of socioeconomic diversity in higher education through the lens of the experience of community college transfer students at two elite universities. Both community colleges and elite universities can benefit from better understanding the transfer students' experience at elite institutions.

Limitations of the Study

This study provides a snapshot of the community college transfer student experience at elite universities. A total of eight students were interviewed for this study. However the transfer student experience varies greatly, and collecting information from a larger number of transfer students would provide a more complete picture of the larger issue of community college transfer students at elite universities.

While some studies have focused on a single university for an in-depth investigation, this study seeks to examine the transfer student experience at two elite universities, one public (UC

Berkeley) and one private (Stanford University). This study provides insight into the differences and similarities of transfer student experiences between a private and a public elite university located in the same geographic region. However, universities across the United States differ in their institutional structures, campus environment, academics, operating systems, and foundational histories. Thus, examining additional universities in different regions of the country would provide a more complete picture of the transfer student experience.

Another limitation of the study is that while participants came from a range of socioeconomic backgrounds, there was less racial diversity among participants. Five of the eight participants were white. Students of color, and African American students in particular, may have different transfer experiences from those shared in this study. Future research could focus on specific underrepresented groups to explore how transfer students of different socioeconomic and ethnic/racial backgrounds vary in their experience at four-year universities, including elite institutions.

The study is directed and informed by the researcher. The two institutions chosen are selected due to the researcher's place of employment (Stanford University), which influences access to information. In order to address the imbalance of information access, the researcher interviewed an equal number of participants at both universities and examined transfer-student-related institutional aspects of the two universities to collectively examine information and transfer student experiences.

Definition of Terms

The terms for this study are defined as follows:

Community college, two-year college, junior college: The terms community college, two-year college, and junior college are used interchangeably to denote institutions that provide two-year degrees among other learning opportunities.

Elite university, highly selective university: As defined by Lee (2013), these are institutions that have high costs of attendance and typically lengthy histories serving predominantly upper and middle upper socioeconomic status students.

Four-year student: These are students who are admitted into universities as freshmen on a typical four-year undergraduate track.

Low-income student: These are students in the bottom quartile of socioeconomic status.

Nontraditional student: This term encompasses a wide variety of students. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), there are seven characteristics of a nontraditional student, namely those who: (1) do not immediately continue their education after high school, (2) attend college part time, (3) are financially independent, (4) have children or dependents other than their spouse, (5) are a single parent, (6) work full time, and (7) have a GED certificate instead of a high-school diploma.

Socioeconomic status: This is an overarching term that includes income, educational attainment, financial security, and subjective perceptions of social class.

Top university, highly ranked university: University rankings incorporate multiple factors such as academic reputation, wealth, research excellence, admissions rates, employer reputations, and academic and extracurricular resources. Researchers may use different metrics

to refer to a top four-year university or use published rankings such as those from *US News and World Report*.

Transfer student: Although students may transfer from one four-year university to another, in this study, the term transfer student is used to denote those students who transfer from a community college to a four-year university.

Traditional student: This term is used to describe students who have enrolled at a four-year university as freshmen directly out of high school and are of traditional college age.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Higher Education and Stratification

Researchers since the 1970s have studied how social class inequalities are linked to the outcomes of the nation's higher education system (Bowles & Gintis, 1976). According to Lee (2013), elite universities have historically been known for their socioeconomic reproduction, in that the institutions maintain systems of wealth and privilege across generations. It is common for students of higher socioeconomic status to attend highly selective and elite universities and for students of lower socioeconomic status to attend colleges that are less selective, including community colleges, resulting in a stratified higher education system.

The sorting mechanism of socioeconomic status within higher education creates unequal treatment based on an individual's socioeconomic status rather than their academic achievement and potential. According to Dowd, Cheslock, and Melguizo (2008), only 3% of freshmen entering 146 highly selective institutions came from the lowest quartile of the socioeconomic status index, whereas nearly 75% of students enrolled in these institutions came from the highest quartile. Stratification in higher education can be traced back to the K-12 system, where students of higher socioeconomic status are typically enrolled in school systems with more resources and opportunities that allow for pre-college preparation and entry into more selective colleges. Low-income students rarely enter the elite pipelines and largely remain in educational systems that perpetuate their low socioeconomic status. Furthermore, elite universities historically have low admittance rates for community college transfer students who typically come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds.

This literature review covers four topics. First is the student population within elite universities and how those universities function within the higher education system. Second is the function of the community colleges within the system of higher education. Third is the relationship between elite universities and community colleges. Fourth is the lack of information about community college transfer students at elite universities.

Elite Higher Education

Elite higher education institutions are defined by Lee (2013) as “private, selective, or highly selective colleges and universities that have high costs of attendance and typically lengthy histories serving predominantly upper and middle upper socioeconomic status students.” Although elite institutions educate a very small percentage of college students, they offer substantial academic and financial returns for those students. Attending an elite or highly selective university provides students with the best educational resources, direct pathways to graduate school, higher post-graduate earnings, greater social status, and greater economic power (Hillman, 2012; Hearn & Rosinger, 2014; Wang, 2016). Additionally, as the selectivity of a university increases, the student’s likelihood of attaining a degree increases by 10% or more (Long, 2008). Compared to less-selective universities, elite institutions invest more than three times per student (Brezis & Hellier, 2017). Attending an elite university is associated with great prestige and power (Dowd et al., 2008). Elite institutions place a disproportionate number of graduates into high-profile jobs, including political office and positions with political influence; for example, Supreme Court Justices have predominantly come from four elite colleges: Stanford, Princeton, Harvard, and Georgetown (Lee, 2013). Although there are many high-achieving low-income students who qualify for admittance, elite universities predominantly serve students from the most privileged backgrounds.

Elite universities have a long history of enrolling students from wealthy families. Beginning in the early 20th century, elite institutions would admit students from private feeder schools and would include specific admissions requirements that few schools outside the feeder system could meet (Karabel, 2005). In the 1950s through the 1970s, the pool of qualified applicants grew, and elite universities were pressured to broaden their student admissions pool (Lee, 2013). Their admissions tactics shifted from a focus on entrance exam scores to more subjective measures such as extracurricular activities and intangibles like personality and “the right fit” (Lee, 2013; Karabel, 2005). They also used “need-blind” admissions processes that gave the appearance of class impartiality. Despite these changes, the elite universities maintained their primary student population of students from high socioeconomic backgrounds.

Nearly 72% of students at the nation’s most selective institutions come from families in the wealthiest quartile (Giancola et al., 2016). According to the Pell Institute (2015), families in the wealthiest quartile have annual incomes of \$108,650 and above; those in the lowest quartile have annual incomes of less than \$34,160. The highly selective universities serve as congregating venues for students who have something in common: namely, they are primarily from very wealthy families. Federal Pell grants are the largest form of need-based student financial aid, and participation is seen at all major colleges and universities (Hearn & Rosinger, 2014). Thus, Pell grants are a good indicator of the number of low-income students at a university. Although many universities increased their Pell grants between 2000 and 2013, the number of Pell grants at the most selective universities has remained virtually unchanged (16% in 2000 vs. 17% in 2013) (Dowd et al., 2008).

Students of high socioeconomic status enter their educational elite pipelines in a manner that is often out of reach for students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. For example,

students of privilege typically enter their highly selective universities directly out of high school, whereas low-income students are more likely to delay entry into college after high school or only enroll part time (Hearn & Rosinger, 2014). Since elite students with direct access to elite universities are those with the most direct access to further education and high-paying jobs, they often become leaders in society, even though, because of their privileged background, they do not represent the majority of Americans. Thus the stratified system of higher education perpetuates social class stratification.

Education scholars have long been concerned about the lack of sociocultural diversity at elite universities. The lack of diverse perspectives among this country's economic and business leaders results in a disconnect between them and the rest of society. As Dowd et al. (2008) explains, "The exclusion of poor working class, racial ethnic minority students from elite institutions reduces the probability that these students will enter positions of power. It also decreases the likelihood that graduates of elite institutions will interact with a diverse set of peers while in college."

Social class inequalities result in unequal educational outcomes, which create and perpetuate larger scale issues such as the rising income inequality. To understand the stratified higher education system, it is important to explore how different sectors of the system serve different student populations and act as a sorting mechanism for students based on socioeconomic background.

Community Colleges

Situated within this stratified higher education system are the community colleges. Founded in 1901, Joliet Junior College in Illinois was the first public two-year college (Beach 2010). The community college origins can be traced back to its intent to delay entry for high-

school students into the four-year universities and to separate students who were deemed capable of traditional college from students who were deemed to be inferior candidates (Beach, 2010). What started out as the “normal school,” whose primary purpose was to educate public school teachers, evolved into the junior college in the 1900s (Beach, 2010). The junior college expanded throughout the 20th century and, as its mission and purpose evolved, the two-year college was renamed the community college to reflect its role not only in higher education but in the surrounding community as well.

Nearly half of all U.S. students beginning post-secondary education start at a community college (Melguizo, Kienzl, Alfonso, 2011), and an increasing number of community college students are from low-income, first-generation, and underrepresented racial minority backgrounds (Wang, 2016). Despite the growing number of minority students attending community colleges, these students remain largely underrepresented at elite universities. According to Fortin (2016), between 1995 and 2009, African American and Latino enrollment increased an average of 46% at community colleges, yet these students saw an average increase of only 8% at the nation’s top four-year universities. In contrast, while white student enrollment remained constant at the community colleges over this same time period, it increased nearly 72% at the top universities (Fortin, 2016). Even though community colleges are serving a disproportionate number of minority students, the pipeline to elite universities for these students remains limited.

According to the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC, 2016), there are 1,108 community colleges in the U.S., making them the largest public post-secondary network in the nation (Handel, 2012). With their open admissions system, the community colleges serve as a critical point of entry (and reentry) for students pursuing higher education and provide a gateway

to four-year universities. Following this path, students typically complete their first two years of lower division coursework at a community college and then transfer to a four-year college to complete the remaining two years of their upper division course work and earn their baccalaureate degree. Some states have implemented transfer agreements between the community colleges and the state's public universities. In California, matriculation agreements facilitate the entry every year of a significant number of community college transfer students into the University of California (UC) and California State University (CSU) system. In the 2015-2016 academic year, approximately 73,000 students transferred from California community colleges to UC and CSU campuses.

Community colleges are, comparatively speaking, affordable and thus serve a high number of low-income students. In the 2015-2016 academic year, the average annual tuition and fees for a public in-state four-year university was \$9,410 vs. \$3,430 for an in-state community college (AACC, 2016). Tuition and fees at a private four-year university can range from \$33,000 upwards, depending on the school and major. At roughly one-third the cost of an average in-state public university, community colleges provide the least expensive option for higher education. Federal Pell grant data indicate that a large portion of low-income students attend community college; in 2013-2014, 33% of all Pell grants were directed to these two-year colleges (College Board, 2014).

Community colleges also serve a significant proportion of student groups who have historically been underrepresented in higher education, enrolling large numbers of African American, Latino/Chicano American, and Native American students as well as low-income and first-generation college-going students (Handel, 2007; Fortin, 2016). Given the need to accommodate more students pursuing higher education and the growing number of students

starting their college careers at community colleges, these two-year institutions are a crucial springboard for students aiming to earn a four-year degree. As the community colleges have become leading providers of higher education (Fortin, 2016) and serve a large portion of the nation's minority population, the lack of representation of community college transfer students at elite universities is a serious concern.

Barriers into Elite Universities

Even though community colleges admit and serve large and growing numbers of students who intend to transfer to four-year universities, few community college transfer students are admitted to elite colleges (Dowd et al, 2008). Elite universities have historically admitted extremely low rates of low-income students. Cheslock (2004) studied transfer student enrollment differences between public and private institutions and found that transfer student enrollment decreased as the university's selectivity increased. In examining *US News and World Report* top 50 colleges and universities and their transfer admissions rates, all but two of the top 12 schools admitted fewer than 100 transfer students per year, representing less than 10% of their undergraduate enrollment (see Table 1). Although there are millions of community college students across the U.S., their representation at top universities is negligible.

Students from the lowest economic quartile represent a mere 3% of enrollment within selective universities (Giancola et al., 2016). Although community colleges serve as a gateway to four-year universities for many low income students, these students encounter a range of barriers that prevent them from entering the elite pipeline. According to researchers, these barriers are located at both the student and the institutional level and include social factors, pre-college preparation, and university programs and structures.

Table 1. Acceptance Rates for Transfer Students Entering Fall 2012 at Ten of the Top-Ranked U.S. Universities (*US News and World Report, 2014*).

Ranking	Institution	Transfer student acceptance rate	Number of transfer students accepted
1	Harvard University	1.04%	15
2	Princeton University	N/A*	N/A*
3	Yale University	2.68%	26
4	Columbia University	6.22%	147
5.1	Stanford University	2.25%	34
5.2	University of Chicago	2.22%	22
7.1	Duke University	10.68%	36
7.2	Massachusetts Institute of Technology	5.51%	25
7.3	University of Pennsylvania	9.40%	197
10.1	California Institute of Technology	2.34%	5

* Princeton had not accepted any transfer students since 1991; this transfer ban policy was lifted starting in 2018. Website source: <http://transferweb.com/stats/transfer-acceptance-rates/>.

Family affluence has a clear impact on where a student attends college or if they attend college at all. Unlike students with parents who have post-secondary experience and are knowledgeable about planning for and financing their children’s college education, low-income students typically come from families with little or no background in post-secondary education and are often the first to attend college. According to Astin and Oseguera (2004), students with highly educated parents have a 500% greater likelihood of being admitted to a highly selective university than students from low-income backgrounds.

One reason for this disparity is that students from low-income backgrounds have much less access to pre-college preparation. They are likely to attend schools with fewer resources and minimal information about the college-application and financial-aid processes, which stymies their ability effectively to plan for college (Lee, 2013). These schools often do not have adequate

counselors or administrative support staff who can assist students with pre-college readiness. Perhaps as a result, low-income students are only one-third as likely to take advanced placement courses as students from more affluent backgrounds (Giancola et al., 2016).

Barriers at the university level also contribute to low rates of low-income and transfer-student admissions to elite institutions. For example, admissions criteria often include ambiguous factors such as the “right fit” and extracurricular activities like sports and performing arts (Lee, 2013). Students from low-income backgrounds may either not have access or cannot afford to participate in costly extracurricular activities. In addition, even though standardized test scores are heavily weighted in the application process, studies have shown that low-income students with high SAT scores are rarely admitted to elite universities; admissions instead tend to favor legacy students (children of alumni or donors) (Dowd et al., 2008).

High-achieving students from low-income backgrounds may not even consider elite universities because of the cost. These students are typically unaware of the various financial aid opportunities that could make an elite university, private or public, affordable (Giancola et al., 2016). As a result, high-achieving low-income students end up attending less selective universities and doing so without any financial aid. Although, many elite colleges make need-blind admissions decisions, which means that the student's financial situation is not taken into consideration during the admissions process, this attempt to avoid discrimination based on socioeconomic status has not resulted in the admission of more low-income students. Because low-income students and their families are unaware of the need-blind process which could benefit them, these students end up enrolling in public two-year or four-year universities which often offer fewer resources, have lower graduation rates, and provide fewer post-graduation

opportunities and prestige. The cumulative effect of these barriers is that very few low-income students, including community college transfer students, are admitted to elite universities.

The Community College Transfer Student Experience

A growing body of research documents the challenges community college transfer students encounter when they transfer to four-year universities (Townsend & Wilson, 2006; Townsend, 2008; Tobolowsky & Cox, 2012; Walker & Okpala, 2017). Research has also documented the challenges that institutional structures can pose for transfer students (Miller, 2013; Tobolowsky & Cox, 2012; Walker & Okpala, 2017). Students who transfer from community college are among the nearly 60% of college students who attend more than one university (Jenkins & Fink, 2015). Thus it is important to understand the community college transfer student experience and the effect of institutional structures on that experience.

Unlike traditional four-year students, transfer students are a distinct student group with wide variety in their characteristics. These characteristics include part-time or full-time enrollment, commuting or living on campus, full-time or part-time employment, single or married or with children, and a wide range of ages and backgrounds. Tobolowsky and Cox (2012) noted that the variability of transfer students extends to their student status, in that they may enter their new university as a first-year, junior- or senior-level student, may be co-enrolled (enrolled in more than one institution), or may even reverse transfer (switch from a four-year to a two-year institution). This diversity makes the transfer student group highly complex and less predictable than traditional four-year students, who typically enter college directly after high school with little no prior college experience.

Beyond these differences, transfer students encounter additional challenges when transferring to a four-year university. As Miller (2013) described, transfer students may

experience a lack of engagement at their new university, have problems with financial-aid systems, or lose credits for courses taken at their previous college and have to take additional “make up” courses at their new university. They may have particular needs, such as extended hours for classes, support for student parents, and transportation support if they live off campus (Miller, 2013). Such academic adjustment difficulties have been described as “transfer shock,” a term coined by Hills (1965), which often manifests as a temporary decline in the student’s grade point average (GPA). Lastly, transfer students are typically on a two-year timeline to graduation, which greatly compresses their university experience.

A number of studies have documented the difficulties transfer students experience at four-year institutions. A recent qualitative study at a public midsized historically black college and university (HBCU) collected data from transfer students about their experience, factors that impacted their retention, and how the university could better support the transfer student population (Walker & Okpala, 2017). The findings revealed a lack of specific efforts at the community college and university level aimed at meeting the needs of transfer students. The study participants expressed feelings of isolation and invisibility and of how vastly different they were from traditional four-year students. The study participants described an institutional one-size-fits-all approach to student programs and services aimed almost exclusively at traditional four-year students. The transfer students in the study also expressed a desire to be recognized for their differences and the challenges they face, and they had suggestions for the university and wanted their voices to contribute to institutional change.

Institutional Approach to Transfer Students

Other studies have explored the effect of institutional structures at four-year universities and how those structures can present challenges for transfer students. For example, Tobolowsky

and Cox (2012) interviewed several administrators and personnel at the selected university to understand how their perspectives and formal policies shaped the institution's approach to transfer students. The researchers found that the transfer student experience is often shaped by a variety of invisible and subtle institutional influences and that misconceptions, stereotypes, and inconsistencies among university personnel created fragmented perspectives about transfer students. Information about transfer student needs and data about the transfer student population were not readily available or accessible, and thus transfer student needs were often lost within the needs of the larger student body.

With their smaller numbers, transfer students were not a priority for the university, since that student population's success had minimal impact on the university's reputation. The study explained how first-time, full-time students' data, such as ACT/SAT scores and retention rates, drove the university's ranking and public reputation. Thus more institutional programming was devoted to those efforts, and there was little fiscal or market incentive for programming aimed at transfer students. Although administrators at this university were fully aware of transfer student issues, they also expressed uncertainty as to appropriate support for transfer students. This study clearly showed that transfer students are not a well-understood group at the institutional level and that unless a university intentionally creates and implements comprehensive programming for transfer students, there will be gaps in service and inconsistent support for the transfer student population.

Identifying transfer student needs and distinguishing the transfer student population from the traditional four-year cohort are essential to ensuring transfer student success, yet this something four-year universities struggle with. Continuing the common campus culture of labeling all new students as freshmen and providing services that focus on four-year students

overlooks the transfer student group entirely. Without proper support for transfer students throughout the transfer process and during their time at their four-year institution, universities will fail to meet the needs of this growing and increasingly important population of students.

Summary

Higher education stratification presents many concerns. Class and income inequalities continue to expand, and it is important to understand how systems such as higher education perpetuate large-scale social inequities. Although the ethos of American democracy regards post-secondary educational attainment as a critical mechanism for overcoming low socioeconomic origins and improving social mobility (Schudde & Goldrick, 2010), research continues to show how socioeconomic background can predict educational attainment.

The sorting of social classes within higher education creates unequal treatment based on class rather than achievement and potential. Elite universities have low acceptance rates of community college transfer students, who typically come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. As a result, low-income students rarely enter the elite pipelines and largely remain in those that perpetuate their low socioeconomic status. The research summarized above explored the transfer student experience and revealed the need for institutional programs and structures tailored to the needs of transfer students. These studies were conducted in predominantly large, public four-year institutions. Research has indicated a lack of information about community college transfer students within elite universities (Dowd et al., 2008; Wang, 2016). Elite universities admit low numbers of students from low-income backgrounds and low numbers of transfer students. However the ability of students to transfer from community college to elite universities is important in enabling social mobility, enhancing civic participation, and creating a diverse democratic society with increased cultural capital. Thus it is important to

understand the community college transfer student experience and to examine how elite universities are serving these students at the institutional level.

Research into the transfer student experience has highlighted the need for more support for the transfer student population (Miller, 2013; Rhine, Milligan & Nelson, 2000; Townsend & Wilson, 2006; Tobolowsky & Cox, 2012; Walker & Okpala, 2017), but few studies have explored how institutional structures affect the transfer student experience. Furthermore, research about institutional structures has generally focused on single institutions, despite the fact that universities across the U.S. operate very differently depending on their status as a public, private or for-profit institution, their religious affiliation if any, their geographic location and demographics, and their mission as an institution. Since not all practices or recommendations work for every institution, it is important to highlight best practices and configure those concepts to each university's particular setting.

The purpose of this study is to fill the gap of research surrounding the transfer student experience within elite intuitions by examining both public and private four-year institutions. Additionally, this study seeks to explore how institutional functions impact the transfer student experience.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Research Method and Approach

This study used a qualitative interview-based approach to answer the research questions. The qualitative approach was appropriate as this study sought to explore the human experience, identify how certain events shape that experience, and provide personal information and explanations (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Other methods, such as quantitative research, were not used since the researcher wanted to capture student experiences in an open-ended setting to allow participants to share their experiences in a holistic way.

Interviewing is the main technique used in qualitative research (Farrelly, 2013). This study used a semi-structured interviewing technique, in which predetermined questions guided the interviews while allowing the researcher and participant flexibility in discussing topics and identifying main points. Interviews were used instead of other techniques, such as focus groups, because the researcher wanted to obtain the individual accounts that are key to understanding human experiences and identifying connecting themes. In addition to participant interviews, the researcher used other sources of information to further inform the study, including a variety of online published information about the two universities and their associated programs.

By comparing two elite four-year institutions, one public and one private, this study sought to understand the community college transfer student experience at the elite universities and how the two universities' different institutional structures and programs shaped the transfer student experience. While some research studies have focused on a single institution for an in-depth look, this study chose to look at two universities to gain an understanding of how

universities not only vary in their institutional programming but also how those differences impact and shape the transfer student experience.

This study posed the following research questions:

1. What are the common themes and experiences among community college transfer students attending the two elite universities?
2. How do institutional differences between the public and the private universities affect the community college transfer student experience?

Research Setting

The study included participants from Stanford University and University of California (UC) at Berkeley. Stanford University is a private research university located on the peninsula south of San Francisco, California. It was founded in 1885 and in 1891 was established as a coeducational, nondenominational institution. The university's enrollment is roughly 60% graduate students and 40% undergraduates. At 8,180 acres, the campus is one of the largest in the U.S.

Founded in 1868, UC Berkeley is the oldest of the 10 research universities in the University of California system. The 1,232-acre campus is located within the City of Berkeley, which is approximately 40 miles northeast of Stanford. This public research university (also known as Cal), has a total enrollment more than double that of Stanford's and consists of roughly 70% undergraduates and 30% graduate students.

Both UC Berkeley and Stanford are very highly ranked. According to *US News and World Report* (2016), UC Berkeley is ranked first in Top Public Schools and globally ranked fourth (2016). Stanford is ranked fifth in National Universities (*US News and World Report*,

2017). In addition to their outstanding academics, Stanford and UC Berkeley are members of the PAC-12 athletic conference and are arch rivals in football.

University profile information for Stanford and UC Berkeley is given in Table 2, including enrollment, acceptance rates, tuition, endowments, student-to-faculty ratios, and student demographics, and reveals notable differences between these two elite universities.

Table 2. University Profile Information for the 2015-2016 Academic Year.

	Stanford University	UC Berkeley
Source of institutional support	Private	Public
Academic year calendar	Quarter	Semester
Total undergraduates	6,994	27,496
Total graduate students	9,776	10,708
Total enrollment	16,770	38,204
Acceptance rate (undergraduate)	5%	17%
Annual in-state undergraduate tuition	\$45,729	\$11,220
Student-to-faculty ratio	4.4:1	17:1
Endowment	\$22.2 billion	\$4.05 billion
Racial demographics	Nonresident Aliens: 8% (612) Hispanic/Latino: 15% (1,072) Black or African American: 6% (425) White: 37% (2,614) American Indian or Alaska Native: 1% (71) Asian: 21% (1,432) Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander: >1% (22) Two or more races: 10% (725) Race/ethnicity unknown: >1% (21)	Nonresident Aliens: 14% (3,771) Hispanic/Latino: 14% (3,875) Black or African American: 2% (583) White: 27% (7,394) American Indian or Alaska Native: >1% (45) Asian: 35% (9,697) Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander: >1% (71) Two or more races: 5% (1,298) Race/ethnicity unknown: 3% (762)
Median family income	\$167,500	\$119,900

Information obtained from: <http://opa.berkeley.edu/campus-data/common-data-set>, <https://ucomm.stanford.edu/cds/>, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/projects/college-mobility/>, https://www.census.gov/library/visualizations/2016/comm/cb16-158_median_hh_income_map.html

For example, Stanford's acceptance rate is lower than UC Berkeley's. UC Berkeley has a much larger student population. Both universities' enrollment consists of less than 10% Black or African American students. UC Berkeley enrolls a larger share of nonresident aliens (classification assigned to non-U.S. citizens) than Stanford. The median annual family income for Stanford and UC Berkeley students is two to three times the U.S. median yearly family income (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016).

Data Collection

Interview Participants

Twelve participants total were interviewed, six from Stanford University and six from UC Berkeley. Of the six participants from each university, four were community college transfer students and two were university administrators who supported transfer students. The administrators interviewed for this study worked directly with transfer students in a variety of capacities, including advising and various student support programs. UC Berkeley and Stanford differ in their structures for transfer student support, and thus the administrator roles at the two universities also differed. Because of the small number of administrators who worked with transfer students, information characterizing the administrators or their job titles is not disclosed to maintain confidentiality. The community college transfer students interviewed for this study included first-, second-, and third-year transfer students. Interview questions for both administrators and students are given in Appendix A.

Semi-structured interviews were held with the administrators to understand how their roles and their universities' institutional programs supported the transfer student population. Interview topics included the allocation of services for transfer students, institutional structures and programs, and how the transfer students were integrated within the university.

Semi-structured interviews were held with the community college transfer students to understand their university experience and how their experience was shaped by their universities' institutional structures and programs. The interview questions were designed to explore differences and similarities of the transfer student experience between the elite private university and the elite public university. Both administrators and transfer students were asked how the university experience and support services were different for transfer students versus four-year students.

Interviews with the transfer students were conducted either in person and over the phone at the convenience of the participant. In-person interviews took place on the Stanford and UC Berkeley campuses in quiet, distraction-free locations of the interviewee's choosing. Phone interviews were conducted when scheduling constraints on the part of the interviewee or the researcher precluded in-person interviews.

Recruitment of Participants

Various outreach efforts were used to recruit participants. To connect with administrators at Stanford and UC Berkeley, the researcher reached out via email and requested interviews. The researcher used convenience sampling at Stanford since she had professional contacts with Stanford administrators. At UC Berkeley, the researcher identified administrators who worked with transfer students via web searches of the UC Berkeley website.

Recruiting transfer students for the study was accomplished via convenience sampling. At Stanford, the researcher requested transfer student referrals from the Stanford administrators. The recruitment of UC Berkeley transfer students was accomplished via referrals from the UC Berkeley administrators as well as the researcher's professional network. The researcher

contacted all transfer student referrals by email and requested their voluntary participation in the study.

Sample Population

Equal numbers of students and administrators from each university were selected for participation in the study. The student population included an equal number of male and female participants, with representation of different age groups and different stages in progress toward degree. Each student participant completed a short demographic survey to ensure the student participant population had a variety of community college transfer backgrounds.

Four university administrators participated in the study, two from UC Berkeley and two from Stanford. The four administrators worked with transfer students in different roles, giving them different perspectives of the transfer student experience within their specific university. Four female and four male transfer students were selected for the study ranging in age from 24 to 59. The sample population demographics show over half of the student participants are white, with one Hispanic/Latino student, one native Hawaiian, and one indicating “other.” Declared majors for the students included classics, architecture, English, political science, psychology, geography, international relations, and interdisciplinary studies. Four students identified as first-generation college attendees, four were from low-income backgrounds, two were military veterans, and one was a student parent. All participants were returning students, having had breaks in their college attendance prior to enrolling at their current university. Their mean self-reported grade point average (GPA) was 3.76, ranging from 3.4 to 4.0. Table 3 summarizes the student participants’ characteristics; A copy of the student survey is given in Appendix B. Due to the small size of the transfer student population at Stanford, age and major are not listed in Table 3 in order to maintain confidentiality.

Table 3. Student Participant Profile Information.

Pseudonym	University	Gender	Ethnicity	Housing status	In-state/ out-of-state transfer status	Year admitted to university	Employment status	Number of previously attended institutions
Mike	UC Berkeley	Male	White	Off campus	In state	2015	Full time	4
Sam	UC Berkeley	Male	Hispanic or Latino	On campus	In state	2016	Part time	1
Chrissy	UC Berkeley	Female	White	Off campus	In state	2014	Not working	1
Marion	UC Berkeley	Female	White	Off campus	In state	2015	Part time	1
Steve	Stanford	Male	Other	On campus	Out of state	2014	Part time	1
Jack	Stanford	Male	Native Hawaiian	On campus	In state	2014	Not working	4
Jordan	Stanford	Female	White	On campus	In state	2016	Part time	2
Lili	Stanford	Female	White	On campus	Out of state	2016	Part time	No answer

Protection of Human Subjects

Great care was taken to ensure the protection of the participants' identity and information. The study was reviewed and approved by the University of San Francisco (USF) Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects (IRBPHS), and a copy of the approval letter was filed in the Office of the Dean of the School of Education (see Appendix C).

All participants voluntarily agreed to participate in the study. All participants were made aware of their rights as research participants, including the right to stop the interview at any time and to skip any questions during the interview. The participants were emailed details of the study before their interviews. The researcher reviewed the purpose of the study before the start of each interview. All participants agreed to have the interviews recorded for accuracy purposes, and the participants were ensured that the recordings and all data collected would be kept secure. The participants were informed that all findings would be documented in a manner that would protect

their identity, including the use of pseudonyms. A sample informed consent form is provided in Appendix D.

Documents and Web Research

In addition to interviews with transfer students and administrators at both institutions, the researcher drew upon other sources of information, including web research and communications with university support functions, to further inform the study. The Stanford and UC Berkeley websites were reviewed for information on orientation, major declaration, and student services. The researcher also contacted via email the two universities' housing offices, orientation coordinators, and academic advisors to better understand each university's institutional programming and systems.

Data Analysis

After all interviews were completed, the researcher reviewed each of the twelve recordings and selected six to be submitted to the Rev audio transcription company (<https://www.rev.com/transcription>). The transcribed recordings were analyzed, coded, and organized in order to identify and present the findings. The interviews that were not transcribed were summarized to capture main ideas, critical quotes, and findings.

Once all transcribed and recorded interviews were collected, the researcher reviewed the twelve interviews to identify common themes and patterns that addressed the two research questions. According to Ryan and Bernard (2003), text analysis includes theme identification, producing a manageable subset of themes, organizing themes or codes, and linking those themes back to the research. Each of the twelve recordings was reviewed twice. In the first review, the researcher captured overall concepts, main themes, and reemerging patterns. If, during the first review, an excessive number of codes was identified, the researcher used broader codes to

capture central ideas and patterns for the second review. In the second review, the researcher extracted quotes and identified additional themes. The researcher created codes to label patterns and key ideas that addressed the research questions. An example of a selected code was TIME, which included the accounts of students and administrators discussing the transfer student timeline, lack of time, and the overall perception of time with regard to the transfer student timeline. Both transcribed and nontranscribed interviews were coded and the data organized into themes and coded categories. The codes used are presented in Appendix E.

Researcher Background

The researcher is a working professional, born and raised in the San Francisco Bay Area. She attended Cabrillo College and then transferred to San Jose State University, where she completed her Bachelor's degree in Health Science. She worked in higher education in both the public and private sector for a number of years before enrolling at the University of San Francisco to earn her Master's degree in Education.

As a community college transfer student herself, the researcher is interested in ways universities can expand their support of and improve institutional programming for transfer students. She recognizes the important pathway to a college degree that community colleges provide for many students, including first-generation college students, underrepresented minorities, veterans, low-income students, and students from nontraditional backgrounds. It is the researcher's hope that with a better understanding of the community college transfer student experience, universities can improve their institutional practices to better serve this growing, vibrant, and increasingly important population of students.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

As described in the previous chapter, eight community college transfer students and four administrators, half from Stanford University and half from UC Berkeley, were interviewed to gather information about the transfer student experience at elite universities. The findings identified both common and different experiences at the two institutions.

Two features common to these students stood out. The first was the transfer students' greater age compared to traditional four-year students. The second was the transfer students' notable and more varied life experience prior to their university enrollment, far beyond that of the four-year students. (The term "life experience" refers to the students' backgrounds and what they experienced, typically in nonacademic settings, prior to transferring to university.) The differences identified in the transfer student experience were largely the result of institutional policies and practices at the two universities. Of particular importance were those related to the transfer student timeline, academic planning and support, orientation, and housing.

Age and Life Experience

Although the two universities consider both transfer students and four-year students to be undergraduates, the transfer students typically have vastly different backgrounds and arrive at university in different stages of their lives and their academic careers. Three of the four transfer students from UC Berkeley and all four Stanford transfer students spoke about age difference. Although UC Berkeley and Stanford are distinctly different institutions, age was repeatedly cited as something that set the transfer students apart from the larger student population.

At UC Berkeley, transfer students comprise 22-23% of the total undergraduate population. Although this is a sizeable fraction, the interviewed students shared how age was a

factor that differentiated them from other new students, in large part because of the different stage of life they were in and thus their different needs and priorities. For example, when asked about differences between freshmen and transfer students, Sam, a 24-year-old recent transfer to UC Berkeley, said: “Transfer students are older, [we have a] different position in life, different priorities.” Chrissy, another UC Berkeley transfer student, echoed this sentiment:

I think I have a different set of needs from the typical college student...Across the board, you could say that my colleagues who are transfer students are older than those who are not, and in that way we have a broader sense of the world and, I guess, ourselves.

Chrissy continued to say that she and her fellow transfer students shared common backgrounds such as their broader life experience and work experience and the fact that they each had decided to pursue their undergraduate degrees for various personal reasons.

Marion, also from UC Berkeley, described how age created a sense of being an outsider: “I am a minority because of my age, [the] majority of people at Cal are 20 years old...I don’t have peers that I can relate to, and I haven’t met anyone my age going to school for the first time.” For many students, the ability to have a sense of belonging and relatability to peers is important. Marion clearly felt that age affected her perception of how she fit into the college setting and how she related to the students around her.

Marion, Chrissy, and Sam all recognized that age separated them from the four-year students, particularly the freshmen. They also recognized that it wasn’t just their greater age that set them apart but also the greater and more varied life experience their extra years had given them. Being older and in a different stage of life, they had a different view of what they needed from their university experience. For example, transfer students may not be looking for social engagements, needing instead to build professional networks to help prepare them for their

careers after graduation. Transfer students also may have more experience in the workforce and thus may be focused on developing greater skill sets for career purposes. As a result of their age and life experience, transfer students do not enter the university setting with the same set of outlooks, needs, or priorities as traditional four-year students and thus feel disconnected from the general undergraduate population.

Compared to UC Berkeley, Stanford's transfer student population is very small, numbering approximately 100 out of almost 17,000 enrolled undergraduates in 2016. The number of transfer students at Stanford has remained relatively low due to the university's overall low admittance rates. All four Stanford transfer students who were interviewed commented on how age set them apart. For example, Steve shared:

At least at community colleges there's people my age or older. Here that's not really the case.

The transfers are probably the only older group. Finding people my age was hard, and I think for me it was awkward getting used to being around students that were so much younger than me.

Steve noted that his age was never an issue at community college since the population there was made up of students of all ages. His perception that transfer students were the only older student group on campus made it difficult for him to find peers his age. He reported feeling awkward around the younger students, which created a sense of disconnection between himself and the other students.

Lili, who was in her first quarter at Stanford, also described how age was a factor that influenced her university experience:

I think a lot of times, transfer students especially just feel like we stick out in this huge way for various reasons either because we're older or we don't look like we grew up in California or all of these other things.

Since there were so few transfer students at Stanford, they were typically the only older student in their classes. At a university where class sizes are generally small, being one of the only transfer students and markedly older created feelings of disconnection and isolation.

When asked whether transfer students felt any insecurities about transferring to Stanford, Jack said one of them was his age: “I feel like being an older person, a student at 28, makes me well behind the curve.” When comparing himself to students who arrived as freshmen and to younger students who were at his same academic level, Jack equated his older age with being behind.

Jordan, another Stanford transfer student, shared a different take on age, describing how four-year students reacted to her:

Usually they’re like, “Oh my gosh. I thought you were like 26 not [Jordan's age],” or they’ll be like, “So does it feel weird being [Jordan's age]?” So that’s kind of funny, and they’ll be like, “Are you going to have kids?”

Jordan noted that this reaction was quite common when the four-year students discovered her age. Such a reaction may have arisen for several reasons. It may have been due to the uncommonness of older undergraduates at Stanford. The weirdness comment may have been a reflection of the younger students’ concept of a “normal” Stanford undergraduate. Because the traditional Stanford four-year student’s age is consistent with that of a recent high-school graduate, Jordan’s age difference was a surprise for the younger students.

When asked about other differences between themselves and four-year students, transfer students from both Stanford and UC Berkeley described how their life experiences played an important role in who they were and how it made them different from the other undergraduates. As Jack from Stanford explained:

The biggest difference I feel is...because of that [community college] experience, we have been exposed to a lot of different types of backgrounds. Our background is generally unique in and of itself, but back in community college we were exposed to even more of such great variety...

The different backgrounds Jack spoke of were not only his own but also those of the people he interacted with, both at community college and in his overall life experience. This distinction was significant to Jack as he valued the diversity of backgrounds he encountered prior to transferring to Stanford. In addition to his greater life experience, Jack noted that he arrived at Stanford with knowledge about what it was like to be a college student, something many of the traditional freshmen were still adjusting to. Because of his different educational pathway and greater life experience, Jack was at a different stage of life compared to traditional four-year students.

Steve, also from Stanford, commented similarly: “You have these different experiences, and I feel like...students who [have] pretty much only been students their entire life don’t understand how the larger world works.” Steve, a widely traveled military veteran with a wife and family, was living in a very different life stage than students who enrolled at Stanford directly out of high school.

Chrissy, from UC Berkeley, pointed out the different paths many transfer students took to university: “I hope that is something you have noticed, but I know it’s something that I [noticed] talking to my friends who are also transfer students, the stories that you hear are pretty varied and interesting.” Chrissy herself took a “nontraditional path” to university, pursuing her “dream career” after high school and then returning to academia when her interests and career path changed.

These two distinctions, greater age and life experience, are key to understanding not only how the transfer student experience differs from that of the traditional four-year students but also how institutional factors can present challenges for transfer students.

Institutional Factors

Both UC Berkeley and Stanford are highly ranked universities. Both are located in the same geographic area, a mere 40 miles apart. Yet the two institutions have distinct differences in their approach to admitting transfer students and in their overall institutional structures, which lead to differences in the transfer student experience.

One obvious difference is the number of transfer students admitted by Stanford and UC Berkeley. As Table 4 shows, the difference is quite drastic. Stanford enrolls a very small number of transfer students each year. Stanford’s relationship with transfer students is not widely publicized, as private universities typically admit very low numbers of transfer students. In contrast, UC Berkeley, as a public university, is committed to admitting significant numbers of transfer students.

Table 4. Transfer Student Admissions Rates for Stanford and UC Berkeley (2013-2016).

	2013 Applied/Admitted	2014 Applied/Admitted	2015 Applied/Admitted	2016 Applied/Admitted
Stanford	1,663/33	1764/33	2,023/20	1,959/42
UC Berkeley	15,993/3,392	16,620/3,354	17,251/3,271	19,148/4,583

Stanford and UC Berkeley are well aware that transfer students have markedly different backgrounds and life experiences from those of traditional four-year students. Both universities have an institutional position of welcoming and valuing students from diverse backgrounds. For

example, Stanford's admissions webpage for transfer students acknowledges that transfer students typically take nontraditional paths to university and extols the value such students bring to the campus environment. A Stanford administrator who works with transfer students spoke about how the university embraces applicant resilience stories and described transfer students as being "far more seasoned." The administrator stated that Stanford seeks out transfer students with resilience stories and greater life experiences, believing these traits translate to success at Stanford.

Despite this expression of how much Stanford values such students, the university admitted only 42 transfer students in 2016, some from other four-year universities and others from community colleges. However, Stanford's "handpicking" of transfer students creates a special group of unique and very interesting individuals. In recognition of their specialness, at orientation the university gives transfer students t-shirts with a unicorn on the front.

Lili described how she and her fellow transfer students embraced their unicorn identity and its significance: "I'm wearing my unicorn shirt today. People have been taking selfies in it all week, being like, "Remember, we're unicorns. We're going to ace those exams." Jordan spoke about how Stanford's extremely low acceptance rates for transfer students made them feel very grateful and fortunate: "The transfers students are all really, really grateful to be here and if anyone complains about anything, we quickly take it back....We're just really lucky to be here, and we know about the 2% [admittance rate]. We know about the numbers and how unlikely it is."

Unlike Stanford, UC Berkeley is a part of the 10-campus University of California (UC) system, which, together with the 23-campus California State University (CSU) system, has matriculation agreements with California community colleges. Thus there are clear pathways in

place for community college students wishing to transfer to UC Berkeley. In 2016, UC Berkeley admitted 4,583 transfer students, a considerable increase over recent years (see Table 4). Perhaps because of the larger number of transfer students and the established pathway from community college to UC, transfer students at UC Berkeley reported a different experience than those at Stanford.

Three of the four UC Berkeley transfer students spoke about the perceptions and stereotypes they encountered, including the belief that they gained admittance to the university the “easy way.” Mike shared: “The freshmen population, there is a misunderstanding or judgement about transfer students that we got in the easy way and therefore we are less intelligent, less likely to succeed.” The implication was that students who were admitted as freshmen had worked harder in such areas as their high-school academics and college preparation than those who had transferred from a community college. This perception created a feeling for the transfer students of being regarded as lesser among the undergraduate population. Chrissy elaborated:

There's an interesting perception, I think, between the students who started at Berkeley as freshmen and those who transferred. I was having an interesting conversation with a friend who has been at Berkeley and she was a freshman and came straight from high school about how...She was like, "Yeah, none of the transfers knew how to [perform a skill]...They didn't know how to [perform a skill] or anything like that." As a transfer student, admittedly...I had much to learn when I came to Berkeley, but so did everybody else. From my perspective, everyone was struggling with the same sorts of things, whereas from their perspective, transfer kids who just showed up had so much to learn.

The assumption that transfer students “just showed up” negated the transfer students’ life experiences and the value of those experiences to the individual student and to the university environment. Many transfer students had worked in different careers or juggled multiple

responsibilities while attending community college, experiences that were often overlooked or undervalued by traditional four-year students. The typical pathway of entering college directly out of high school is not one that suits or is feasible for every student, and a nontraditional pathway is often far from easy.

Orientation

Orientation is an important process for all new students. It sets the stage for the university experience, serving as a welcoming event and providing logistical preparation for incoming students. The effectiveness of orientation depends on how the event is structured and what messages it sends to the incoming students.

The orientation programs for transfer students at Stanford and UC Berkeley differ in their structures, but both provide opportunities for incoming students to become acclimated to their new university and acquainted with their new campus. Stanford offers a week-long event before the autumn quarter begins, whereas UC Berkeley offers a one-day orientation on four different occasions dates prior to the start of the fall semester as well as a make-up orientation day at the start of classes. Stanford and Berkeley both use social media, such as Facebook, to create a forum for incoming transfer students to converse, ask questions, and get to know one another before they arrive on campus.

Stanford's New Student Orientation (NSO) is a week-long, university-wide event that takes place the week prior to the start of classes. NSO features specific events for transfer students along with other informational sessions for traditional incoming freshmen, including workshops about academic planning, engaging with faculty, and financial-aid assistance. Other NSO events are held to enable students to meet one another, socialize, make friends, and build a sense of community.

While all Stanford transfer students interviewed for this study shared some positive experiences regarding NSO, they also mentioned that they felt the events were catered primarily toward traditional freshmen. Both Steve and Jordan shared that they felt many of the NSO events were not applicable to transfer students. Steve explained:

It definitely helps meeting advisors, but some of the events choosing between trying to fix things that are going on with our move and then going to a thing where people are talking about feelings, I was like, “Sorry, feelings aren’t my thing. I need to fix my stuff first.” Again, it’s designed for traditional students and not transfers. There were specific events for transfers and I went to all those. Those served a purpose for me individually, but going to events, again, being around all these kids was very weird for me... There’s a limited amount of time I have until I start classes and then I’m going to have to put all this stuff on hold. I chose if it’s not transfer-specific or for veterans, I’m going to try to fix all my stuff with my family first. All those events, everyone loves them. They weren’t for me.

Steve moved to Stanford from out of state, uprooting his entire family and household. He shared that when he arrived to campus, he had an overwhelming amount of tasks and responsibilities to take care of. Because he was resettling his family while he was transitioning to Stanford, he had a vastly different orientation experience than traditional four-year students who were living away from home for the first time.

Lili also shared how she attended the transfer specific events and was not as interested in the other events:

I went to a couple of them and then just stopped going and the other transfers did the same because it was all freshman students being like, “But I want to major in four things” and “But I want to take four languages” and “My specific question about my specific GPA from my specific high school”... It was just like none of it applied to us.

Like the other transfer students, she was looking for orientation events that met her needs and did not want to spend time on those that didn’t.

During NSO, the admissions team and a number of Stanford administrators emphasized to the incoming transfer students the important role they play because of their life experiences and special backgrounds. Lili recounted:

During NSO week, the Dean of Admissions talked to us, and a lot of people in different positions talked to us. They're like, "You're coming into Stanford with the perspective that everybody else just straight up doesn't have. It's important to share your story and share your experience and talk to people and just give a different perspective."

UC Berkeley's orientation is known as CalSO (Cal Student Orientation). The program for incoming freshmen is two days long and one full day for transfer students; both programs aim to help students register for classes, meet others, learn about academic programs and student resources, and learn more about UC Berkeley and campus life. For students who have decided on a major, there are also opportunities to meet with staff from the intended academic college and major program.

Two of the UC Berkeley transfer students said that they felt the CalSO was focused primarily on incoming freshmen. While Chrissy said that orientation was helpful for her and enabled her to get a sense of her major department and where her classes would be held, she did not find the more social activities useful:

The orientation process as Cal is very social, which I think makes more sense for incoming freshmen. They really emphasize making friends and doing silly get-to-know-you activities, which I appreciate. I get the advantage or the reason that they do that, but I think as someone who is a little bit older who...I already knew [what] my major was going to be. I wasn't going to be living [on campus]. I think the orientation as a whole just felt a long day whereas I could have gone for a couple of hours and...just gotten the information I needed, and I didn't need to sit around and learn Berkeley cheers.

Since she came to UC Berkeley knowing her major and with a specific career plan, Chrissy did not need CalSO's social aspects. Rather, she needed information that would help her effectively plan for her academic major and career.

Sam, who had recently moved to Berkeley and was living on campus, described his stressful orientation experience: "Students are going through culture shock, and you give them a day or two, then orientation...creating this hole of stress, and then school starts." Even though there were specific events for transfer students, Sam found CalSO tailored to four-year students. As a result, the orientation process did not meet his needs but rather added to the stress and culture shock of relocating geographically while simultaneously adjusting to a new university environment.

At the institutional level, both universities orientation programs tended to lump transfer students in with traditional freshmen. A UC Berkeley administrator acknowledged: "There is sometimes a culture which thinks of new students as freshmen...and not necessarily is as able to recognize that transfer students are a significant population on campus and may have different needs." Because of their different needs, when services and programs focus primarily on traditional four-year students, transfer students feel excluded. UC Berkeley administrators did recognize the importance of making university decisions with transfer students in mind to ensure they are not left out. Although both Stanford and UC Berkeley have very different orientation programs for transfer students, the students at both universities expressed feelings of disconnection because the programs were aimed principally at four-year students.

Academic Planning and Support

University policies such as advising, declaring a major, and academic deadlines shape the student experience and can have a particular impact on transfer students.

Transfer students arrive at university on a “fast track,” most of them intending to complete their undergraduate degree in two years. Like other incoming students, transfer students are coming to their new university excited about new opportunities and wanting to make the most of their time on campus. Like other freshmen, they are adjusting to their academic institution on multiple levels, experiencing new levels of instruction and new online learning systems and navigating the campus and the various academic and student support units. While traditional freshmen have four years in which to explore and dabble in various areas, transfer students must adjust and make decisions quickly in order to maximize their opportunities on campus and graduate on schedule.

All of the UC Berkeley transfer students described the stress of the two-year timeline and how it differentiated them from four-year students. Mike observed: “Realizing how little time you have with so much to do is very overwhelming, and for some, paralyzing ...coming in is so anxiety-inducing.” Transfer students are starting at the university at a time when their undergraduate peers, who have been at the elite university since they were freshmen, are fully adapted to their environment. Mike described how students who came in as freshmen are at an advantage because they have had time to learn about the campus and explore various opportunities at UC Berkeley, whereas transfer students must try to learn all the information almost immediately: “Students who came in as freshmen know these [UC Berkeley] channels better. Transfers are at a disadvantage, we’re not as aware, we don’t know all the good study spots...”

Transfer students also spoke about how difficult and stressful it was to avoid falling behind in their academic plan. UC Berkeley operates on the semester system, and taking a semester to decide on their major, minor, or academic goals could derail them from graduating

on time. Because transfer students are typically older, a delay in graduating can have a significant impact in their post-graduation career.

The fear of being behind from the onset was a factor for many UC Berkeley transfer students. Chrissy noted: “Even taking a semester or even a year to get your feet under you, that’s half of your time gone.” Having to quickly make these important decisions, decisions that may well influence the future course of their lives, was very daunting.

The institutional process for declaring a major can contribute to transfer students feeling pressured and behind. At UC Berkeley, a student must be first admitted into the university, and once admitted must then apply and be accepted into a major. Different majors within the university have their own policies, recommendations, and deadlines. Traditional students can take a year or more to decide on their major, but transfer students must declare within a semester or at most a year. UC Berkeley majors have different requirements such as prerequisites and minimum grade point averages (GPA). Transfer students have a very limited window of time in which to explore different fields before they choose a major. Because of the time crunch, they often find themselves forgoing exploration in order to decide quickly and stay on track for graduation.

UC Berkeley administrators acknowledged the time constraints transfer students experience. As one administrator explained:

The biggest difference I think for transfer students is the time crunch, right? There’s the pressure of “How do I get the most out of this place in two, two and a half or three years, and what does that look like for me?” I think there’s immediate “I’m behind” feeling from the beginning.

Another UC Berkeley administrator observed that “When you come in as a transfer, you come in with very limited time” and noted that transfer students do not have the “luxury of trial by error.”

Sam captured this situation when he said: “I have the same opportunities as four-year students, but I have two years.”

The difference in timeline also injects confusion into the terminology used to describe student seniority and status. For example, undergraduates can refer to themselves as freshmen, sophomores, juniors or seniors or as first-, second-, third- or fourth-year students. For transfer students, being called first-year students does not accurately represent them; they may be in their first year at their new university but they have already completed several years of college. As Sam explained: “If I’m a transfer student, I can say I’m a junior or I’m a first year, but I’m not a first year, I’m a third year.” Sam also noted how some four-year students use the number of years to refer to their status vs. being freshmen or juniors. More time spent at the university conferred seniority, with seniority translating to four-year students having a better understanding of the university, campus resources, and opportunities.

Stanford transfer students also referenced the challenges they experienced related to time pressure and feeling behind at the onset. Unlike UC Berkeley, Stanford is on the quarter academic calendar system. Steve spoke about his adjustment:

A lot of us are transferring in and we really don’t know what we want to do, so this is our first time being fully immersed into the academic world. You try one thing and you realize this isn’t for me, maybe you go to another, which delays your ability to graduate on time because you’re focusing on something else...I think for transfers and especially veterans who are probably a little more undecided on what they want to do with their life, career, or just their studies...

Some transfer students begin at their four-year college knowing their major and their plan of study, but many are undecided and want to explore options. In addition, many transfer students worked while they attended community college, and being a full-time student is a new experience for them.

Beyond selecting a major, transfer students face challenges posed by the scheduling and sequencing of courses. Many core courses for majors begin in the first term of the academic year, and required courses often must be taken in a specific order. If transfer students do not decide immediately on a major, they may miss the start of a required sequence of courses and have to wait until the following year to begin those critical courses. Steve explained this predicament:

By missing one quarter, I have to [wait to] the following year to start with sequence one, two, three. I think that is a major problem and I don't know how to solve it. Again, Stanford's undergraduate thing is very cookie-cutter-like for me, in which 90% of the population here they are going to follow everything in the same pattern [but for] that 10% or whatever it doesn't work.

Steve recognized how Stanford's course planning is structured for four-year students and how there is an apparent lack of awareness as to how course scheduling and sequencing can negatively impact transfer students.

One difference between Stanford and UC Berkeley is that Stanford undergraduates are admitted as an undeclared student, whereas at UC Berkeley students must apply for admission under an identified major and are accepted into the associated school that houses that major. At Stanford, freshmen are encouraged to declare a major by the end of their sophomore year; transfer students are allowed to take until the end of their junior year (their first year at Stanford) to declare but are encouraged to do so earlier. Although both universities encourage students to explore multiple fields in order to find the one that interests them the most, transfer students on their compressed timeline are rarely able to take advantage of the opportunity.

Another difference between UC Berkeley and Stanford is how advising is structured. At Stanford, students are assigned pre-major advisors; these are individuals who are either teaching faculty or nonfaculty staff who provide general academic advising and help undergraduates register for classes and navigate the majors. Transfer students are matched specifically with pre-

major advisors based on the students' stated academic interests and other factors. Once Stanford undergraduates have declared a major, they are assigned to their major advisor who counsels them on their major-specific plans and academic progress. Transfer students also receive academic and major support for a Transfer Advising Counselor who oversees transfer student programming. While the Stanford transfer students expressed their appreciation for the many individuals they can reach out to for help, they also noted the lack of a central location or dedicated space for transfer students on campus.

UC Berkeley provides a Transfer Student Center, an on-campus space specifically for transfer students. This center is staffed with academic staff support as well as transfer peer advisors and other mentors to support transfer students. The center also has many transfer-specific programs for outreach and student involvement, including mentoring programs. Similar to Stanford, once UC Berkeley students declare a major, they work with their major department advisors to ensure they understand, progress toward, and achieve their degree requirements.

Housing

While both Stanford and UC Berkeley offer on-campus student housing, the two universities differ in the housing options available to transfer students. Stanford considers living on campus an important part of the Stanford university culture for undergraduates, graduate students, and many faculty. Because Stanford provides on-campus housing, the university's admissions rate is linked to the number of "beds" available for incoming students. In contrast, at UC Berkeley, on-campus housing is not guaranteed to all students. According to the 2015-2016 UC Berkeley Common Data Set, approximately 95% of first-time, first-year (freshmen) students lived on campus. The same report documented that 74% of the total undergraduate population lived off campus. A UC Berkeley housing representative explained:

Transfer students, like freshmen, are classified as first-year students. Although housing for all students at Berkeley is not guaranteed, the first-year students receive a housing priority and are more likely to receive a housing offer, whether it be in a residence hall or apartment. Alternative off-campus housing ranges from private apartments listed on our website Cal Rentals, the Berkeley co-ops, International House, and fraternity/sorority [houses].

Because UC Berkeley does not guarantee on-campus housing and because that housing is likely to be expensive, transfer students often choose to live off campus. Students who live off campus may have to commute a considerable distance via car or various transportation systems, which results in a very different experience than living on campus.

Of the UC Berkeley transfer students interviewed in this study, one lived on campus, one lived in nearby off-campus housing, and two lived off campus and commuted. Those students who did not move but chose to commute from their existing residences did not express as much stress in adjusting to their new university as those students who relocated. For example, Chrissy decided to commute to UC Berkeley since she would only be there for two years. She said her adjustment was “quite easy because [she] didn’t really have to deal with it [Berkeley housing].” Marion said that if she had been younger, she would have lived on campus but because she was older, on-campus housing would not have been a good fit for her.

Sam, on the other hand, described how moving into on-campus housing a week before classes began was difficult for him. With the culture shock inherent in adjusting to a new university environment, his move into a new residence, and the time demands of orientation, Sam did not have time to get settled into his new environment before classes began and experienced what he described as a “compounded effect” of many changes and adjustments. Relocating to and reorienting in a new living arrangement is stressful, as is adjusting to a new

campus and academic environment. These changes are especially stressful for transfer students who are on a tight timeline to graduation.

At Stanford, transfer students who are single and under the age of 24 are typically housed in Kimball, a dorm for transfer students. Older transfer students and those who are married or have families are placed in graduate student housing. Although Kimball is intended to be the “hub” for transfer students, those students who did not live in Kimball did not feel any connection to it. As Lili explained: “I don’t really have a reason to go there. I’m not just going to show up, even though they’re always like ‘Just show up. We love it’.”

The Stanford transfer students who lived in graduate student housing expressed more connection with their graduate student neighbors, many of whom were older, married or had families, than with the other students. Lili who is married and lived in graduate student housing explained: “I’m also sometimes glad that I live in graduate housing because it means I get to go to a lot of graduate events too, and I just feel more comfortable talking to other graduate students than I do sometimes talking to people in my classes.” Jack who lived by himself in an on-campus studio, shared that he felt “quite a disconnect” from the undergraduates in general and that, in many ways, he still felt like an outsider. Steve echoed this disconnect, noting that living in graduate housing made him feel isolated from the other students. He further elaborated by saying that even when he was on campus, he was “more meshed in with the graduate students or faculty or researchers than [he was] with undergraduate students who aren't transfers.”

Given the small number of Stanford transfer students, housing them in different locations intensified feelings of isolation and disconnection. For transfer students who lived in graduate housing, although they were able to connect with students in their age range, the fact that they were not graduate students created a different type of disconnection. The lack of a designated or

clearly recognized space on campus for transfer students made it difficult for those students to find a sense of community and connection.

Summary of Results

The community college transfer students interviewed for this research described in various ways how factors like age, life experience, and academic timeline as well as institutional structures such as orientation, advising, and housing affected the transfer student experience. Particularly because of their greater age and wider life experiences and, for many, their nontraditional paths to university, transfer students are generally a very different population from four-year students. As the transfer student population continues to grow on many college campuses, it is important to understand how different institutional programs and structures can foster inclusiveness or create disconnection for these students.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION, RECOMMENDATIONS, LIMITATIONS, AND CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to understand the community college transfer student experience at two elite universities and how programs and practices at the universities affect that experience. This qualitative study examined the perspectives and experiences of eight students who transferred from community college to one of two elite four-year universities, one private (Stanford) and one public (UC Berkeley). The study also included interviews from four administrators employed at the elite universities to gain insight into institutional perspectives regarding transfer students.

The study findings reveal that although the two universities have in place programs and practices to welcome, matriculate, and integrate transfer students into the university community, the transfer students interviewed expressed feelings of disconnection or isolation at both institutions. Factors such as the age difference between transfer students and their undergraduate peers, the transfer students' greater life experience, and their compressed timeline to graduation affected all of the transfer students interviewed. Institutional factors such as orientation, housing, and academic structures and programs, while different at each university, had significant impacts, some positive and some negative, on the transfer student experience.

The study found that campus culture shaped the transfer student experience. At UC Berkeley, transfer students comprise nearly 25% of all undergraduates. Despite this significant representation, the transfer students observed that the campus culture perpetuated the stereotype that transfer students gained entrance to UC Berkeley "the easy way" compared to the path taken by traditional four-year students. In contrast, the Stanford transfer student population is much smaller, accounting for less than 1% of all undergraduates. Because they were such a small

population, the transfer students felt fortunate to have been admitted to Stanford. The university reinforced the belief that transfer students were a valued cohort by giving them unicorn t-shirts at orientation to represent their uniqueness. Yet even though the Stanford transfer students were welcomed as a special group, they still expressed feelings of disconnection from the undergraduate student body.

Transfer students at both universities felt their greater age and broader life experience set them apart from the traditional four-year students. The interviews revealed various ways in which institutional policies and programs at both universities contributed to the transfer students' disconnection.

Discussion

This study confirms much of the existing literature that has documented the range of challenges community college transfer students face at four-year universities. Because of the transfer students' different backgrounds, their needs and priorities are very different from those of traditional four-year students.

Age and Life Experience

The findings reveal two commonalities shared by all transfer students interviewed, namely they were older and they had greater life experience than their undergraduate four-year peers. All transfer students interviewed for this study were returning students; that is they had breaks in enrollment and had spent time away from higher education in pursuit of other goals and pathways. Thus they were at a different stage of life compared to traditional four-year students. As a result, the transfer students all described feeling distinctly different from the other undergraduates.

The age contrast between the transfer students and traditional four-year students was brought up by all interviewees in multiple settings and different contexts. The age difference resulted in disconnection for the transfer students on multiple levels. Being older, the transfer students were more focused on their academic work and their goal of attaining their degree and less on the social aspect of the university experience, making it difficult for them to use the socializing avenue as a way to connect with their fellow undergraduates. Because they were older, the transfer students had greater and more varied life experience than traditional four-year students.

Arriving at the university after having been in the workforce, perhaps with a spouse or children, the transfer students were very different from the undergraduates, most of whom came directly from high school and were likely still largely dependent on their parents. This difference in background created a difference in needs and priorities as the transfer students were at a very different stage in life as they pursued their university degrees. Because of the life experience differences, the transfer students experienced feelings of disconnection or isolation.

The transfer students' nontraditional paths to university also set them apart. However, because the size of the transfer student populations at the two universities, the transfer students at Stanford and UC Berkeley had different experiences at the two institutions. At Stanford, the transfer student admissions rates are kept low, and the university deliberately selects transfer students from diverse background with resilience stories, believing that the students' greater life experience and demonstrated resilience will enable them to successfully meet the challenges they will face at Stanford. The university values the transfer students and hopes that intermingling them with the undergraduate population will create opportunities for learning enrichment and enable both groups to learn from each other. However, because there were so few transfer

students at Stanford, they were typically the only transfer student in their class and perhaps in their entire major. Thus their uniqueness ended up creating distance instead of connection and made it difficult for them to find a sense of community and belonging on campus.

Although transfer students at UC Berkeley make up nearly one-quarter of the undergraduate population, their nontraditional paths to university set them apart. The UC Berkeley transfer students interviewed reported a perception among the four-year students that they had gained admission “the easy way,” with the implication that transfer students were not as intelligent or hardworking as the four-year students who had arrived as freshmen. This negative perception of transfer students and their different life experiences contributed to feelings of disconnection and not belonging.

Age and life experience were the foundational differences of the transfer students interviewed in this study. Because of these differences, the transfer students felt disconnected from other undergraduates and found that many institutional programs and structures did not address their needs. To better integrate these students into the campus environment, both universities need to provide age-appropriate spaces and programming for transfer students.

Institutional Factors

This study confirms existing research about how institutional programs and structures can contribute to the challenges transfer students face at four-year universities. Although universities are generally aware that transfer students have specific needs that differ from those of traditional undergraduates, they may not have the understanding or the resources to address those needs. This study found that the institutional factors that posed the greatest challenges for the transfer students interviewed were the timeline to graduation and institutional practices related to orientation, academic planning, and housing.

Two-Year Timeline

The transfer students' typical two-year academic timeline had a significant impact on their academic planning, campus involvement, and preparations for graduation and career readiness. The interviewed transfer students reported feeling behind from the onset and overwhelmed by all they had to quickly learn about their new university. They did not have the four-year students' luxury of time to be able to take full advantage of the opportunities at their university. The time crunch is an unavoidable challenges for transfer students, but different approaches in institutional programming and structures could lessen its impact.

University Programming

Orientation programs are particularly important for smoothly bringing new students on board. This study found that transfer students attended orientation in order to gain a better understanding of their new institution and to equip themselves with the tools and resources they needed to succeed in their university career. Transfer students spoke about how orientation featured numerous events and aspects that they did not find useful or relatable. In particular, the social aspects that appealed to traditional four-year students looking to establish new friends were not useful to transfer students who were looking instead for networking and other forms of professional engagement. Providing information, activities, and resources specifically geared for transfer students and their different needs would help them come up to speed quickly, something that is critically important given their tight academic timeline.

Housing and Space

Housing and on-campus space for transfer students had a marked effect on their university experience. Transfer students described how their housing arrangements often made them feel isolated. Stanford and UC Berkeley take different approaches to housing for transfer

students. At Stanford, the students are housed on campus but not in all the same place; rather, younger transfer students are housed in one dorm and older or married students or those with children are placed in graduate student housing. At UC Berkeley, transfer students can live in on-campus housing, nearby off-campus housing, or commute in from remote locations. As a result, all of the interviewed transfer students from both universities spoke of a sense of disconnection from other undergraduates and sometimes from each other. The provision of a housing community that could accommodate most if not all transfer students would better enable these students to develop a sense of connection with each other and of belonging at their university.

Both Stanford and UC Berkeley transfer students also spoke about the need for on-campus space specifically dedicated for transfer students. Although each university offers some form of transfer student space, the students still perceived a lack of space where they felt like they belonged. More space specifically for transfer students would enable greater collaboration, community building, and connectedness among these students. Providing housing and space that meets their needs would go a long way to addressing the issues of disconnection and not belonging that many transfer students experience.

Study Recommendations

The findings of this study point to potential changes in institutional programs, policies, and practices that would improve the transfer student experience. Transfer students represent a significant portion of college-going students, and it is important to examine how this group of students can be better supported at four-year universities, including elite universities. Adapting institutional practices and evolving campus culture to more smoothly and fully incorporate transfer students into the university environment would enhance their experience and the likelihood of their success. Transfer students encompass a large population of students from low-

income, first-generation, underrepresented ethnic/racial minority, military veterans, and other nontraditional groups that are critical in serving in higher education. Enabling their access to and success at four-year universities, including elite universities, is essential to addressing inequities in higher education and educational outcomes.

Pre-Orientation

Transfer students spoke of their limited time at their university and how they often felt behind. To address this issue, universities should consider ways to help the transfer students “hit the ground running.” One way to accomplish this would be to reach students before they arrive on campus, even before orientation. A pre-orientation program could be specifically developed to enable transfer students to learn about their new university and begin their acclimation well before they set foot on campus. Such a pre-orientation program would include information on important points of contact on campus, navigating the new campus, transportation and parking, connecting with current transfer students for advice and tips, recommendations for extracurricular activities, advice and tools related to new online learning platforms, navigating the various websites and available sources of information, campus support services, and other information that would aid the integration of transfer students on campus. With such information in hand, the transfer students would be better prepared for their transition to the university and thus experience less stress and fewer feelings of being behind at the onset.

Orientation

Orientation is recognized as an important event for new students, but the transfer students in this study expressed how aspects of orientation were not suitable or helpful for them. They found that many orientation events were geared heavily toward traditional four-year students and were not appropriate for older students. Transfer students would clearly benefit from an

orientation program with more components specifically designed for them. At the same time, the overall orientation program needs to ensure that transfer students and four-year students are both welcomed in a way that enables the two groups to interact and not be segregated. An orientation program that meets the needs of transfer students would include activities geared toward the interests of older individuals with greater life experience. It would provide the information most helpful for them, such as how to explore different majors without falling behind in their academic timeline and advice from former transfer students on making the most of their university experience while balancing the demands of family or other obligations. Such an orientation would build on and serve as a refresher of information provided in the pre-orientation. Because transfer students often feel the pressure of their two-year timeline, it is important to implement an orientation program that enables them to acclimate and learn the ins and outs of their new university as easily and as quickly as possible.

Academic Planning

The transfer students interviewed spoke about difficulties involved in declaring a major, particularly if they were undecided when they arrived at their new university. They spoke of feeling behind at the outset, caught between a desire to explore different majors yet not wanting to fall off their two-year timeline because, in their indecision about a major, they missed deadlines or the start of a critical sequence of courses. One way to address this issue would be to allow transfer students more time to declare a major while at the same time providing them a way to quickly explore different majors, perhaps through introductory seminars by the various schools and departments that would provide overviews on their offered majors. Such an accommodation would enable transfer students to explore different areas and make a more informed choice of a major without falling off their two-years-to-graduation timeline.

In addition to falling behind in declaring a major, transfer student may also fall behind because of course sequencing. Transfer students who do not decide on a major until mid-year often miss the start of a required sequence of courses. Missing the start of a critical sequence of courses can result in a delay of an entire term or year. Incorporating more flexibility in course sequencing and scheduling to allow transfer students to begin their major-required courses mid-year would enable them to move forward immediately and not lose critical time toward their degree.

Housing and Space

The students interviewed described how transfer student housing arrangements had a significant impact on their university experience. The study found that transfer students often felt isolated and disconnected because of their housing arrangement. Providing a central housing location specifically for transfer students would help to create a sense of community among these students. If it is not possible to house all transfer students on campus, some campus space specifically designated for transfer students (perhaps a lounge or a courtyard) would provide a valuable physical “hub” where transfer students could gather and feel a sense of belonging.

This study also found that transfer students who relocated geographically faced additional challenges in their adjustment to their new university. These students in particular would benefit from transfer-student-specific housing. In addition, early move-in dates would greatly aid their adjustment by allowing them to settle into their new living arrangement before classes begin.

Addressing Disconnection

A theme heard repeatedly in this study was disconnection, whether between the transfer students and the traditional four-year students, among the transfer students themselves, or between the transfer students and the university as a whole. Changes are needed at the

institutional level to better incorporate transfer students into the campus environment. The best way to ensure that changes do indeed meet the needs of transfer students is to directly include these students in the design and implementation of new or modified programs, policies, and other institutional structures.

While expressions of disconnection with respect to age and life experiences were common to both Stanford and UC Berkeley transfer students, some experiences of disconnection or isolation were markedly different at the two universities. Of particular note was the perception at UC Berkeley that transfer students had gained admittance “the easy way.” Institutional efforts are needed to dispel this false and demeaning stereotype. Possible ways of accomplishing this include creating stronger relations between transfer students and traditional four-year students through campus events and including transfer students in campus leadership opportunities that have traditionally been filled by four-year students. The university could also counter this misperception by highlighting successful transfer students, former and current, in academic or career spotlights. Creating positive visibility about transfer students in conjunction with opportunities for collaborative engagement with campus members would showcase the transfer students to be viewed in a positive light. At Stanford, where transfer students felt isolated and out of place in large part because there were so few of them, the university could implement programs and structures that facilitate the creation of a sense of community and belonging for these students.

Transfer students, like all undergraduates, need opportunities to feel connected to their fellow students and to develop a sense of belonging at their university. Because transfer students are distinctly different from traditional four-year students in their backgrounds, needs, and priorities, universities must provide programming, policies, and other structures tailored to this

specific group of students. The best way to accomplish this is to involve transfer students in defining the problems and implementing the solutions.

Study Limitations and Recommendations for Further Research

This study had limitations that should be taken in account with regard to further research. The sample size of this study represented only a small fraction of the transfer students at Stanford and UC Berkeley. The sample size of eight participants, four from each university, provided a limited view of how transfer students experience elite universities. Further research should consider collecting data from a larger sample size in order to gain a broader and more statistically representative understanding of transfer student experience and the effect of institutional programs and structures on that experience.

The transfer students interviewed for this study had different academic standings. Some were in their first quarter of transferring, some were beginning their second year, and some were in their third year. Transfer students at different stages in their academic timeline may have different responses to questions about their university experience. Additional research could explore how or if the different stages of the transfer student timeline affect their university experience, for example, comparing the experience of first-year transfer students to that of second-year transfer students.

Another study limitation was the participants' demographics. Community college students represent many underrepresented populations. However, the researcher was able to include only a few of these underrepresented groups in this study. Students from first-generation, low-income, and underserved backgrounds may have very different transfer experiences from those shared in this study. Future research could focus on specific underrepresented groups to

explore how transfer students of different socioeconomic and ethnic/racial backgrounds vary in their experience at four-year universities, including elite institutions.

In addition, only three of the eight students interviewed for this study were in-state transfer students. There are undoubtedly considerable differences in the transfer student experience between students who transfer from out of state compared to those who transfer from in state. Students who transfer in state to nearby universities are likely to still be close to home and in a familiar area, which would make their transition smoother. Additionally, if students transfer to a local university, they may previously, perhaps repeatedly, have visited the campus and thus feel more familiar with their new surroundings. Community colleges located near four-year institutions may act as feeder schools and may be better able to prepare students to transfer to those universities. Support in the form pre-transfer advising and ensuring that curricula are set up at the community college to allow course credit to transfer to the four-year university would be of immense value to transfer students.

Students who transfer from out of state have very different circumstances and face additional challenges in adjusting to their new environment. Students who move long distances leave friends and family behind. Because of the geographical separation, these students may lack information on the admissions and transfer process for out-of-state universities, including how their previous coursework will transfer over. Beyond institutional logistics, students transferring from out of state must adjust not only to a new campus environment but also to a new living environment. Out-of-state transfer students who are married or have children must also deal with the relocation and adjustment of their dependents. Further research could focus on how the move from out of state or from in-state locations geographically distant from the new university impact the transfer student experience.

Lastly, due to the researcher's employment at Stanford, sources of information at that institution were readily accessible. The researcher was able to connect within the university's network and consult with various members of the Stanford community, which assisted in identifying participants and with data collection for the study. The researcher was also able to readily navigate Stanford's online information to understand how transfer operations functioned within the university. Because the transfer student population at Stanford was very small, information about transfer students was condensed to a small number of contacts and information sources, which provided the researcher with more access and information about the Stanford transfer student population.

In contrast, the UC Berkeley information networks and sources were not as well known or accessible to the researcher. As a result, the researcher was able to connect with only a small number of individuals at UC Berkeley; other key figures and points of contact with regard to transfer students were not known to the researcher and thus affected her ability to collect information that could further explain UC Berkeley's systems. UC Berkeley's operations are decentralized, which makes tracking information and navigating the housing, orientation, and advising functions difficult, particularly for an outsider. As a result, some information was not accessible to the researcher and some contacts were not available to provide information or data for this study. These limitations have potential impact on the perspectives of the researcher and the availability of information sources related to transfer students at UC Berkeley. Outsider and insider positions yield different perspectives, and further research could examine institutional functions and programs with and without researcher connections to provide consistency when comparing institutional organizations.

Conclusion

Equitable access is a cornerstone of U.S. higher education policy and ethos and is key to creating and sustaining a democratic society. With elite institutions predominantly serving students from high socioeconomic backgrounds, equally capable students from underrepresented backgrounds face limited access to superior educational resources and their attendant higher graduation rates, direct pathways to graduate school, higher post-graduate earnings, and greater socioeconomic influence. Furthermore, the lack of social and cultural diversity on elite campuses results in societal losses of diverse perspectives and cultural capital among the nation's leaders. Improving the pathway for students from low socioeconomic backgrounds into highly selective and elite universities would allow these students greater access to the educational resources that match their academic abilities and would help address the inequities in the stratified higher education system.

With nearly 50% of all university students beginning their academic career at a community college and with the vast majority of those students coming from low-income, first-generation, and underrepresented minority status backgrounds, community colleges are key to providing access to higher education for many underserved groups. Although the community college route to a four-year degree is often termed "nontraditional," more and more students, especially from low socioeconomic backgrounds, are taking this route. While elite colleges and universities tend to serve students from high socioeconomic status, which contributes to the perpetuation of a stratified higher education system, a step toward achieving equitable educational opportunity lies in providing expanded access to these elite institutions for community college transfer students.

The two pathways to university, traditional and transfer, are distinctly different. Historically, most students have entered college directly out of high school, and thus most four-year universities have structured their institutions to meet the needs of a highly predictable and consistent group of students. Transfer students, however, are not a homogeneous group but rather are highly diverse, particularly with regard to age and life experience. As a result, universities' institutional structures and programs often do not meet the needs and priorities of transfer students. With more and more students beginning their college careers at community colleges and then transferring to four-year universities, higher education must adapt to effectively meet the needs of this important group of students. It is essential that community college transfer students be able to reach for and realize their academic goals, and thus universities, including the elite institutions, need to provide the opportunities and institutional support that specifically serve their needs and enable their success.

Beyond meeting the needs of community college transfer students individually, enabling the academic success of these students as a population is important for society as a whole. In addition to transfer-student-specific changes at the university level, changes will be needed in policy and legislation to facilitate access to the full spectrum of the higher education system, including elite institutions, for low-income, racial/ethnic minority, and underrepresented students. Such changes, though perhaps challenging to implement, will have a lasting positive impact by reducing socioeconomic inequalities in higher education and, with time, across society, which, as history has shown, is essential for preserving a strong, vibrant, and sustainable democracy.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

SAMPLE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR UNIVERSITY ADMINISTRATORS AND TRANSFER STUDENTS

Interview Questions for University Administrators

1. What is your role?
2. What are the programs that help transfer students succeed here?
 - a. Why are these programs needed?
3. What makes community college students want to transfer here?
4. Once a transfer student is accepted, what happens after?
5. What are the biggest differences in serving community college students and first-time freshmen here?
6. How has the transfer programming changed over time?
7. What are gaps in support you would like to provide?
 - a. What else do you think is missing from this group?

Interview Questions for Community College Transfer Students

1. Can you share with me about your educational path to where you are now?
2. What was your community college experience like?
3. How was your experience coming to this university?
 - a. Follow-up: what was helpful? What was missing?

4. As a community college transfer student, how do you feel your experience is different than your peers who are not transfer students?
 - a. Follow-up: have you noticed any of your peers treat you different because you transferred? Faculty/instructors/staff/advisors?
5. What are some of the best things this university does for community college students?
 - a. Follow-up: what are some things that can be improved?
6. Did anything surprise you when you transferred here?
7. What advice would you give to future community college transfer students?

APPENDIX B

TRANSFER STUDENT BACKGROUND SURVEY QUESTIONS

1. Gender:

Female Male Other Decline to State

2. Age: _____

3. Race/Ethnicity:

American Indian or Alaska Native

Asian

Black or African American

Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish Origin

Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander

White

Other

Decline to State

4. Hometown (city, state): _____

5. Current University:

1. Stanford University 2. UC Berkeley

6. Declared Major: _____

7. Current GPA: _____

8. Housing Status:

On Campus Off Campus Other

9. Employment: Please select your work status:

Full time

Part time

On campus

Not working

Other

10. Community college you transferred from (name, city, state): _____

11. Number of previous institutions attended before transferring to current university:

1

2

3

4

5+

12. Please check the following that apply to you:

First-generation college going student

Veteran

Low income background

Student parent

Other

13. Please enter the semester/quarter and year you transferred to your current university:

APPENDIX C

APPROVAL FROM THE UNIVERSITY OF SAN FRANCISCO INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW
BOARD FOR THE PROTECTION OF HUMAN SUBJECTS

Exemption Notification - IRB ID: 732

Christy Lusareta <noreply@axiommentor.com>
Reply-To: Christy Lusareta <calusareta@usfca.edu>
To: rdmadison@usfca.edu

Mon, Nov 7, 2016 at 12:10 PM



Protocol Exemption Notification

To: Rachael Madison
From: Terence Patterson, IRB Chair
Subject: Protocol #732
Date: 11/07/2016

The Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects (IRBPHS) at the University of San Francisco (USF) has reviewed your request for human subjects approval regarding your study.

Your project (IRB Protocol #732) with the title **The community college transfer student experience at Stanford University and UC Berkeley** has been approved by the University of San Francisco IRBPHS as **Exempt** according to 45CFR46.101(b). Your application for exemption has been verified because your project involves minimal risk to subjects as reviewed by the IRB on 11/07/2016.

Please note that changes to your protocol may affect its exempt status. Please submit a modification application within ten working days, indicating any changes to your research. Please include the Protocol number assigned to your application in your correspondence.

On behalf of the IRBPHS committee, I wish you much success in your endeavors.

Sincerely,

Terence Patterson, EdD, ABPP

Professor & Chair, Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects

APPENDIX D

SAMPLE INFORMED CONSENT FORM



CHANGE THE WORLD FROM HERE

Consent Form

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY

Below is a description of the research procedures and an explanation of your rights as a research participant. You should read this information carefully. If you agree to participate, you will sign in the space provided to indicate that you have read and understand the information on this consent form. You are entitled to and will receive a copy of this form.

You have been asked to participate in a research study entitled Community College Transfer Practices Within Private and Public Elite institutions conducted by Rachael Madison, a Master's student in the Department of Organization and Leadership at the University of San Francisco. The faculty supervisor for this study is Professor Danfeng Soto-Vigil Koon, a professor at the University of San Francisco.

WHAT THE STUDY IS ABOUT:

The purpose of this research study is to study how elite private and elite public universities in the Bay Area interact with community college transfer students through outreach, recruitment, admissions, and onboarding resources.

WHAT WE WILL ASK YOU TO DO:

During this study, the following will happen:

During the interview I will ask about your role and involvement with community college transfer students or as a community college student yourself, and your perspective on transfer student services, and what recommendations you identify as important to better serve this specific population of students.

DURATION AND LOCATION OF THE STUDY:

Your participation in this study will involve an hour long interview and a possible follow up interview, regarding outreach and recruitment, admissions practices and any additional community college transfer services at the institutional level. The study will take place over the phone or in person.

POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS:

The risks and benefits associated with this study are a loss of your time and the risks associated with regular activities. The benefit of the study is that it may add to the research on the field of education. This information, once collected, might be read by policymakers, educational experts, educators and scholars and could affect the educational practice. If you do not want to participate in the study, you will not be mentioned in any documents of the study, and your decision to not participate will not be told to anyone. You may choose to withdraw your consent and discontinue your participation at any time during the study without penalty. If you are upset by any of the questions asked, the researcher will refer you to counseling services available publicly or at the university if you are a member of the academic community (student, staff or professor).

PRIVACY/CONFIDENTIALITY:

Any data you provide in this study will be kept confidential unless disclosure is required by law. In any report published, no information will be included that will make it possible to identify you or any individual participant. Specifically, all information will be stored on a password-protected computer and any printouts in a locked file cabinet. Consent forms and any other identifiable data will be destroyed in 2 years from the date of data collection.

COMPENSATION/PAYMENT FOR PARTICIPATION:

There is no payment or other form of compensation for your participation in this study.

VOLUNTARY NATURE OF THE STUDY:

Your participation is voluntary and you may refuse to participate without penalty or loss of benefits. Furthermore, you may skip any questions or tasks that make you uncomfortable and may discontinue your participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits. In addition, the researcher has the right to withdraw you from participation in the study at any time.

OFFER TO ANSWER QUESTIONS:

Please ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you should contact the principal investigator: Dr. Danfeng Koon at dkoon@usfca.edu or the researcher [Rachael Madison](mailto:Rachael.Madison@stanford.edu) at rmadison@stanford.edu. If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a participant in this study, you may contact the University of San Francisco Institutional Review Board at IRBPHS@usfca.edu.

I HAVE READ THE ABOVE INFORMATION. ANY QUESTIONS I HAVE ASKED HAVE BEEN ANSWERED. I AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS RESEARCH PROJECT AND I WILL RECEIVE A COPY OF THIS CONSENT FORM.

PARTICIPANT'S SIGNATURE

DATE

APPENDIX E

PATTERN CODES FOR DATA ANALYSIS

Pattern code	Brief description
AGE	Any indication of age or age contrast
RESILIENCE	Life experiences, student backgrounds, resilient stories
TIME	Lack of time, being behind
TRANSFER APP	Transfer application process
ORIENTATION	Transfer orientation and onboarding
HOUSING	On campus or off campus, relocating
MATRICULATION	Choosing a major, institution rules, classes, academic structure
OTHER INFORMATION	Other information
STANFORD	Information about Stanford University
BERKELEY	Information about UC Berkeley