ABSTRACT

PACK, ELIZABETH MYRA. An Evaluative Case Study: The Influence of Institutional Policies, Procedures, and Practices on Completion of Nontraditional Transfer Students at a Private, Religious-Based, Doctoral Degree-Granting, Moderate Research University. (Under the direction of Dr. James Bartlett).

The purpose of this single, intrinsic, evaluative case study was to examine the problem of nontraditional transfer student completion at a private, religious-based, doctoral degree-granting, moderate research university in North Carolina. The following research questions guided the study: (a) How do institutional policies, procedures, and practices encountered during the process of admission and first term of enrollment at a four-year university support completion of nontraditional transfer students? and (b) How do institutional policies, procedures, and practices encountered during the process of admission and first term of enrollment at a four-year university inhibit completion of nontraditional transfer students? Trust University had experienced a decline in completion rates of the nontraditional transfer students enrolled in its bachelor’s degree completion program. The low completion rates were a problem of practice that required further study.

The focus of the intrinsic case study was to evaluate policies, procedures, and practices that influence nontraditional transfer student completion of a bachelor’s degree and ways the institution can enact supportive policies, procedures, and practices to reduce or eliminate barriers to nontraditional transfer student completion. Data were collected utilizing interviews, observations, and document analysis. Three groups of interviews were conducted: (a) students, (b) admissions staff, and (c) administrative staff. Two observations were conducted: (a) transfer fair and (b) classroom presentation. Observation data were recorded utilizing an observation protocol (see Appendix H). Documents analyzed included:
(a) catalog, (b) website, (c) recruiting materials, and (d) historical documents (see Appendix Q). Interview data analysis was conducted through evaluation coding. Observation and document data analyses were conducted through direct interpretation to triangulate with interview data. Data were presented as descriptions of positive and negative responses, suggestions for improvements, recommendations, and additional interpretations.

Data analysis revealed common improvements needed for recruiting and admissions policies, procedures, and practices categorized as: (a) communication and (b) transfer credit. Common improvements needed for the first-term experience included redesigning orientation to meet the immediate needs of new degree completion program students and creating a credit-bearing course to meet longer term needs of new degree completion program students. Data revealed several ways in which Trust University supported nontraditional transfer student completion, demonstrated primarily by success coaches (advisors). Data revealed several ways in which the university inhibited completion including specific transfer credit information not being communicated early enough in the admissions process, cost and financial aid structure issues, and curricula designed by personnel whose priorities were not the same as students or employers in the field were inhibitive to completion.

Several conclusions were drawn from the study. Trust University will need to restructure financial assistance to demonstrate that nontraditional transfer students are a priority of the institution. Academic departments should reexamine current degree completion programs and evaluate the curricula with current employment and market demands. The university should research why distance students underutilize current support services. Providing support services that are designed and delivered specifically for distance students is a primary demonstration of commitment to nontraditional transfer student completion.
An Evaluative Case Study: The Influence of Institutional Policies, Procedures, and Practices on Completion of Nontraditional Transfer Students at a Private, Religious-Based, Doctoral Degree-Granting, Moderate Research University.

by

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A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty of North Carolina State University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my mother, Shirley, who has demonstrated to me throughout my life what love, determination, perseverance, and joy truly look like. You knew when I needed a supportive gesture and when I needed to be left alone. Thank you for all that you are and have been on this journey.
BIOGRAPHY

Elizabeth is a native North Carolinian with her formative years spent in the Winston-Salem area. After graduating from high school, she planned to enter the workforce, but her parents had other ideas. Still thinking she was not college material, she entered the local community college. After completing two associate’s degrees in business and marketing, she realized she would need a bachelor’s to be competitive in the workforce. Fortunately, at the community college she discovered information on a private college that would accept most of her credits. She would not have to start over, but she would have to move.

Elizabeth completed her bachelor’s degree in Business Administration in two years and a master’s degree in business two years later. She had every intention of becoming a vice president of marketing at a Fortune 500 company. The only glitch was there were no companies or positions of that nature in the small town where she lived. Eventually, Elizabeth would find a marketing position in a small company an hour away from the town. She loved the job but not the commute.

Almost four years later, by happenstance, she was given an opportunity to work at her alma mater as an academic advisor in the program from which she graduated. The higher education bug bit her. Championing adult students to achieve a degree became her passion. As she completes the requirements of her Ed.D, Elizabeth has achieved the position of director of the program from which she graduated over 20 years ago. She plans to continue being an advocate for adult education at the university level.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First and foremost, I must acknowledge God for the ability to pursue doctoral studies, the strength to overcome obstacles, and the peace that surpasses all understanding. To fellow believers who prayed without ceasing for that strength and peace, I am more grateful than words can express. My family has been caring, supportive, and understanding of the many times I could not come visit or talk on the phone for one doctoral reason or another.

To the 2013 Charlotte Executive Cohort, you are amazing. Shannon Landrum and Leah Davis have become special lifetime friends. Thanks to you both of you for walking with me, carrying me on several occasions. Cathy Curtis and Robin Ross also made this journey a pleasure. I have learned so much from all of you.

Special appreciation goes to several work colleagues. Dr. Bobbie Cox, mentor and friend, thank you for reading each chapter and offering your invaluable research expertise. Dr. Sara Newcomb, who started doctoral studies at the same time as I but at a different institution, was an important soundboard and cheerleader. Thanks to both colleagues, who were among the few I could talk the doctoral talk with and they could truly understood what I was saying. Work colleague and sister in Christ, Deb Bridges, was a constant provider of positivity and encouragement.

Last but not least, I thank my Chair, Dr. James Bartlett, who was a calming force to my anxious moments, and my committee who had nothing more than my success as priority. This dissertation is far better for having you oversee its purpose, outcome, and all points in between.
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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Student success has multiple descriptions (Mullin, 2012). Many consider degree completion to be the definitive measure of student success (Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, & Hayek, 2006). The current federal Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) assessments define community college student success as the completion of a degree or certificate (Boggs, 2011). Clotfelter, Ladd, Muschkin, and Vigdor (2012) defined student success as (a) the attainment of an applied diploma or degree or (b) the completion of coursework required to transfer to a four-year college or university. Student success can also be defined using traditional measures of academic achievement such as scores on standardized college entry exams, college grades, and credit hours earned, which represent progress toward a degree (Kuh et al., 2006). Other community college student success measurements include the degree of student satisfaction with the educational experience and personal development outcomes (Kuh et al., 2006). Measuring student success should include how the community college helps students set education goals and create realistic plans of study toward those goals (Felsher & Garza Mitchell, 2015). Goldrick-Rabb (2011) considered the increase or decrease of student expectations after entering community college as a simple measurement of success. Student success should also be measured by college preparation for long, productive, and rewarding careers in a rapidly changing economy (Completion by Design, 2016). Kuh et al. (2006) considered the transfer rate to four-year institutions as an important indicator of community college student success.
College completion is one of the most compelling policy issues in higher education (McClendon, Tuchmayer, & Park, 2009). National organizations, foundations, states, and individual community colleges have shifted focus from access to success (O’Banion, 2010). President Obama initiated a national completion agenda by challenging community colleges to increase the number of high quality degrees and credentials (Kolb, Kalina, & Chapman, 2013). The challenge requires community colleges to produce an additional 5 million graduates by 2020 (O’Banion, 2010). Six national community college organizations led by the American Association of Community Colleges and the Association of Community College Trustees signed “A Call to Action,” charging community colleges with graduating 50% more students with high quality degrees and certificates by 2020 (p. 45). The Lumina Foundation for Education launched “Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count,” aimed at improving success of community college students (Rutschow et al., 2011). According to Rutschow et al. (2011), the purpose of Achieving the Dream is to help community colleges build a “culture of evidence” (p. iii) by using student records and other data to examine longitudinal student performance and to identify barriers to academic progress. Community colleges take the next steps by developing intervention strategies to improve student outcomes, conducting further research on student progress, and bringing effective programs to scale (Rutschow et al., 2011). Achieving the Dream has reached over 200 institutions in 34 states becoming “the most significant reform movement in the history of community and technical colleges” (McClenney, 2013, p. 7). Another Lumina Foundation initiative, Big Goal, calls for an increase of the proportion of Americans with high quality
degrees and credentials to 60% by 2020. The Completion Agenda is a “very big deal” (O’Banion, 2010, p. 46). Given the projections that two thirds of all jobs in 2020 will require advanced training or education, postsecondary institutions have no choice but to increase student completion rates (Sugar, 2010).

Completion yields returns to students and society (Jenkins, 2015). Increases in educational attainment are associated with greater earnings and lower unemployment (Mullin & Phillippe, 2013; Carlson & McChesney, 2015). The Bureau of Labor Statistics (2015) illustrated the wage increase in a report of earnings and unemployment rates by educational attainment. A graduate with a high school diploma or equivalency earned a median weekly wage of $678 compared to one with an Associate’s degree earning $798 and one with a bachelor’s degree earning $1,137 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015). Carnevale and Cheah (2015) reported that except for social science and architecture majors, unemployment rates for recent college graduates were less than for experienced high school diploma workers; slightly under 8% compared to almost 10% respectively. The gap in unemployment widened to 17.8% for recent high school graduates compared to the same recent college graduates (Carnevale & Cheah, 2014, p. 6). Carnevale, Rose, and Cheah (2011) described the wage gap in educational attainment in lifetime earnings. A high school graduate earns $1.3 million over a lifetime compared to $1.7 million with an associate’s degree and $2.3 million with a bachelor’s degree. Carlson and McChensey (2015) concluded that a bachelor’s degree was the minimum level of educational attainment needed to maintain standard of living and not lose buying power.
Taxpayers benefit $142,000 in revenue for those with an associate’s degree (Trostel, 2010). Two-thirds of that revenue is generated by higher tax payments, but there are substantial savings in government-funded programs such as healthcare, social welfare, and criminal justice systems (Jenkins, 2015). With an average taxpayer cost of $60,400 per associate’s degree (Trostel, 2010), total taxpayer benefit is almost 2.4 times greater than taxpayer investment (Jenkins, 2015).

The following sections of this chapter provide a description of the problem and the purpose of this research followed by a presentation of the theoretical and conceptual frameworks guiding the approach to the research purpose. Next, the chapter provides the research questions and explains the significance of the study. The remainder of the chapter discusses limitations, delimitations, and definitions of the study.

**Statement of Problem**

Students who start at community colleges to transfer to four-year universities are at a disadvantage in completing a bachelor’s degree compared to students who start at a four-year college or university (Long & Kurlaender, 2009; Sandy, Gonzalez, & Hilmer, 2006). This disadvantage is due to a number of personal challenges such as having low socioeconomic status, lacking academic preparation, working full or part-time, being a first-generation college student, and being of nontraditional age (Miller, 2013). Transfer students over the age of 24 with an associate’s degree are 31% less likely to complete a bachelor’s degree than those 20 years old and younger (The National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2015). Mullin and Phillippe (2013) stated that researchers rarely examine the university role
in transfer or the extent to which students’ post-transfer success is due to the actions of the receiving institution. In a Texas case study, Miller (2013) identified challenges specific to the institutional transfer process encountered by community college students at a four-year university: (a) integration problems, (b) financial aid problems, (c) transfer credit problems, (d) academic problems, (e) specific transfer needs, and (f) cross-institution curriculum problems.

Integration problems. Community college transfer students at the Texas four-year university faced the greatest challenge of integration into the institution (Miller, 2013). Transfer students are often nontraditional-aged, attending part-time or working off campus, and have multiple responsibilities such as caring for children (Miller, 2013, p. 46). Little time remains to participate in activities outside the classroom (Miller, 2013, p. 46). Whether by choice or circumstance, transfer students without a connection to the campus can get lost in the system (Miller, 2013, p 46). From student journal responses, Owens (2010) described transfer students’ experiences of marginality. Students indicated feeling as if they were: “expected to know what to do,” “missing important information,” “alone,” “overwhelmed,” and “just a number” (p. 105).

Financial aid problems. Nontraditional transfer students commonly encounter either a loss of financial aid or a discontinuation of aid due to missed deadlines (Miller, 2013). Students attending community colleges are likely to come from low-income backgrounds (Handel & Williams, 2012). Federal and state grant aid available to nontraditional students is often not enough to cover education-related costs such as tuition, books and supplies,
transportation, and basic living expenses (Patel & Rudd, 2012). Current federal financial aid policies are less likely to help students from lowest income backgrounds (Handel & Williams, 2012). The emphasis has shifted from grants to loans (Handel & Williams, 2012, p. 46). Moreover, the Pell Grant eligibility formula reduces the number of terms a student may be eligible for a grant from 18 full-time semesters to 12 full-time semesters (Association of Community College Trustees, 2012). What assistance transfer applicants receive may be limited if the institution has not reserved financial aid specifically for transfer students (Stainburn, 2011). Transfer students’ financial awards are often last to be packaged by four-year institutions (Handel & Williams, 2012).

**Transfer credit problems.** Transfer students risk credit not applying to the four-year degree plan (Miller, 2013). The current educational system does not provide an equitable flow of students between community colleges and four-year universities (Goldrick-Rab, 2010) which can result in students repeating courses or having to take additional courses at the four-year institution to complete a degree (Miller, 2013). The loss of credit in the transfer process negatively affects completion rates (Doyle, 2006). Doyle (2006) found the 6-year completion rate of the baccalaureate dropped from 82% of students whose entire credit earned at the community college transferred to 42% when some credit did not transfer to the four-year university.

**Academic problems.** Although many nontraditional transfer students welcome the challenge of university-level courses, many doubt their abilities to handle a heavier workload (Owens, 2010). Many students express being “overwhelmed” or “scared and intimidated” by
the new academic experiences (Owens, 2010, p. 111). Nontraditional transfer students may also feel academically unsupported by faculty (Hoffman & Reindl, 2011): “Most professors at [the university] think that the only class we are taking is their class. I wish they were more considerate” (Owens, 2010, p. 111). Comparing faculty interactions at the community college and the receiving four-year institution, some nontraditional transfer student experiences are not as supportive:

[The] Community College was nice because there was…a little bit more, I guess, one-on-one time if you needed it with the professors. A little laidback atmosphere than [here with] teachers running back and forth from class to class to grad students to TAs, to office hours, their grants, their funding, whatever they're doing […] as far as just going up to the instructor whenever and talking to them, it seemed like they would be more available at [the community college] than they are here. (Townsend & Wilson, 2006, 447)

Transfer-specific practice problems. Miller (2013) reported that institutions lacked transfer-specific practices such transfer advising, transfer orientation, transfer mentors, and transfer financial aid workshops. Transfer students may experience difficulty with navigating the process of applying and becoming accepted to the institution due to “red tape” in getting enrolled (Malhotra, Shapero, Sizoo, & Munro, 2007) and a cumbersome enrollment process (Deggs, 2011). Transfer students need more information on the transfer process, clear policies specifying how credit will transfer, and simplified admissions requirements (Handel & Williams, 2012). Transfer students must often decide whether to
attend a university before the institutions assesses credit for transfer (Handel & Williams, 2012, p. 42). Orientation programs or information systems not designed for transfer students do little to involve this population in the university (Wang, 2009). A lack of involvement is negatively associated with baccalaureate attainment (Wang, 2009). Providing accurate, updated, and transfer-specific policies and procedures is critical to nontraditional transfer student persistence (Miller, 2013). Although nontraditional student attainment of a bachelor’s degree produces the highest individual and social returns, the objective conflicts with the institutional structures in place to support it (Pusser et al., 2007).

**Cross-institution curriculum problems.** A lack of cross-institutional collaboration can make the transfer pathway difficult to navigate (Handel & Williams, 2012). Universities do not consider the consequences of curriculum decisions on transfer students because four-year institutions do not have a focus on transfer student experience (Handel & Williams, 2012). Little integration of curricula between community colleges and four-year universities causes delays in transfer student completion at four-year institutions (Miller, 2013).

**Advising problems.** The complexity of the transfer process coupled with insufficient guidance leads to delays in transferring from community college (Handel & Williams, 2012, p. 42). Students do not detect issues with transfer credit until after the process begins, and students may have to spend additional time at the community college to become eligible for transfer to the four-year university (Handel & Williams, 2012, p. 42).

**Impact of non-completion.** Community college student transfer success impacts four-year university completion rates (Shapiro, Dundar, Wakhungu, Yuan, & Harrell, 2015).
Many community college students intend to transfer to complete a bachelor’s degree (Bradburn, Hurst, & Peng, 2001). The National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (2015) reported that 46% of all students who completed a degree at a four-year institution in the 2013–14 academic year were at a two-year institution at some point in the previous 10 years. However, completion by transfer from a community college to a four-year university results in lower rates of success than other pathways to a bachelor’s degree (Radford, Berkner, Wheeless, & Shepard, 2010). Radford et al. (2010) reported only 12% of students who began at a community college earned a bachelor’s degree within six years. Federal and state governments expect postsecondary institutions to increase completion rates exponentially by 2020 (Rutschow et al., 2011; Sugar, 2010). Despite the growth of nontraditional students in higher education, four-year institutions remain poorly adapted to support their success (Shugart, 2008).

**Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this study was to examine the problem of nontraditional transfer student completion at a private, liberal arts, religious-based university in North Carolina. The study focused on institutional policies, procedures, and practices that influence nontraditional transfer student completion of a bachelor’s degree. The study identified institutional policies, procedures, and practices that have the greatest potential to support completion and represent barriers to completion. Finally, the study determined ways in which the institution can enact supportive policies, procedures, and practices to reduce or eliminate barriers to improve nontraditional transfer student completion.
**Theoretical Framework**

The selected theory must provide a framework for several important aspects of this research study: (a) nontraditional students, (b) institutional policies, procedures, and practices, (c) transfer from community college to a four-year university, and (d) completion or non-completion. Several theoretical frameworks have been developed to explain student attrition. Most well-known and studied is Vincent Tinto’s Model of College Student Departure (Monroe, 2006): “Despite the very extensive literature on dropout from higher education, much remains unknown about the nature of the dropout process” (Tinto, 1975, p. 89). Tinto (1975) believed the problem with research on dropout was a failure to delineate the multiple characteristics of student departure by proper definitions and theoretical frameworks that would go beyond basic descriptions of the processes students go through that lead to leaving college before completion (p. 89). Tinto’s theoretical model was based on Durkheim’s theory of suicide and the field of economics education (Tinto, 1975, p. 91). Taking ideas of social integration levels and their impact on suicide decisions and the economic approach of cost-benefits analysis used by individuals to make investments in extra-educational activities, Tinto (1975) moved his theory toward a predictive model of dropout by seeking to explain a process of interactions that impact individuals to make certain persistence or dropout decisions. As depicted in Figure 1, the model includes individual characteristics and dispositions that are relevant to persistence and drop-out in addition to how the institutional characteristics intersect with the individual and impact the decision-making process (Tinto, 1975, p. 93). Tinto credited Spady (1970) as the first to
employ Durkeheim’s theory of suicide, and many of the same elements from the Model of the Undergraduate Drop-out Process are represented in Tinto’s model of student departure (Tinto, 1975, p. 39). Tinto (1975) summarized the model:

The process of dropout from college can be viewed as a longitudinal process of interactions between the individual and the academic and social systems of the college during which a person’s experiences in those systems (as measured by his normative and structural integration) continually modify his goal and institutional commitments in ways which lead to persistence and/or to varying forms of dropout. (Tinto, 1975, p. 94)

Dropping out occurs when students are not adequately integrated into social and academic environments of college, and student background characteristics influence dropout decisions through the effect on such integration (Williamson & Creamer, 1988).
Other attrition researchers aimed to test and validate (Terenzini & Pascarella, 1978; Pascarella, 1982), revise (Berger & Braxton, 1998), and improve (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Braxton, Hirschy, & McClendon, 2004) Tinto’s model of attrition. Terenzini and Pascarella (1978) conducted a longitudinal study including 766 freshmen to determine if persisting students and voluntary dropouts differed on certain attitudinal and behavioral measures of academic and social integration, controlling for the pre-college factors. The results showed that the pre-college factors were not significantly related to attrition, but that interactions exhibited the largest proportion of variance followed by academic integration and social integration, respectively (Terenzini & Pascarella, 1978). The conclusion was that Tinto’s model was conceptually useful to study attrition, but that revisions of the model may also be needed (Terenzini & Pascarella, 1978). Pascarella (1982) expanded the test of Tinto’s model to include a diverse group of institutions such as residential universities, private liberal arts colleges, two-year commuter colleges, and four-year commuter institutions. The model was validated when applied to residential universities and private liberal arts colleges (Pascarella, 1982, p. 3). However, the concepts of social and academic integration for the commuter samples were only weakly associated with persistence and withdrawal decisions (Pascarella, 1982, p. 21). Berger and Braxton (1998) offered a revision of Tinto’s model to include organizational attributes such as institutional communication, fairness in policy and rule enforcement, and participating in decision making. The study found that organizational attributes were an important part of the persistence process during the first year of college (Berger and Braxton, 1998, p. 114).
Despite the influx of non-traditional transfer students on university campuses, attrition models derived to explain traditional student departure continued to be used. Bean and Metzner (1985) developed a Model of Nontraditional Student Attrition to address some limitations of traditional student models like Tinto. Bean and Metzner (1985) recognized that older, part-time, commuter students were making up larger proportions of college campuses, and that these students indicated higher rates of attrition than their younger, traditional counterparts: “Although older, part-time students have been included with traditional students in studies of attrition, little research has been devoted exclusively to these nontraditional students beyond a simple tabulation of the dropout rate” (p. 485). A major difference between the models is that nontraditional students lack the need of social integration as it was defined in the Tinto model; Tinto (1975) placed a great importance on social integration in making dropout decisions. Another major difference is the added element of non-collegiate environmental factors that were found to have a strong relationship to attrition for nontraditional students (Bean & Metzner, 1985, p. 489). The non-collegiate environmental factors identified included (a) a lack of finances, (b) long work hours, (c) lack of encouragement, (d) family responsibilities, and (e) a perceived opportunity to transfer (Bean & Metzner, 1985, pp. 489–490) (see Figure 2). Bean and Metzner (1985) summarized the framework that dropout decisions were based on four sets of factors: (a) past academic performance (typically high school GPA), (b) intent to leave is influenced primarily on psychological outcomes, but also academic performance, (c) background and defining variables (primarily high school performance and educational goals, and (d) environmental
variables (expected to have substantial effects). Bean and Metzner (1985) noted that the first three sets of factors could be mitigated by other variables within the model.

Braxton, Hirschy, and McClendon (2004) developed another revision to Tinto’s theoretical framework, Theory of Student Departure in Commuter Colleges and Universities, to address student attrition in non-residential settings. The basis of the model was provided by 16 propositions which were organized by four underlying conceptual orientations: economic, organizational, psychological, and sociological (Braxton et al., 2004, p. 36). Each proposition was derived from findings from research conducted in two-year and four-year commuter universities.

**Economic.**

*Proposition 1*—the lower the costs of college attendance incurred by students, the greater their likelihood of persisting in college (Braxton et al., p. 36).

**Organizational.**

*Proposition 2*—the more a student perceives the institution is committed to the welfare of its students, the lower the likelihood of the student’s departure (Braxton et al., p. 37).

*Proposition 3*—the more the student perceives the institution exhibits institutional integrity, the lower the likelihood of the student’s departure (Braxton et al., p. 38).

**Psychological.**

*Proposition 4*—motivation to graduate from college exerts a positive influence on student persistence. Motivation to make steady progress toward college completion also positively impacts student retention (Braxton et al., p. 38).

*Proposition 5*—the greater a student’s need for control and order in his or her daily
life, the greater the student’s likelihood of departure (Braxton et al., p. 38).

*Proposition 6*—the stronger the student’s belief that he or she can achieve a desired outcome through his or her efforts, the less likely the student will depart from a commuter college (Braxton et al., p. 39).

*Proposition 7*—the greater a student’s awareness of the effects of his or her decisions and actions on other people, the greater a student’s likelihood of departure from a commuter college (Braxton et al., p. 39).

*Proposition 8*—the greater student’s need affiliation, the greater the student’s likelihood of departure from college (Braxton et al., p. 39).

**Sociological.**

*Proposition 9*—as parents’ educational level increases, the likelihood of student departure from a commuter college or university also increases (Braxton et al., p. 40).

*Proposition 10*—as support from significant others for college attendance decreases the likelihood of student departure also decreases (Braxton et al., p.40).

*Proposition 11*—the probability of student departure from a commuter college or university decreases for students who participate in communities of learning (Braxton et al., p. 40).

*Proposition 12*—the probability of student departure from a commuter college or university increases for students who engage in anticipatory socialization before entering college (Braxton et al., p. 41).
**Additional propositions.**

*Proposition 13*—student entry characteristics affect the level of initial commitment to the institution (Braxton et al., p. 41).

*Proposition 14*—the initial level of institutional commitment to the institution affects the subsequent commitment to the institution (Braxton et al., p. 41).

*Proposition 15*—the greater degree of academic integration perceived by students, the greater their degree of subsequent commitment to the institution (Braxton et al., p. 42).

*Proposition 16*—the greater degree of subsequent commitment to the institution, the greater the likelihood of student persistence in college (Braxton et al., p. 42).

Elements derived from the propositions depicted in the theory of student departure in commuter colleges and universities are presented in Figure 3. Student entry characteristics, external environment, campus environment, and academic communities of the institution directly influence either subsequent commitment to the institution or departure decisions of students enrolled in commuter colleges and universities (Braxton et al., p. 43).

None of the attrition models specifically addresses transfer from a community college to a four-year university. Community colleges and four-year universities are structurally and environmentally very different institutions. Students encounter these differences as part of the transfer process. In essence, students transferring between these differing institutions experience transition as they adjust to a new environment. Schlossberg (1984) described the transition framework as moving in, moving through, and moving out (see Figure 4). During the first stage of a transition, moving in, one becomes familiar with the new environment,
rules, roles, and relationships (Schlossberg, 1984, p. 57). The second stage, moving through, represents a between period of adjustment to the transition: a person may experience physical and emotional fatigue and question decisions (Schlossberg, 1984, p.57). The third stage, moving out, is seen as an ending of one transition and moving on to the next life transition or experience (Schlossberg, 1984, p.57). Schlossberg (1984) described moving out as a period of grief: “Changing jobs, moving, and returning to school all are transitions in which adults mourn the loss of former goals, friends, and structures” (p. 57).

The transition framework is based on the following premises:

- Adults continuously experience transitions.
- Adults’ reactions to transitions depend on the type of transition, their perceptions of the transition, the context in which it occurs, and its impact on their lives.
- A transition has no end point; rather, a transition is a process over time that includes phases of assimilation and continuous appraisal as people move in, move through, and move out of it (Schlossberg, 1984, p. 59).

The transition model includes coping mechanisms that Schlossberg (1984) entitled the 4 S’s. The 4 S’s are factors that influence the ability of an individual to manage a transition (see Figure 5):

- The Situation variable represents the context of the transition. Does the transition come at a time of multiple stressors? For example, the transition to a new job is different from the transition to a new job while coping with a dying parent.
- The Self variable recognizes the differences of individual life issues and personality.
- The Support variable represents the help available to the individual in transition. Supports and options vary for each individual.
- The Strategies variable represents how an individual copes with transition. People navigate transitions in different ways (Schlossberg, 1984, p. 61)
Of the attrition models that would address major components of the research study, Braxton, Hirschy, and McClendon (2004) provide the most appropriate framework for nontraditional students’ path to completion and the variables that can impact completion. The model incorporates environmental factors that Bean and Metzner (1985) discovered were particular to nontraditional students and represents the interactionalist elements of Tinto
while also addressing the “ill-structured problem” created by the characteristics of commuter institutions. Over time, Tinto revised his theory, but the model still applied mostly to traditional students completing a freshmen year of college in a residential environment. Braxton et al. (2004) preserved the institution-student intersections that impact completion posited by Tinto, but the model represents intersections of nontraditional students with institutions where they do not live on campus or do not participate in traditional campus life.

The most applicable framework to address the aspect of transfer in the research study is Schlossberg’s Theory of Transition. The Schlossberg (1984) model depicts the transition that nontraditional students experience as transfer students from one institution type (community college) to another (four-year university). There is movement as a transfer student: physical and psychological. The Integrative Model of the Transition Process (Schlossberg, 1984) encompasses the transfer experience (moving in), points at which students adjust to new rules and roles (moving through), and how the transition can impact student completion (moving out). Schlossberg (1984) also included the 4 S’s which are similar to the academic and environmental variables in the Braxton et al. (2004) model which are claimed to influence a student’s ability to manage the transition or complete an academic term.

**Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework depicted in Figure 6 combines Braxton et al. (2004) and Schlossberg (1984) as the theoretical elements of both models represent the aspects of the research study: (a) nontraditional students; (b) institutional policies, practices and procedure;,
(c) transfer from community college to a four-year university; and (d) completion or non-completion. The conceptual framework depicts the focus of the study: the impact of institutional policies, procedures, and practices encountered during the transfer process from the community college to the four-year university on completion.

Based on Townsend studies (1993, 2008), admissions process and transfer credit policy are the first set of institutional policies, procedures, and practices included in the conceptual framework. The admissions process represents recruitment practices and application procedures established by the institution that are directed toward or required of potential transfer students. Transfer credit policy represents the standards and practices established by the institution to review and determine the amount of prior college credit that will transfer toward fulfillment of university program completion requirements. An “Other” category is included for additional admissions and transfer credit policies, procedures, and practices identified in the study. The first transfer adjustment includes transfer credit accepted and level of institution fit perceived. Transfer credit accepted represents the amount of prior college credit earned that the institution will accept toward fulfillment of university program completion requirements. According to a Townsend study (2008), transfer credit was the most important factor in university choice by community college transfers students. The first level of institution commitment (Braxton et al., 2004) represents student perception of the admission process and management of the transfer experience (Schlossberg, 1984).
Figure 6. Conceptual framework: Institutional policies, procedures, practices, and non-traditional transfer student completion.
Based on Townsend studies (1993, 2008), orientation and academic environment are the next set of institutional policies, procedures, and practices. Orientation represents institutional effort to communicate policies and procedures that new students need to know to become integrated at the university. Academic environment represents the established structure of teaching and learning at the university. The next transfer adjustment includes academic integration and level of institution commitment. The final level of institutional commitment (Braxton, et al., 2004) represents student perception of the academic environment and management of the initial enrollment experience (Schlossberg, 1984).

**Research Questions**

Stake (1995) believed designing good research questions “that will direct the looking and thinking enough but not too much” (p. 15) could be the most difficult task for a researcher. The design of all research requires a conceptual organization around the research questions (Stake, 1995, p. 15). Rather than hypotheses or program goal statements, Stake (1995) termed the conceptual structure of case study as the issue and the research questions as the *issue statements or questions*. Stake (1995) used these terms to draw attention to problems and concerns. Stake (1995) believed that the nature of people and systems become more transparent during their struggles. Stake (1995) viewed issue statements, or questions, as a powerful conceptual structure for organizing a case.

The following research questions, or issue statements, guided this study:
1. How do institutional policies, procedures, and practices encountered during the process of admission and first term of enrollment at a four-year university support completion of nontraditional transfer students?

2. How do institutional policies, procedures, and practices encountered during the process of admission and first term of enrollment at a four-year university inhibit completion of nontraditional transfer students?

**Significance of Study**

This study adds to current case study research on transfer student adjustment. This study is one of the first to focus on the institutional policies, procedures, and practices encountered during the process of admission and enrollment in the first transfer semester and to observe the influences of those encounters on completion. The study is also one of the first to apply a theoretical framework of adult student attrition beginning at transfer from the community college to the four-year university and the completion of junior- and senior-level coursework that culminates in the attainment of a bachelor’s degree. This study is also one of the first to focus solely on nontraditional, commuter, transfer students who attended community college prior to transferring to a four-year university.

The findings from the study will be used to improve institutional policy, procedure, and practice decisions that will result in the increase of enrollment, persistence, and completion of nontraditional transfer students at a local four-year university. The study will provide insight to both community colleges and four-year universities on what policies, procedures, and practices support and inhibit nontraditional transfer student completion. The
identification of institutional factors that support and inhibit persistence can lead to needed policy, procedural, and practice changes that improve completion rates for both types of institutions. Some evidence shows that institutions are becoming more sensitive to the challenges faced by adult learners, but the strategies and actions taken by these institutions are neither systematic nor empirically based (Pusser et al., 2007). This study will provide much needed empirically-based findings to a four-year university to make strategic policy, procedural, and practice decisions that support better completion rates of nontraditional transfer students.

Limitations

The homogeneity of the sample may limit generalizing the findings beyond the population. The case study design bound the data to one institution limiting the applicability of the findings across all four-year universities.

Delimitations

The scope of the studied population was limited to nontraditional transfer students, not all students who transfer from the community college to the four-year institution. The barriers studied were limited to the institutional category and those encountered during the transfer process and first term of enrollment.

Definition of Terms

Case Study Method is a type of qualitative research that includes intensive analyses and descriptions of a single unit or system bound by space and time (Hancock & Algozzine, 2006).
Community College is an institution regionally accredited to award the associate of arts or associate of science as its highest degree (Cohen & Brawer, 2008).

Completion is the percentage of transfer students who earn a bachelor’s degree or higher within five years of transfer to a university (McHewitt & Taylor, 2003). See also Student Success.

Dispositional Barrier is the self-perception of the learner such as low confidence, negative past experiences with school, lack of energy, and fear of being “too old” to participate (Cross, 1981).

Four-Year University is a private, non-profit, liberal arts, religious-based, baccalaureate, or higher degree granting institution.

Degree Completion Program is comprised of the last two years of study of a bachelor’s degree.

Institutional Barrier is a practice or procedure that excludes or discourages adults from participating in educational activities (Cross, 1981).

Nontraditional Student is older than 24 years of age, does not live in a campus residence, is a part time student, or some combination of these three factors; is not greatly influenced by the social environment of the institution; and is chiefly concerned with the institution's academics (Bean & Metzner, 1985).

Policies are requirements to be accepted for enrollment and continued studied at Trust University.
*Procedures* are the mechanisms of process by which a student is accepted and enrolled in Trust University.

*Practices* are how potential students are recruited, accepted, and enrolled in Trust University.

*Situational Barrier* is a factor in an individual’s life circumstances that prevent full participation in learning such as lack of time, lack of money, or job or home responsibilities (Cross, 1981).

*Student Success* is the attainment of an applied diploma or degree or the completion of coursework required to transfer to a four-year college or university (Clotfelter et al., 2012). See also *Completion*.

*Transfer Student* is a student who has earned prior college credit at a community college and moves to a university to complete baccalaureate studies.

**Summary**

This chapter provided a topical introduction on a completion agenda facing community colleges and four-year universities. The chapter described a current problem of nontraditional transfer student completion and detailed the challenges faced by this unique student population. The chapter explained the purpose of the study was to examine the problem through the lens of institutional policies and procedures at a local university to expand the practices that support completion and improve practices that hinder completion. The chapter discussed the theoretical frameworks of Braxton et al. (2004) and Schlossberg (1984) that guided the study. The theoretical frameworks were operationalized into a
conceptual framework of institutional policies, procedures, and practices encountered by nontraditional students during the process of transfer to a four-year university and impact on completion. Additionally, the chapter explained the significance of the study to higher education research policy, and practice. Finally, the chapter provided limitations and delimitations of the study and a comprehensive listing of key terms and definitions used in the study.
CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The review of literature presents the aspects of the research study, nontraditional students, completion, and transfer, in the context of institutional influences on each aspect. The first part presents nontraditional student characteristics and the institutional factors that influence student participation in higher education. The next part of the review revisits the completion agenda and the influence of institutional factors on student success. The final part of the review presents the transfer relationship between community colleges and four-year universities from the perspective of student experiences with the transfer process and adjustment to the receiving institution.

Nontraditional Students

This section describes the characteristics of nontraditional student participation in higher education particularly the institutional factors that influence participation and persistence.

Characteristics of participation. Bean and Metzner (1985) provided a definition of nontraditional students that is most appropriate for this research study: older than 24, does not live in a campus residence, is a part time student, or some combination of these three factors; is not greatly influenced by the social environment of the institution; and is chiefly concerned with the institution's academics. Additionally, nontraditional students work full- or part-time, have family and community responsibilities that are external to their educational pursuits, and demonstrate delayed enrollment in higher education (not directly from high
school graduation) (Choy, 2002). According to Cross (1981), nontraditional students encounter three types of barriers in participating in higher education: (a) situational, (b) dispositional, and (c) institutional. Situational barriers are factors in an individual’s life circumstances that prevent full participation in learning such as lack of time, lack of money, and job and home responsibilities. Dispositional barriers represent the self-perception of the learner such as low confidence, negative past experiences with school, lack of energy, and fear of being “too old” to participate. Institutional barriers consist of those practices and procedures that exclude or discourage adults from participating in educational activities (Cross, 1981).

Situational barriers identified in the literature were classified as work and family responsibilities (Beaudin, 1982; Burton et al, 2011; Ellsworth et al, 1991; U.S. Department of Labor, 2007), lack of support from the workplace (Deggs, 2011), inability to prioritize activities and tasks (Shepherd & Nelson, 2012), lack of time (Ellsworth et al, 1991; Garland, 1993; U.S. Department of Labor, 2007), location of the learning site (Burton et al, 2011), and low socioeconomic status (Burton et al, 2011; Pusser et al, 2007). Adult students have the task of balancing the demands of work, family, and life in general with the requirements of their courses (Bamber & Tett, 2010). Garland (1993) considered these classifications as a student’s learning environment. The lack of family and peer support is especially a problem if the student also lacks self-confidence. Although support from family and peers is important, equally important and difficult to achieve is the ability for the student to have a physical milieu that is conducive to learning—a designated space away from daily family life
absent of interruptions and distractions. Garland (1993) related the lack of time to time available, as impacted by changes in the student’s circumstances and the time inherent in the students’ multiple roles as spouses, parents, and full-time employees.

Ekstrom (1972) studied situational barriers for women in higher education such as sociological barriers related to social class and ethnicity. Women from lower socioeconomic levels were less likely than women from upper socioeconomic levels to continue their education. Ethnicity was also found to be related to college aspirations and attendance. Black women attended college more frequently than Black men and had the highest educational aspirations. Ekstrom (1972) also found the family conditions that most influenced women’s participation in post-secondary education included (a) attitudes of parents of husband, (b) head of household responsibilities, (c) family size and childcare responsibilities, (d) care of ill or elderly family members, (e) lack of household assistance, (f) lack of privacy for study, and (g) mobility due to husband’s career.

Ellsworth, Pierson, Welbourn, and Frost (1991) found dispositional barriers as the most important category for adult learners. Dispositional barriers identified in the literature were classified as initial motivations (Beaudin, 1982), attitudes and self-concept (Deggs, 2011; Ellsworth et al, 1991; Molhotra et al, 2007; Shepherd & Nelson, 2012), lack of a clear goal, stress of multiple roles and adult pride (Garland, 1993), negative perceptions of the value of education (Molhotra et al, 2007), and lack of readiness for the higher education level (Burton et al, 2011). Garland (1993) delineated stress of multiple roles and time constraints imposed by multiple roles. Students reported that it was stress, particularly trying to study
effectively while under stress, not time, that indicated a problem: “The problem of stress seems to have two aspects: the stress of their normal roles often increased by their new role of student and its demands; and the normal stress of study itself” (Garland, 1993, p. 190). Bamber and Tett (2010) found that student attitude toward study was a factor in success. Outcomes were also determined by ability and attitude: “The determination has to be seen, however, not simply in terms of personal aspirations but also in the light of the fact that there are a number of added pressures” (Bamber & Tett, 2010, p. 470).

Institutional influence on participation. From 1985 to 2005 there was a proliferation of degree completion programs for working adults (Shugart, 2008). Colleges and universities have recognized the revenue potential and social responsibility of successfully recruiting nontraditional students. However, these institutions have continued to offer “one-size-fits-all” programs and services (Hadfield, 2003) demonstrated by a lack of institutional support, a lack of faculty investment, and low status on campus (Bash, 2003). Thiel (1984) recognized the importance of institutional adaptation to the uniqueness of the adult student: “Higher education will no longer be able to rely on the enrollment of traditional students as a majority of its clientele and income. A dichotomy exists between the need for lifelong education and the lack of responsiveness by higher education” (p. 6). Despite the influx of nontraditional students, higher education continues to neglect this new majority in relation to policy, mission, research, and programming (Kasworm, 1993; Kasworm, Sandmann, & Sissel, 2000).
Implementing institutional changes that reflect the needs of nontraditional students would benefit all campus and community stakeholders (Kasworm et al., 2000). Institutional change requires a critical analysis of public policy (Bash, 2003; Kasworm et al., 2000). Concerns with funding, student access, content and delivery, and student financial aid are shaped by public policy that influences the policies and procedures carried out by institutions that affect nontraditional students (Kasworm et al., 2000, p. 452). Bash (2003) called on Congress to enact a universal bill of educational rights that would guarantee every citizen access to the widest possible array of educational opportunities. Hadfield (2003) looked to business and industry to find a better way to recruit and retain nontraditional students.

Using a customer service approach, Hadfield (2003) posited institutional changes that demonstrated excellence to nontraditional students when we:

- make our school their school;
- ask them what they need to learn;
- ask them what they do not need to learn;
- deliver what they need when they need it;
- put great teachers in the classroom;
- deliver meaningful learning experiences;
- listen to their complaints, questions, and suggestions;
- “walk the talk”; and
- continuously measure performance (pp. 21–23).
Kasworm et al. (2000) recognized that the path to needed institutional changes was full of paradoxical tensions in access, control over learning, and support systems: “The substantive nature and process of learning is a key access issue for adults” (p. 456). In a society of ever-changing knowledge, questions of control include, “Who defines […] knowledge as worthy of learning? Who designates certain knowledge as sufficiently valuable for credit?” (p. 457). Because adults are highly diverse, there is a need for support systems to both focus upon adult entry and persistence and also the sense of confidence, identity, and life circumstances as a learner (Kasworm et al., 2000, p. 457). The mission of higher education requires reframing: “Adult learners and their needs should move from the periphery into the mainstream of academic culture. Changes in policy to support such movement are fundamental to this reframing of the mission” (Kasworm et al., 2000, p. 459).

Nontraditional students stop attending to have a baby, get married, have surgery, or take care of a family member (Hadfield, 2003, p. 19). The delayed or interrupted participation does not automatically indicate a retention issue, but institutions do need to understand the intermittent nature of nontraditional student enrollment and have programs and practices in place to ensure their return (Hadfield, 2003, p.19). Since adult students are primarily part-time, re-entry students, many questions persist regarding the potential successful completion of adult learners in undergraduate studies (Kasworm, 2003). Unfortunately, despite the increasing numbers of adult students participating in higher education over the last forty years, there is a lack of research on adults as learners (Kasworm, 2003).
Completion

This section discusses the various definitions of completion. This section also revisits the completion agenda and the influence of institutional factors on student success.

Defining completion. At first glance, defining completion would appear to be a straightforward venture; however, the myriad ways completion is utilized and measured in higher education complicates the use of one standard definition. For community colleges, completion is discussed as completion rate—the number of credentials attained (Belfied, Crosta, & Jenkins, 2013) and proportion of an entering community college cohort that completed a degree or certificate reported at annual intervals (Alfred, Ewell, Hudgin, & McClenney, 1999); output—number of associate degrees and certificates awarded in a given year (Belfield et al., 2013); and pathway to completion—sequence of courses and enrollments that lead to a credential (Belfied et al., 2013). Since community colleges serve a transfer function, a completion rate is also considered to include the percentage of transfer students who earn a bachelor’s degree or higher within five years of transfer to a university (McHewitt & Taylor, 2003). Clotfelter et al. (2012) measured success by combining attainment of an applied diploma or degree, or completion of the coursework required to transfer to a four-year college or university. Wyner (2012) measured excellence in part by completion/transfer outcomes—the proportion of students who complete an associate’s degree, earn a certificate of one year or greater in length, or transfer to a four-year college. For this research study, completion was considered in the context of the four-year university
by nontraditional transfer students, a majority from the community college who are pursuing a bachelor’s degree.

**Completion agenda.** National initiatives by foundations and the U.S. Department of Education are focused on developing policy and institutional practices that improve the completion rates and other measures of success for community college students (Bailey & Alfonso, 2005; Rutschow et al., 2011). Bailey and Alfonso (2005) analyzed the state of research on the effectiveness of four types of institutional practices on persistence and completion. The findings provided substantive lessons about effective institutional practices and suggested improvements to program effectiveness research (Bailey & Alfonso, 2005, p. 2). Although there is a wealth of research on persistence and completion in higher education, there is a dearth of insight on the effect of institutional policies on community college retention and completion (Bailey & Alfonso, 2005; Jenkins, 2006). The most difficult empirical problem in the assessment of persistence and completion practices is the attribution of causality (Bailey & Alfonso, 2005). For example, researchers and practitioners consider orientation programs to be crucial to community college student persistence (Bailey & Alfonso, 2005, p. 23). However, most orientations are voluntary, and little has been done to compare participant and non-participant persistence and completion (Bailey & Alfonso, 2005, p. 25). There could be additional unmeasured differences between the two groups (Bailey & Alfonso, 2005, p. 25). Bailey and Alfonso (2005) concluded that community colleges must commit to developing a “culture of evidence” by devoting more resources and skills to research; recognizing that research involves a range of studies from simple
descriptive comparisons to more time-consuming controlled experiments; combining quantitative and qualitative approaches in studies; providing opportunities for faculty and staff to discuss evidence; developing more systematic methods to disseminate useful research findings; and promoting collaboration among academic, institutional, and state-level researchers.

Over the last decade, community colleges have experienced a shift from a traditional mission of access to a new mission of success (McClenney, 2013). Community colleges are turning the focus from any citizen entering an “open door” to improving the academic attainment of students (Rutschow et al., 2011). This national initiative was driven by the Obama administration and Achieving the Dream (ATD) launched by the Lumina Foundation in 2004 (Rutschow et al., 2011, p. 1). The objective of the initiative was to help community colleges build a “culture of evidence,” the use of data to examine student performance over time and to identify barriers to academic progress (Rutschow et al., 2011, p. 1). Rutschow et al. (2011) presented an evaluation of the progress made by the first 26 colleges to join ATD through the spring of 2009. Participating colleges were expected to enact a five-step process of institutional reform which included (a) securing leadership commitment; (b) using data to prioritize actions; (c) engaging stakeholders; (d) implementing, evaluating, and improving intervention strategies; and (e) establishing a culture of continuous improvement (Rutschow et al., 2011, p. 3). Each of these community colleges committed to an ambitious set of improvements including (a) completion of developmental courses and progression to credit-bearing courses; (b) completion of so-called gatekeeper courses, including
introductory courses in English and in math; (c) completion of attempted courses with a
grade of “C” or better; (d) persistence from semester to semester and from year to year; and
(e) attainment of college credentials (Rutschow et al., 2011, p. 4). Most of the participating
colleges (81%) made substantial progress in developing more evidence-based systems aimed
at improving student success (Rutschow et al., 2011, p. 5). Other improvement steps were
less impressive. Although a large number of intervention and program services were
developed, many reached only a small number of students (Rutschow et al., 2011, p. 10). A
large number of strategies were implemented to improve academic performance, but few of
those strategies included changing the content and delivery of classroom instruction
(Rutschow et al., 2011, p. 10). Trends in student outcomes across the initial participating
colleges remained relatively unchanged (Rutschow et al., 2011, p. 11). Rutschow et al.
(2011) stressed that evaluation was early in the progress of ATD and while adjustments to
the initiative were still being made. In 2010, Achieving the Dream became an independent,
non-profit organization (Rutschow et al., 2011, p. 12). Change in status has resulted in many
changes in leadership, structure, and vision (Rutschow et al., 2011, p.13). However,
Achieving the Dream remains at the forefront of the completion movement and will continue
to drive community colleges to improve the success of students (Rutschow et al., 2011, p.
14).

Student success at community colleges impacts completion at four-year colleges and
universities through the function of transfer. Wang (2009) found that community college
GPA was one of the best predictors of baccalaureate attainment. As important was the
finding that precollege motivational factors such as perceived locus of control and
educational aspirations affect community college transfer student baccalaureate attainment
(Wang, 2009, p. 583). The implication for community colleges is the need to focus on
student learning and academic performance to improve student outcomes (Wang, 2009, p.
583). The implication for universities is the need to identify programs and practices that
reduce difficulties encountered during transfer and adjustment to a new environment (Wang,
2009, p. 583). Some options could include designing the format of how credit is earned
around the diverse needs of nontraditional students, loosening stringent transfer
requirements, or giving credit for life and work experience (Monroe, 2006). Developing
transfer centers, transfer-specific advising (Miller, 2013), transfer orientations (Miller 2013;
Wang, 2009), and information systems can inform transfer students of the support and
services available to assist in their adjustment.

Transfer

This section presents the transfer relationship between community colleges and four-
year universities through the perspective of student experiences with the transfer process and
adjustment to the four-year university.

Transfer process. Townsend (1993; 1995; 2008); Townsend, McNerny, & Arnold,
(1993); and Townsend & Wilson, (2006) conducted numerous case studies to provide a better
understanding of transfer student transition and adjustment. Townsend (1995; 2008) focused
on community college transfer students who transferred to residential settings at the four-year
university, but older commuting students were included in other study samples (Townsend,
1993; Townsend & Wilson 2006). Townsend (2008) described a two-part transition. The first, transition part one, was the transfer process of applying, analyzing transfer work, admission, and registration at the four-year university or receiving institution (Townsend, 2008, p. 69). The second, transition part two, was the transfer students’ experiences once at a receiving university (Townsend, 2008, p. 69). There were several distinctive factors that influenced transfer students’ decisions as to which four-year university to attend (Townsend, 2008, p. 71). Transfer students are already college students who have earned a number of college credits, and how many of those credits will transfer to the four-year university is a major influence on the college-choice decision (Townsend, 2008, p. 71). During the application process, a transfer student can experience difficulty realizing in advance which previous college credit earned will transfer even after the receiving institution has been selected.

By far the most mentioned frustration in transition part one, was the application process due to the lack of prior credits accepted toward a desired major (Townsend, 2008, p. 71). In other case studies, Townsend (1993; 1995) found that transfer students felt very much on their own during the application and admission processes, citing a failure of some institutions to communicate with the prospective transfers. Either the transfer students received no information or incomplete orientation information (Townsend, 1993, p. 8). Townsend (1993) suggested from the findings in the study that community college transfer students who succeed at the four-year university must be fairly self-reliant and able to survive with minimal institutional assistance. In a more recent study, Townsend and Wilson
(2006) noticed a marked improvement in responses about receiving assistance during the transfer admission process. Most respondents indicated working with an advisor and experiencing formal welcome programs (Townsend & Wilson, 2006, p. 485). Still, other respondents did not know where or who to ask for assistance (Townsend & Wilson, 2006, p. 485). Attendance at the orientations was also problematic due to the students’ work schedules and family obligations (Townsend & Wilson, 2006, p. 485).

In transition part two, transfer students experience adjustment to an environment that can differ significantly from the community college (Townsend & Wilson, 2006, p. 73). For this particular case study, Townsend (2008) noted that students felt “like a freshman again” (p. 73) in their lack of knowledge of how their new college worked.

**Transfer adjustment.** There is a need to learn more about the experiences of students who transfer from community colleges to universities (Berger & Malaney, 2001). A community college student who transfers to a four-year university to pursue baccalaureate studies faces new psychological, academic, and environmental challenges (Laanan, 2001). These transfer students face a difficult adjustment to the academic rigor at the four-year university and other environmental factors that differ from the community college (Laanan, 2001). One form of adjustment was termed “transfer shock” (Hills, 1965), which was represented by a drop in GPA in the first term of transfer at the four-year anniversary. Hills (1965) also warned transfer students that they would experience more difficulty than the native student, and they would not graduate in the normal time. Using GPA alone to describe the transfer adjustment process is insufficient (Laanan, 2001; Townsend, 2006) especially
considering that most transfer students experience a recovery in GPA in successive semesters (Hills, 1965). Additional research concerned with the performance of transfer students using GPA as a primary factor has had conflicting results (Laanan, 2001). The research on post-transfer adjustment is lacking (Laanan, 2001; Townsend & Wilson, 2006) particularly for nontraditional students. Much of the research on transfer students has been limited to traditional-aged community college students who transfer to residential four-year colleges and universities (Berger & Malaney, 2001; Hills, 1965; Laanan, 2001; Townsend 1995, 2008).

**Institutional influence on transfer.** Several implications for community colleges and four-year universities surfaced from the Townsend case studies. The responsibility for assisting transfer students to have successful transitions to four-year universities rests with both community colleges and four-year universities (Berger & Malaney, 2001, p. 18). The community college should assist the transfer student with the college choice decision by providing information on the differences between the two types of institutions beyond the tuition, level of courses offered, and degrees awarded: “Understanding the institutional perceptions of community college students prior to transfer to particular institutions may provide information useful to four-year institutions during the recruiting process as well as after the students have transferred” (Townsend & Wilson, 2006, p. 451). Institutions should focus on achieving a providing seamless transfer process and integrating transfer students once at the receiving institution (Townsend & Wilson, 2006, p. 452). Transfer students need to know in advance about what credit will and will not transfer to a receiving institution
Townsend (2008, p. 74). Townsend (2008) urged administrators and faculty at both community colleges and four-year universities to work together on articulation agreements. The approach to orienting transfer students needs to be reexamined (Townsend, 2008; Townsend & Wilson, 2006). Some community college transfer students needed more individual attention, whereas some transfer students did not want to be treated as freshman (Townsend & Wilson, 2006, p. 452) but would like to have an orientation that emulated the one for freshman by providing multiple opportunities for students to get to know one another and form connections that would last beyond orientation (Townsend, 2008, p. 73).

Institutions should concentrate on what specific action can be taken to facilitate transfer students’ transitions (Townsend, 2008, p. 76). Neither community colleges nor four-year universities can ignore the responsibility for developing institutional policies to ease the transfer process (Townsend, McNerny, & Arnold, 1993, p. 442).

**Summary**

This chapter comprised a review of literature on each aspect of the research study, completion, nontraditional students, and transfer adjustment, in the context of institutional influences on each aspect (see Appendix A for a summary of the literature). The first part of the literature review revisited the completion agenda and the influence of institutional factors on student success. The next part of the review presented nontraditional student characteristics and the institutional factors that influence their participation in higher education. The last part of the review presented the transfer relationship between community colleges and four-year universities from the perspective of student experiences with the
transfer process and adjustment to the receiving institution. The following chapter outlines the methodology employed and provides an overview of the comparative case study approach utilized in the study.
CHAPTER THREE

METHODS

The purpose of this study was to examine the problem of nontraditional transfer student completion at a private, liberal arts, religious-based university in North Carolina. The study focused on institutional policies, procedures, and practices that influence nontraditional transfer student completion of a bachelor’s degree. The study identified institutional policies, procedures, and practices that have the greatest potential to support completion and represent barriers to completion. Finally, the study determined ways in which the institution can enact supportive policies, procedures, and practices to reduce or eliminate barriers to improve nontraditional transfer student completion. Stake (1995) identified intrinsic case study as a study that is undertaken because the researcher wants a better understanding of a particular case. The researcher chooses the case not because it represents other cases or to understand an abstract construct nor generic phenomenon (Stake, 1995). This study utilized a single, intrinsic, evaluative case study to answer the following research questions.

1. How do institutional policies, procedures, and practices encountered during the process of admission and first term of enrollment at a four-year university support completion of nontraditional transfer students?

2. How do institutional policies, procedures, and practices encountered during the process of admission and first term of enrollment at a four-year university inhibit completion of nontraditional transfer students?
In this chapter, research design and method are described, including critiques and benefits of employing the case study method. Site selection and participants, data collection, data analysis, and issues concerning quality are detailed.

**Research Method**

**Qualitative research.** Stake (1995) distinguished qualitative from quantitative method of research inquiry in three major ways: (a) the distinction between explanation and understanding as the purpose of inquiry, (b) the distinction between personal and impersonal role of the researcher, and (c) the distinction between knowledge discovered and knowledge constructed. Explanation versus understanding can be described as the quantitative researcher’s need to explain and control, whereas qualitative researchers need to understand complex interrelationships among all that exist (Stake, 1995, p. 37). Explanation can lead to understanding and a deeper understanding of a phenomenon can lead to better explanation of its existence (Stake, 1995, p.38). The choice is not between explanation or understanding but which purpose is emphasized:

To sharpen the search for explanation, quantitative researchers perceive what is happening in terms of descriptive variables, represent happenings with scales and measurements (i.e. numbers). To sharpen the search for understanding, qualitative researchers perceive what is happening in key episodes or testimonies, represent happenings with their own direct interpretations and stories (i.e. narratives). (Stake, 1995, p. 39)
The choice becomes not between approaches, but selecting the appropriate techniques for the problem being studied (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

Standard quantitative designs limit the role of personal interpretation during data collection and statistical analysis, whereas qualitative designs rely on the researcher to be in the field making observations, exercising subjective judgements, analyzing, and synthesizing during data collection and analysis (Stake, 1995, p.41). Researchers are active participants in the research (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). The final distinction also relates to the role of the researcher as interpreter. Stake (1995) stated that most contemporary qualitative researchers believe that knowledge is constructed rather than discovered. The constructivist stance is described as conceiving three realities: (a) The first (#1) is an external reality that is capable of stimulating us but we know nothing other than our interpretations of those stimuli; (b) the second (#2) is a reality formed of those interpretations of simple stimulation, or experiential reality, representing #1 to the extent that we do not realize our inability to verify it; and the third (#3) is a universe of integrated interpretations, or our rational reality (Stake, 1995, p.100). The aim of qualitative research is not to discover #1, but to construct a clearer reality #2 and a more sophisticated reality #3 while withstanding disciplined skepticism (Stake, 1995, p.101).

**Characteristics and purposes of the case study method.** Hancock and Algozzine (2006) stated that case studies have a long tradition in the social and behavioral sciences and have been used to advance theory and knowledge in many disciplines. Case study research is also considered the most challenging of any social science endeavor (Yin, 2009).
Researchers usually have many different things in mind when they talk about case study research (Gerring, 2007). There are many who think case studies are limited to clinical descriptions of individuals with unique characteristics and symptoms and the treatments to help them, but case study research represents a much broader category of analysis (Hancock and Algozzine, 2006).

Yin (2009) offered a two-part definition based on the scope of the case study and data collection and analysis.

A case study is an empirical inquiry:

- that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real life context, especially when;
- the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident.

A case study inquiry:

- copes with the technically distinctive situation in which there will be many more variables of interest than data points, and as one result;
- relies on multiple sources of evidence, with data needing to converge in a triangulating fashion, and as another result;
- benefits from the prior development of theoretical propositions to guide data collection and analysis (Yin, 2009, p. 18).

Hancock and Algozzine (2006) compared case study research to other general research traditions such as qualitative and quantitative approaches. A researcher identifies a topic or question(s) of interest, determines an appropriate unit to represent it, and defines
what is known based on careful analysis of multiple sources of information about the “case” (Hancock & Algozzine, 2006, p. 10). Researchers do agree upon several general characteristics: (a) case study research focuses on an individual representative of a group, an organization or organizations, or a phenomenon; (b) case study research observes the subject in its natural context, bounded by space and time; and (c) case study research is grounded in rich and varied information (Hancock & Algozzine, 2006, p. 15).

Many applications of case study research are found in the fields of law, medicine, sociology (Tellis, 1997), management strategy, information systems, innovation, and organizational change (Rose, Spinks & Canhoto, 2015). Events such as a campus response to emergencies and student perceptions of block-scheduling, situations such as underrepresented student populations in higher education and sexual attraction between counselor and client, and programs such as a teacher certification process and a drug prevention education program are a few examples of what has been studied using case study research (Hancock & Algozzine, 2006).

**Benefits and critiques of the case study method.** Probably the most important benefit of case study research is the adaptability to different research settings (Rose, Spinks, & Canhoto, 2015). Case study research affords additional flexibility with different research questions (Rose et al., 2015, p. 8). When a "how" or "why" question is being asked about a contemporary set of events over which the researcher has little or no control, case study research has a distinct advantage over other approaches (Yin, 2009). One of the greatest concerns surrounding case study research is a lack of rigor (Yin, 2009). Reasons for the
concern are generated by carelessness of the case study researcher, lack of methodological
texts to guide the approach, and confusion of case study research with case study teaching
(Yin, 2009, p. 12). Another critique of case studies is that they are not generalizable (Rose at
al., 2015; Yin, 2008). Yin (2009) answered that concern: “Case studies, like experiments, are
generalizable to theoretical propositions and not to populations or universes” (p. 15). Stake
(1995) explained that the case study design is not chosen to “optimize production of
generalizations,” but that “valid modification of generalization can occur in case study
research” (p. 8). Finally, case studies take a long time to complete and require an exorbitant
amount of effort from the case study researcher (Yin, 2009). Rose et al. (2015) described the
concern as a practical challenge of gaining in-depth access to case sites. Yin (2009)
described the effort as resulting in massive, unreadable documents. Yin (2009) admitted that
good case studies are possible but are still very hard to produce.

Research Design

Stake (1995) identified intrinsic case study as a study that is undertaken because the
researcher wants a better understanding of a particular case. The researcher chooses the case
not because it represents other cases or to understand an abstract construct or generic
phenomenon, but because of the intrinsic interest in the case (Stake, 1995). According to
Stake (1995) in an evaluation study, the researcher chooses specific criteria by which a
program’s strength and weaknesses, success and failures, will become apparent. This study
utilized a single, intrinsic, evaluative case study in the interest of understanding the impact of
admission policies, procedures, and practices on nontraditional transfer student completion at a particular university.

**Site Selection**

Stake (1995) declared case study research was not sampling research. Studying one case to understand other cases is not of primary concern, as a sample of one or two is unlikely to be a strong representation of others (Stake, 1995, p. 4). Stake (1995) contended that good case study should not depend on defending the typicality of the case. Foremost to the research is maximizing what can be learned about a particular case (Stake, 1995, p. 4).

As an intrinsic study, the case was pre-selected (Stake, 1995). This study was conducted at a small, private, liberal arts, religious-based university in the southeastern United States. To maintain confidentiality, the university is referred to as “Trust University.” Trust University is located in a small town of approximately 4,000 residents. The town and the county are designated as rural. Trust University is approximately 60 miles southwest from a metropolitan area. With a 225-acre campus and over 400 employees, Trust University is geographically and economically substantial to the town in which it is located. According to the university website, Trust University has a longstanding relationship with local Baptist churches that established the university as a boarding high school in the early 1900s and with the greater Baptist community. Trust University holds a strong commitment to Christian principles and values, which the university deems as the best foundation for human and societal development. The total student population is approximately 5,000 of which 63% are female and 37% are male. The overall undergraduate population consists of 69% Caucasian
students, 18% African American students, 3% Hispanic students, 1% Asian students, and approximately 10% all other races. University–wide programming includes traditional residential, nontraditional distance undergraduate programs and graduate studies that serve 37 states and 21 foreign countries. All programs offered at Trust University have an extensive liberal arts focus. The majority of students graduate in business, social sciences, and nursing.

Since 1978, Trust University has met the needs of nontraditional students through the degree completion program (DCP). The DCP was designed to serve students who had earned a degree in a technical field, designated as an A.A.S. or associate in applied science degree, from a community college. Trust University accepted the A.A.S. degree as representative of the completion of freshman and sophomore years of college. Trust University, through the DCP, provided general education coursework in combination with junior and senior curricula in a major field which would culminate into a bachelor’s degree. Students completed a minimum of 64 credit hours, approximately half representing general education coursework and approximately half representing major coursework. The DCP established a reputation for being transfer-friendly particularly to students who had completed applied science programs. Until the establishment of a new articulation agreement in 2015 between public community college and universities, Trust University was the only institution among public universities and one of only a few private institutions to accept A.A.S. degrees or up to 64 credit hours of an applied science program toward a bachelor’s degree.
Before the advent of online education, Trust University’s degree completion program was a unique system of delivering distance education to nontraditional students. Early locations of Trust University’s degree completion program ranged from community colleges to a renovated school turned visitor information and community center. By the early 1990s, the DCP was being held in 16 sites including the university’s main campus. Full-time students enrolled in four courses each fall and spring terms and two to three courses each summer term to complete the program in two years. Students attended classes two evenings per week. Trust University understood the importance of taking education where the student resided. Commuting to the university campus or attending classes during the day did not serve the needs of most nontraditional students. At peak enrollment in 2004, the DCP had almost 1,100 students enrolled. In early 2000, Trust University began adding a few online courses each semester to DCP offerings. Trust University has admitted to slowness in full adoption of online education but demonstrates a sense of pride in currently having nine of the 10 DCP majors available entirely online. Two of these programs, Accounting and Healthcare Management, have received national recognition for quality in online delivery and service.

During the past six years, Trust University’s DCP has experienced a decline in face-to-face enrollment in preference to online courses and programs. The transition alone would not be very remarkable, but the overall enrollment in the DCP has also trended downward. At the beginning of 2016, the DCP administration was reorganized under an umbrella of Digital Learning in an effort to preserve what the DCP had always been designed to do,
which is taking education to students where they reside, but with a delivery structure not yet completely comfortable to the university. Trust University is breaking new ground again to meet the changing educational needs of nontraditional students, to regain and surpass the DCP peak enrollment levels, and to establish a position of excellence in online education. The DCP has evolved over the years, but Trust University maintains the mission of providing a pathway for nontraditional students with prior college experience to realize the completion of a bachelor’s degree.

A 2-year rotation of coursework designs each degree program in the DCP. Students can attend part-time or take additional hours to extend or accelerate completion. In a 2015 enrollment and retention trends report, Trust University listed graduation rates for students in fall 2013 at only 13.07% after 2.3 academic years (see Appendix B). This data could simply indicate that more students elected part-time rather than full-time enrollment. With an additional academic year, students reached completion at about a 54% rate. However, students remained six and eight academic years to near an 80% graduation rate. This data prompted the initial interest and selection of the case. The low completion rates identified for the nontraditional transfer student population at Trust University was a problem of practice that required further study.

Participants

The unit of analysis for this study was Trust University. Perspectives from students, admissions staff, and administration participants were included as sources of data. Student participants were selected based on completion status as of May 2016 for students who
entered Trust University’s degree completion program in August 2013. An additional year of student enrollment was considered to help control for the fluctuating nature of nontraditional student participation. Students with “complete” status and students with “not complete” status were identified for interviews. Selection of participants depended on ease of access and willingness of participants to share information concerning the issue being studied (Stake, 1995, p. 4). Trust University’s degree completion staff assisted in identifying students who meet access and willingness criterions. Due to completion status, some of the students were currently enrolled; therefore, recruiting was conducted utilizing records of students’ university email and other email addresses and last known mailing addresses. Paper invitations, Facebook, and phone records were used for follow-up or in lieu of undeliverable or non-active email addresses. The student recruitment letter can be found in Appendix C. Admissions staff and administrative participants were selected based on proximity to and expertise with the admissions procedures of the university’s degree completion program. The admissions staff and administration recruitment letters can be found in Appendices D and E, respectively.

**Data Collection**

Stake (1995) emphasized that a data gathering plan should include a data management system. In addition to contact, calendar, and expense information (Stake, 1995, p. 55), a researcher journal was used to record interview notes, reflections, and initial interpretations. The journal was also the source of notes, initial thoughts, and ideas at the conclusion of each interview. To preserve the confidentiality of the data, the digital version
of the journal has been saved on a password-protected laptop computer and external hard-drive. The paper version of the journal has been kept in a safe environment. Both version of the journal were made available to the dissertation committee chair and members upon request.

Employing multiple methods of gathering data, or triangulation, is essential to validate the interpretations of the case study researcher (Stake, 1995). Three main data collection methods are (a) interviews, (b) observations, and (c) documents (Stake, 1995).

The researcher utilized interviews, observations, and document and archival analysis for this study.

**Interviews.** According to Stake (1995), two principal uses of case study are to obtain the descriptions and interpretation of others: “The interview is the main road to multiple realities” (p. 64). Stake (1995) recommended having an advance plan to getting good interviews.

Three groups of interviews were conducted: (a) students, (b) admissions staff, and (c) administrative staff. Interviews followed group-appropriate interview guides (see Appendices F, G, and H). Demographical data were collected on each participant using demographic information sheets (see Appendices I, J, and K). Pre-interview, each participant was given a copy of the interview guide and informed consent form approved by North Carolina State University’s Institutional Review Board (see Appendices L, M, and N). Each participant received a full explanation of the purpose of the study, time needed for the interview, and a review of each of the questions. Once the signed consent form was received
from the participants the interviews was conducted. All interviewees were assured that they could decline to participate in the study at any time without recourse. Interviews were conducted in-person or on the phone depending on the availability of the participant and proximity to the interviewer. Each interview was digitally recorded to preserve the entirety of the questions and responses. At the conclusion of the interview, ample time was used to prepare a written transcript including key ideas and episodes (Stake, 1995). A written copy was provided to the participant for accuracy and stylistic improvement (Stake, 1995, p. 66). No compensation was provided to participants.

**Observation.** Observation helps the researcher gain better understanding of the case (Stake, 1995). What is to be observed should be determined by the issues surrounding the case (Stake, 1995). Two types of recruitment events, a transfer fair and classroom presentation, were observed to gain a better understanding of recruiting and admissions practices of nontraditional students at Trust University. Observing the communication between recruiter and potential degree completion program students captured admissions policy and procedure in action. As an intrinsic study, the description of the observation focused on the contexts (Stake, 1995). Stake (1995) described contexts as the physical situation, “the entryways, the rooms, the hallways, its place on the map, its décor” (p. 63). Stake (1995) believed that the physical space was fundamental to researchers and readers. Other contexts are often also important (Stake, 1995). Hearing participants describe what is said and how it is said to recruit potential degree completion program students assisted the researcher in gaining a better understanding of the case. An observation protocol was
utilized (see Appendix O). Pre-observation, the participant received a full explanation of the purpose of the study and time needed for the observation. Once the signed consent form was received from the participant (see Appendix P), the observation was conducted. No compensation was provided to any of the participants.

**Document analysis.** In addition to interviews and observation, case study researchers often need to review “newspapers, annual reports, correspondence, minutes of meetings, and the like” (Stake, 1995, p. 68). Documents were reviewed that state and describe admissions policies and procedures, such as a program catalog and university website (see Appendix Q). Additional documents reviewed were those used to facilitate recruiting and admission processes, such as brochures and the admission application. Archived newspaper articles and institutional data were reviewed to provide description and historical perspective of Trust University’s service to nontraditional students.

**Data Analysis**

Analysis is making sense of the case, giving meaning to first impressions and final assertions (Stake, 1995). According to Stake (1995), there is no particular moment when analysis begins. Stake suggested conducting data collection and analysis simultaneously (Yazan, 2015).

Where thoughts come from, whence meaning, remains a mystery. The page does not write itself, but by finding, for analysis, the right ambiance, the right moment, by reading and rereading the accounts, by deep thinking, then understanding creeps forward and your page is printed. (Stake, 1995, p. 73)
Multiple sources of data collection included interviews, observation, and documents. Journal notes, reflections, initial thoughts, and ideas initiated analysis in this study and were on-going throughout the study.

Stake did not provide a specific process to achieve meaning making and interpretation of data (Yazan, 2015). To provide additional guidance needed for the analysis process, Creswell’s (2014) steps of qualitative data analysis, summarized in Figure 7, were utilized. After data have been prepared and organized for analysis, a researcher should review all of the information (Creswell, 2014, p. 247). As a case study, initial thoughts were identified from reviewing interview transcripts, typed journal notes, and sorted documents (Creswell, 2014, p. 247).

The next step in the analysis is to begin coding the data (Creswell, 2014, p. 247). Coding involves taking collected data, segmenting sentences or paragraphs, and labeling the segments with a term (Creswell, 2014, p. 248) that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, or essence-capturing attribute to the data (Saldana, 2009). Data were hand-coded. Codes were not pre-selected, but were allowed to emerge during data analysis (Creswell, 2014, p. 248). The study utilized the method of Evaluation Coding (Saldana, 2009). According to Saldana (2009), an evaluation method is appropriate for policy, critical, organizational, and action studies (Saldana, 2009, p. 98). Evaluation Coding is an application of non-quantitative codes onto qualitative data (Saldana, 2009, p. 97) that assigns judgments about the merit and worth of programs or policy (Rallis & Rossman, 2003).
Evaluation Coding emerged from participant responses to interview questions. For this study, Evaluation Coding employed an amalgam of: (a) Magnitude Coding, to note whether the participant makes a positive [+] or negative [-] comment, (b) Descriptive Coding, to note the topic, and (c) In Vivo Coding, to note the specific qualitative evaluative
comment, and (d) a recommendation coding tag (REC) with a specific memo of action for follow-up. All codes related to specific policies, practices and procedures. Next, the codes, data from observations, and review of documents were used to develop a description (Creswell, 2014, p. 249). Developing a description “involves a detailed rendering of information about people, places, or events in a setting” (Creswell, 2014, p. 249).

Creswell (2014) suggested the last step in analysis is to “draw meaning from the findings of data analysis. This meaning may result in lessons learned, information to compare with the literature, or personal experiences” (p. 292).

Validity and Reliability

Stake (1995) stated that throughout the work of case study, researchers ask, “Do we have it right?” and “Are we developing the interpretations we want?” Stake (1995) recommended using protocols that he termed, triangulation, to deal with issues of validity and reliability in data gathering and analysis. These protocols go beyond simple repetition of data gathering to intentional effort to find the validity of the data observed (Stake, 1995, p. 109).

Triangulation protocol. This study utilized investigator triangulation (Stake, 1995). Investigator triangulation involves additional researchers reviewing the same phenomenon (Stake, 1995, 113). The researcher presented observations to a colleague to discuss alternative interpretations. Reactions of the colleague served to provide additional data for the study (Stake, 1995, 113).
Member checking. This study utilized the process of member checking (Stake, 1995). Member checking involves asking actors to examine rough drafts of writing in which the actions and words of the actors are featured (Stake, 1995, p. 114). Interviewees and participants in observations were asked to review the findings of the study where they were featured for accuracy. The actors were encouraged to offer alternative language or interpretations but were not promised that their version would be in the final report (Stake, 1995).

Positionality Statement

As an academic administrator at Trust University, the researcher was afforded the advantages of close proximity and access to the research site. The researcher’s job position is within the program being studied. The researcher’s understanding of nontraditional student transfer experiences has been informed and influenced by more than 10 years of work experience in Trust University’s degree completion program. A challenge for the researcher throughout this study was to disregard the influence of the contexts in which the researcher is immersed on a daily basis. The researcher chose the issue to be studied because the researcher has an inherent concern about nontraditional student completion. The researcher has a personal and professional stake in the success of the nontraditional students served by Trust University. As a first step to guard against undue influence, the researcher focused on a unit of analysis primarily of admission policies and processes which allowed a degree of separation from the researcher’s positional and experiential influences. Additionally, the research journal was helpful for making note of any influential thoughts or emotions due to
the researcher’s professional experience. Enlisting helpers, peers, and external reviewers throughout the data collection and analysis phases of the study helped correct any undue influences on the researcher’s interpretations and assertions.

**Ethical Considerations**

The major ethical criteria for the research study to be approved by North Carolina State University IRB included: (a) risks to human subjects were minimized, (b) risks to human subjects were reasonable in the relation to the expected benefit to the human subjects and/or the importance of the knowledge that were reasonably expected to result, (c) the selection of human subjects was equitable, (d) additional safeguards were included to protect human subjects from undue influence to participate in the study, and (e) informed consent was sought and documented from either the human subject or his/her legally authorized representative (N.C. State, n.d.b). These ethical criteria guided the entirety of the research study.

To obtain permission to interview students in the study population, an informed consent form was utilized (see Appendix L for the informed consent form for students). The form provided adequate information to potential research subjects to make an informed choice as to their participation in the study and documented the potential study participants’ decision to participate (N.C. State, 2014). The information provided on the form included the invitation to participate in the research study:

You are being asked to take part in a research study. Your participation in this study is voluntary. You have the right to be part of this study, to choose not to participate
or to stop participating at any time without penalty. The purpose of research studies is to gain a better understanding of a certain topic or issue. You are not guaranteed personal benefits from being in a study. Research studies also may pose risks to those that participate. In this consent form you will find specific details about the research in which you are being asked to participate. If you do not understand something in this form it is your right to ask the researcher for clarification or more information. A copy of this consent form will be provided to you. If at any time you have questions about your participation, do not hesitate to contact the researcher(s) named above. (N.C. State, 2014)

Personal benefits to the individual, if any, and a confidentiality statement were additional information needed on the consent form. The remaining information provided on the consent form that applied to this research study concerned compensation, contact information for questions about the study or rights as a participant, the consent statement to participate, and the signature lines for the subject and investigator (N.C. State, 2014). The signed consent form was the only way interviewees were linked to the research. The signed consent forms were scanned and saved electronically to a secured laptop and external hard drive. For face-to-face interviews, consent was obtained on the paper form. Any phone or Skype interviews required that consent be obtained electronically. The consent form was made available in multiple formats upon request to accommodate persons with disabilities or who required special consideration.
No deception was used to conduct the research on study participants. Interview responses were recorded on paper notes by the researcher. Paper notes were secured with the researcher and filed in the researcher’s locked office along with a secured laptop and external hard drive when not in use. To protect the identity of the participants, pseudonyms were assigned to each interview. In the report of findings, only matched pseudonyms with individual responses were used to distinguish between participants. There is a way to identify participants by the email addresses used to invite them to participate, therefore, email addresses were located on the investigator’s secured computer and research journal for the duration of the study. Any participant identifiers were purged from the data storage devices at the conclusion of the study. There was minimal risk associated with this research.

**Summary**

This chapter introduced the methodological approach to the study. The chapter included a description of the case study method, its benefits, critiques, and applications in qualitative research. The chapter also provided a detailed account of how the case study method was used in the study. A description of the site and sample based on selection criteria was provided. The process of collecting and analyzing the data was described. Issues of validity and reliability of data were addressed in addition to researcher bias and ethical considerations. The following chapter provides a report of findings from the research.
CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to examine the problem of nontraditional transfer student completion at a private, religious-based, doctoral degree-granting, moderate research university in North Carolina. The following research questions guided the study:

1. How do institutional policies, procedures, and practices encountered during the process of admission and first term of enrollment at a four-year university support completion of nontraditional transfer students?

2. How do institutional policies, procedures, and practices encountered during the process of admission and first term of enrollment at a four-year university inhibit completion of nontraditional transfer students?

The focus of the research was to gain a better understanding evaluate institutional policies, procedures, and practices that influence nontraditional transfer student completion of a bachelor’s degree and ways the institution can enact supportive policies, procedures, and practices to reduce or eliminate barriers to nontraditional transfer student completion.

The study utilized a single, intrinsic, evaluative case study. This chapter provides an analysis of data gathered through interviews, observations, and document analysis.

Participants Interviewed

Student participants were selected based on completion status as of May 2016 for students who entered Trust University’s degree completion program in August 2013. Five students with “complete” ($n = 2$) status and students with “not complete” ($n = 3$) status were
identified for interviews. The student recruitment letter can be found in Appendix C. Five admissions staff and five administrative participants were selected based on proximity to and expertise with the admission procedures of the university’s degree completion program. The admissions and administrative staff recruitment letters can be found in Appendices D and E, respectively.

**Interviews**

The interview responses are presented in the order of the interview questions. A general description of the university’s recruiting and admissions policies, procedures, and practices; what admissions policies, procedures, and practices are most and least helpful to students; what aspects of admissions policies, procedures, and practices are missing; and how the university can improve admissions policies, procedures, and practices are presented.

**General descriptions of the university’s recruiting and admissions policies, procedures, and practices.** Admissions and administrative staff were asked to provide a general description of the university’s recruiting and admissions policies, procedures, and practices of potential degree completion program students. Admissions staff Kayla, Laura, and Tim responded that to be admitted to the degree completion program, applicants must have completed prior college coursework. Peggy, administrative staff, described the requirement as transferrable hours. Kayla and Laura mentioned that past policy required 60 transferrable hours of course credit for admission. The past policy was in force at the time of the student participants’ admission to the university. According to Laura and Beverly, the policy changed to a requirement of 48 transferrable hours for admission to the university.
Laura mentioned that exceptions were made to the current policy on a case-by-case basis. She offered an example of an applicant who had less than 48 transferrable hours but needed an online program not offered at the community college. In addition to the number of prior college credit hours required, Anthony, Brad, and Beverly stated that only coursework completed at a 2.0 GPA or higher was considered for transfer to the university. Beverly added that transfer credit was awarded based on the comparability of courses offered at the university. There is no stated GPA requirement for admission to the university’s degree completion plan. Beverly and Kayla said the university would accept up to 64 hours from a community college and up to 96 hours from a four-year college or university. Graduation required at least 128 hours to earn a bachelor’s degree.

Kayla and Peggy described the initial stages of the recruiting and admissions process. Recruiters provided inquiry cards to interested prospective students. The inquiry cards were entered into the admissions database. Laura mentioned that prospective students could also submit an inquiry through the university website. Kathy and Tim said recruiters contacted prospective inquiries to encourage them to apply. Alison said a primary responsibility of recruiters was to move inquiries to applicants. Anthony described the recruiting process as recruiters “supporting, assisting, cajoling, prodding students to complete a file.” Brad, Alison, and Kayla described the next stage of the process. Applicants were required to submit official transcripts from all previously attended colleges. Beverly said, “We do not request those for the student.” Beverly and Brad stated that the transcripts were evaluated to determine transferability of coursework. Laura said that admissions determined eligibility
based on the policy previously described and made acceptance decisions. Kathy stated that recruiting and admissions procedures were “undergoing significant changes.” Laura described one of those changes as on-the-spot acceptance. The student would be accepted and registered for his or her first term before all of the previously attended college transcripts had been received and evaluated. If needed, adjustments to course registrations could be made once all previously attended college transcripts were received and evaluated. Alison, Laura, and Tim described the final stage of the process. Accepted students were assigned a success coach who registered the new students for their first term and prepared each new student a course checklist and completion plan. Tim said that success coaches work with accepted students from first term to completion. Laura suggested that students liked having transfer credit and completion plans provided to them early in the process: “They want to know how long, how much, and what’s involved at the beginning.”

Anthony and Paul said recruiters made contact with potential degree completion program students through a variety of sources and multiple strategies. Peggy said recruitment practices included attending events held for prospective students. All of the admissions staff stated that community colleges were the primary locations for recruiting. Alison and Brad recognized that the degree completion program was especially designed for community college students. Alison described the design as a “two-plus-two” program. Community college students who completed an Associate in Applied Science degree that is comparable to one of the degree completion programs could typically complete at the university in two years. Kathy stated, “A good bit is done with our community college
partners.” Paul described community college students as a target audience for the degree completion program. Alison and Brad mentioned other locations such as local businesses, hospitals, and law enforcement agencies where recruiters visited to make contact with prospective students for specific programs offered. Kathy said that recruiters set-up display tables with promotional materials, and Beverly mentioned the practice of visiting individual community college classes. Kayla said recruiters spoke to potential degree completion program students about the university, program requirements, tuition rates, and estimated time to completion. Laura added that recruiters try to meet with community college students who are near completion. In addition to recruiter presentations, Brad said that program information was also communicated via printed materials, advertisements, call-ins, and the university website. According to Kathy, a significant change in practice was initiated within the last year. Academic advisors transitioned to new roles as success coaches placing them earlier in the recruiting and admissions process. The new role also moved the academic advisors from under academic program leadership to enrollment management leadership.

Each student was asked to provide a general description of his or her transfer experience with the university. George had completed two years at the community college and wanted to complete his bachelor’s degree. He reviewed several universities. He said he was “looking for a school that offered flexibility.” Cynthia’s prior college experience was primarily at the community college but she had attended a university prior to attending the community college. She mentioned a delay in her enrollment in the community college after attending the first university and then a delay of a couple years after she completed
community college and enrolled in Trust University. She met with a recruiter on the main campus who reviewed a program layout and provided her a tour of the main campus. Brenda completed a degree at the community college in criminal justice and wanted to pursue a bachelor’s degree in a similar field of study. Brenda attended a college fair at the community college where many public and private North Carolina colleges and universities were represented to find out more about what programs they offered and how her degree would transfer to their institutions. She noted meeting with an academic advisor (success coach) early in the admissions process. The advisor (success coach) explained the transfer credit process. Susan also transferred from a community college to the university. She considered several public universities before selecting Trust University. She preferred a program that could be completed on-site. Susan’s communication with admissions staff was via phone or email. All of the students described the process of applying and sending in prior college transcripts for evaluation.

**Positive comments from admission staff.** Alison described the transfer policies of the Associate of Applied Science degrees to the university. Alison said the “transfer-friendliness” of the university allowed students to complete their bachelor’s degree in two years in several of the major programs. These programs required little to no perquisites. Student could be admitted into their program of study and complete any prerequisites concurrently. Alison mentioned the criminal justice program did not require any prerequisites and the human services program only required one prerequisite course. Kayla mentioned the nursing program as one of the majors that required only a few prerequisite
courses. Kayla said there was no time limit on the transferability of courses. Alison and Brad said the admissions procedures were simple. Alison said, “We try to make it as painless and seamless as possible for the student.”

Tim stated that the university used multiple marketing strategies to generate prospect inquiries. He said the established “Pathway Agreements” for applied science programs with the community colleges were important in marketing the degree completion program. Alison and Laura said “word of mouth” was also effective. Alison mentioned that the employer tuition assistance and referral programs were significant recruiting tools. Laura said admissions staff were visible at the community colleges multiple times throughout the semester and created a familiarity among their students with the university. She mentioned that classroom visits generated the most prospective inquiries. Tim agreed that recruiter visits to the community college generated inquiries. Brad and Kayla said the practice of offering a free, online application was attractive to potential degree completion program students. Alison said that as part of the recruiting practices, admissions staff encouraged community college students to complete their programs before transferring to the university. She was complimentary to the community colleges regarding their preparation of students to attend the university. Alison tells community college students, “You are getting an excellent foundation here at the community college to go on to the next level.” Alison recognized the importance of the community colleges, describing them as “excellent feeders” to the university’s degree completion program. She added that the admissions staff attempted to provide community college students a sense of comfort with the university.
In addition to admissions staff, Laura complimented the success coaches’ work with prospective students. Success coaches assisted prospective students with questions about course transfer and accepted students with selection of their first university courses. Success coaches explained transfer credit and time to completion. Laura said this practice was “one of [their] best recruiting tools.” Kayla described positive aspects of offering most of the degree completion programs completely online. She said that online classes were “very beneficial” to working adults. Brad described admissions personnel as experienced. Alison described admissions personnel as concerned and attentive. Kayla assured that admissions personnel made immediate contact with prospect inquiries to gage their interest in the degree completion program. Laura stated that experienced enrollment officers also assisted accepted students with course selection.

**Positive comments from administrative staff.** Peggy also used the term “transfer-friendliness.” She defined transfer-friendliness as a transfer course that was counted as a direct equivalency to a university course. Kathy also stated that there was no time limit on coursework that could be considered for transfer. Paul stated that the admissions policies “emphasize opportunity over rigor” recognizing that prior college experience did not always demonstrate full capability. Anthony said the admissions policies created “nearly open enrollment” since there was not a stated entrance GPA requirement. The one GPA requirement for entrance to the university was that only coursework completed at a GPA of 2.0 or higher was considered for transfer. Anthony also said the admissions procedures were simpler and more accessible for degree completion program students. He stated the
procedures were “not nearly as formidable as the standard traditional student process.”

Overall, Anthony believed the procedures to be effective in producing strong yields in enrollment.

Beverly supported the attractiveness of the practice of not charging an application fee to potential degree completion program students. Paul also recognized multiple contact means and visiting strategies practiced by admissions staff. He added that the university provided resources for success. Paul reported the focus on a newer practice of promoting the degree completion program to potential degree completion program students who may have less than two years of prior college experience as a way to serve more nontraditional students. Paul was complimentary to the practice of cross-training admissions and advising (success coach) personnel so that “admissions specialists can advise and advisors can recruit.” Kathy also mentioned that Pathway Agreements provided seamless entry to the university.

**Positive comments from students.** Cynthia and Diane described their transfer experience as “smooth.” Cynthia elaborated on her experience with the admissions personnel:

> After doing all the transfer paperwork, I had a coordinator that I worked with that kept in touch with me through email. He made sure I had everything submitted and that I needed submitted, and if I missed something he would reach out to me and say, ‘I need this.’ It was kind of like he had a checklist and he stayed on top of it, and he was wonderful.
Cynthia experienced “no issues” with the process. Diane was also complimentary to admissions personnel: “I just applied. I heard back within a short amount of time, and I was contacted by my counselor. She walked me through what classes I could take, what requirements I had, and I signed up for a few.” George described why he selected Trust University:

After looking at the different options, I found that it would be an easy transition into [Trust University]. With me working, I work for [Organization name] Healthcare System and have since I’ve been in high school. So, having the local campus, it was just very helpful for me as a student to be able to either commute or do online classes, whichever worked well with my flexibility.

George stated the ease of transition from the community college to the university was a major factor in selecting the university. Brenda described the transfer process as “pretty good” and “informative.” Susan described her transfer experience as “nothing bad,” noting the process was “straightforward.” Susan selected the university due to the overall cost of the program. The degree completion program “was less expensive in the long run” because of the transferability of her community college coursework to the university.

Brenda and Diane were complimentary to the community colleges they attended. Brenda received assistance from her community college advisor in the process of transferring to the university. Diane mentioned that the community college where she attended regularly promoted the university, and admissions staff from the university were well-known at the community college: “Going through [community college name], they promote [Trust
University] quite a bit because a lot of courses don’t transfer to other universities.” Susan also recognized the benefit of affiliation with community colleges:

The overall admission to [Trust University], was easy in my opinion. I liked how you guys had the direct affiliation with [community college name]. I think that helps whereas [public university name] doesn’t have it. I think that is a benefit for [Trust University].

George liked that the university offered both online and on-site classes. Cynthia liked the assistance from the university academic advisor (success coach) reviewing the remaining course requirements and providing a completion plan during the admissions process. She said having a course layout early helped her know more of what to expect. Diane also said admissions staff explained program requirements early in the process. George received assistance from admissions staff with obtaining prior college transcripts and course selections. Brenda found the admissions staff helpful in answering questions about the degree completion program. Both Brenda and Cynthia described the admissions staff as “wonderful.”

**Negative comments from admissions staff.** There was one negative comment pertaining to admissions policies. Alison stated that the business programs required more prerequisite courses than the other degree completion programs. There were no negative comments pertaining to procedures. As for practices, Kayla said that the human services program still required the major courses to be completed on-site.
**Negative comments from administrative staff.** There was one negative comment pertaining to admissions policies. Peggy noted that requiring a specific number of prior college credit hours to be accepted into the degree completion program limited recruiting opportunities. There were no negative comments pertaining to procedures. Peggy remarked that recruiting practices were “still very old school.” Enrollment was driven by individual recruiting efforts and not by more technological means. Not enough of the potential student population was being reached by current recruiting practices.

**Negative comments from students.** Brenda and Susan provided negative comments about their transfer experiences. Brenda described her transfer experience with the university as “a little off.” She experienced difficulty connecting to university admissions personnel: “To actually find out what transferred in I had to go through my advisor at [community college].” Brenda attended a transfer fair at the community college and visited the university booth. She said the recruiter did not know specific transfer credit information. Brenda travelled to the university’s main campus to meet with an academic advisor (success coach) to review her prior college credit, determine what transfer credit she would receive, and present her the remaining courses required to complete the program.

Susan did not believe she had received accurate advising at the community college which caused her to take courses that were not accepted for transfer at a public university. The community college that Susan attended did not provide transfer advising to specific universities. The public university she was considered attending would have required five more math courses than Trust University’s degree completion program. Susan was also
disappointed in how the university degree completion program was explained by admissions staff. She said she was not told that not all of the program courses were held on-site. In addition, Susan experienced some of the on-site courses being cancelled due to low enrollment. With no other convenient on-site options, she completed those courses online: “Frustrating.” Susan said the course rotations and completion plan were not provide or explained: “I wasn’t made aware.” She did not believe she was provided enough support from her advisor (success coach): “There wasn’t the teamwork in picking classes…I think it was kind of left up to me to figure out.”

**Recruiting and admissions policies, procedures, and practices most helpful and least helpful to potential transfer students.** Admissions and administrative staff were asked to describe aspects of the recruiting and admissions policies, procedures, and practices that were most helpful and least helpful to potential degree completion program students. Students were asked the same question but as to which aspects were most and least helpful in their transfer experiences.

**Positive comments from admissions staff.** For policies, Brad said that the university did not require references or test scores for admittance to the degree completion program. Kayla and Laura said that students were not required to enroll full-time and could participate at their own pace. Laura added that the program provided flexible course offerings. Alison thought allowing some exceptions to the transfer credit hour policy was most helpful to potential degree completion program students. She also said the readmission policy for students with low GPAs provided more assurance of ultimate success. Students with low
GPAs who reapplied to the university were reviewed by an academic committee. Review required students to demonstrate commitment to academic progress and completion as a condition of readmission.

Brad and Tim said the “streamlined” process of admissions was most helpful to potential degree completion program students. Brad said the process was “simple” and “not a lot of work” which provided and easy transition for potential degree completion program students to the university. Tim called the admissions process a “one-stop-shop.” Kayla said there was little to no lag time between inquiry to acceptance. Brad said there was a one- to two-day turnaround for transcript evaluation. Laura said the response time to inquiries was good. Tim noted that the process also made admissions decisions simple.

Recruiting and admissions practices received the most positive comments from admissions staff. Alison and Kayla described the interaction between admissions personnel and potential degree completion program students as the most helpful. Alison said, “We provide great customer service to our students.” She said recruiters communicated transfer credit information and remaining course requirements. She added that recruiters tried to “provide as much straightforward information as we can.” Kayla said students received “accurate information.” Laura said recruiters “know our program.” Tim said recruiters were “subject-matter experts.” Kayla said admissions staff understood adult student needs because many of the admissions staff were graduates of the degree completion program. She believed potential degree completion program students were helped most by “that sense of knowing that somebody has been through it.” Alison was also complimentary to financial
planning personnel. She said that recruiters could provide basic financial aid information, but she was most confident in the “excellent financial planning office” to guide potential degree completion program students. Speaking of the university staff as a whole, she said, “We’re here for the student.”

**Positive comments from administrative staff.** Paul called the admissions requirements of the degree completion program a “policy of opportunity.” He and Anthony recognized that not all prior college coursework demonstrated the true capability of potential degree completion program students. Anthony said the transfer credit policies allowed more potential degree completion program students to be evaluated and provided an opportunity to succeed at the university level. He recognized that requiring transcripts from previously attended colleges may not be the most helpful to potential degree completion program students, but was “vitaly important to the university” policy. He said the transfer credit policy was “doing the right thing.” Beverly noted the university provided flexibility in the transfer credit policy by allowing an appeal process to reconsider credit that may initially be denied. Kathy said the Pathway and Articulation Agreements with community colleges were the most helpful to potential degree completion program students. She and Peggy said the university tried to be as “transfer-friendly” as possible. Anthony also said the admissions process was “fairly streamlined” and “fairly simple.” He added that the process was “less formidable” than traditional student admissions.

Kathy said that implementing the new success coach model would be the most helpful practice to potential degree completion program students. She described the model as
a “customer-friendly, student-centered concept.” Paul said adding online tutoring services was “a great assistance to students.” Anthony was complimentary to the admissions staff describing them as “congenial, supportive, and encouraging,” and saying, “They are committed to helping people.”

**Positive comments from students.** Comments concerning admissions procedures were similar to those from admissions and administrative staff. Four of the students said the admissions process was most helpful. Cynthia said, “The process and procedure of how everything was laid out for me, I really liked.” Diane commented on the quick feedback she received. George said the “ease into the program” was most helpful. He described the process as “smooth,” and said, “I can’t imagine it being any easier.” Susan remarked on transfer credit evaluation and course checklists:

> I liked how you just sent your transcript and they took what they could, and told you.

> I also loved this little form that I keep track of. You see how old that is. I can keep track of my classes and what I need provided it doesn’t change.

Cynthia also mentioned the course checklist she received as most helpful. Additional positive comments on recruiting and admissions practices focused on the admissions staff. Brenda and Diane said admissions staff demonstrated a willingness to help. Brenda described the admissions staff as “amazing.” George said the admissions staff assisted with all of his questions and made the process easier.

**Negative comments from admissions staff.** Alison expressed concern about responding to the number of comments from potential degree completion program students
about the cost of the program. She said the university’s tuition was higher than most other schools offering a similar program. Laura, responding to a follow-up question about completion plans, said that remaining university course requirements varied depending on the major and courses taken at the community college. Kayla said, “You may end up with a lot more than 128 hours just because of the requirements of each degree.” Laura said that completion in two years was difficult for transfer students with less than 60 transferrable hours. Alison said the negative aspect of the exception policy, accepting students with less than 48 transferrable hours, was that those students may experience more difficulty at the university level. Students with only a few transfer hours may not have the foundation to be successful at the university.

Brad said that during peak periods, “Sometimes we get bogged down with people. The Registrar’s Office gets bogged down because they’re the ones who evaluate transcripts. The transcript evaluation process has created a ‘bottleneck’. ” Transcript evaluation could extend to three to five days, but he thought it was “not a drastic problem.” Laura said applicants have not known the impact of the transfer credit policy until they reached a success coach. On the other hand, Laura said some applicants thought the process was too fast and chose to delay enrollment. Tim said obtaining transcripts from applicants was the least helpful aspect of the admissions process.

Brad said there was not enough staff to serve higher levels of potential student interest. Laura admitted that not all information was disclosed during recruiting, such as details of transfer credit and remaining courses needed. Since students may not know exactly
how many hours were needed to complete the program until they reached a success coach, some students could feel misled by recruiters. Laura suggested the need to achieve a certain number of new students to enroll could influence when details were communicated. Laura believed that any non-disclosure was unintentional. She said success coaches assisted recruiting and admissions to clarify any misunderstandings to retain the student; however, “sometimes [they] lose them.” Kayla said that numbers-driven recruiting “affects our retention.”

**Negative comments from administrative staff.** Peggy also said that the “cost structure” was least helpful to potential degree completion program students. The university offered few incentives and no scholarships to attract high caliber students. Kathy said not accepting certain prior college coursework could be “viewed by some as a stumbling block” to enrollment.

Anthony said the admissions process was “too slow.” He offered an example pertaining to the application process: “A 24-hour turnaround internal to the university, could be days or weeks before connection is reestablished” with the applicant. The delay prevented the student from moving forward: “detrimental to the student” and “detrimental to the university.” Paul added that admission processes did not provide accurate information on admittance within 24 to 48 hours. Admittance can take up to a week to 10 days. Anthony, Beverly, and Peggy recognized the length of time to obtain and evaluate transcripts was also least helpful to potential degree completion program students. The university required applicants to obtain transcripts from all prior institutions attended. Anthony stated the
university was subjecting applicants to perform a function in which they were “unaccustomed to and uncomfortable with.” Beverly described the process as a “disservice to the student.” She added that missing transcripts at the time of registration can cause a student to take a course that was completed at a previous institution.

Beverly said the practice of the transcript evaluation depicting only coursework completed at a 2.0 or higher was least helpful to students. This practice allowed students to be admitted whose overall previous college credit could be below a 2.0 GPA. She added that the university not having a stated admissions GPA requirement had become a “disservice to students.” Beverly believed applicants whose overall previous college credit was below a 2.0 GPA lacked writing skills and a commitment to learn.

Kathy was concerned about the academic structure of the degree completion program. She said the academic departments did not view the degree completion program as part of their responsibility: “DCP was disowned by departments.” Over time, a separate department had to schedule classes, advise students, and hire faculty. Kathy said, “That should have never happened.”

**Negative comments from students.** Comments focused on communication of information similar to the admissions staff comments. Brenda said there was a lack of transfer credit assistance at the beginning of the process. Cynthia said she was not informed of the number of prerequisite courses that were required: “That shocked me a little bit”. She said had she known, she would have completed the prerequisites prior to applying the university: “I could have been a little more successful in finishing.” Cynthia also expressed
some frustration with the website for a lack of program information. She was unable to find specific information on transfer credit or program prerequisites. Susan said there was a lack of guidance and explanation of the program. She expressed particular frustration with not receiving accurate information about course delivery. Diane noticed a lack of direction on scholarships.

**Missing from the university's recruiting and admissions policies, procedures, and practices for transfer students.** Admissions and administrative staff and students were asked what was missing from the university's recruiting and admissions policies, procedures, and practices for transfer students.

**Positive comments from admissions and administrative staff.** Alison said the GPA requirements were appropriate and did not impact admittance to the university. For example, the nursing program required a minimum 2.5 GPA, and the elementary education program required a minimum 3.0 GPA for admittance to the majors. She said advisors (success coaches) helped students work toward GPA requirements before beginning a major. Kayla and Laura mentioned that recently added incentives had been missing for a long time. Laura explained that a proposal for incentives had been declined by administration in the past, but most recently administration approved three admissions incentives for the degree completion program: Early Registration discount, Refer a Friend, and Legacy grant. She said the Refer a Friend incentive had the most potential to attract students to the program. Anthony said that admissions policies resulted in most applicants being eligible for enrollment. He reiterated that admissions policies demonstrated nearly open enrollment. Alison said there had been
some effort to focus on improving marketing practices for the degree completion program. She added some of the recruiters and administrators were recognized at the community colleges.

**Positive comments from students.** When asked what was missing from the university's recruiting and admissions policies, procedures, and practices for transfer students, Cynthia responded, “Nothing.” Diane could not think of anything. She mentioned the competition didn’t accept as much transfer work. She said, “Everyone at [University] was great to work with.” George said he “couldn’t imagine the transfer process being any easier.” He said once he submitted his transcripts from the community college, the process “flowed” smoothly. He added that the advisor (success coach) was always there to help.

**Negative comments from admissions staff.** All of the admissions staff recognized that not enough potential degree completion program students for the degree completion program were being reached as the university had capacity to serve. Each staff person expressed different missing aspects of policy, procedure, and practice impacting enrollment. Alison said admissions staff needed to recruit more which would require more travel to recruiting sites. However, Brad said that current practices were ineffective and “out of date.” He believed that the university had not discovered “how to reach students in a digital age.” Kayla suggested that an incentive strategy had “been missing for a long time.” Laura said a competitiveness was missing due to the lack of an incentive strategy. She explained, “We require more hours, offer no incentives or scholarships.” As a result, students were lost to competing institutions. Kayla added there was a lack of visibility for the degree completion
program; the university was still unknown to many. Laura added that the online presence of
the program did not meet the needs of potential degree completion program students.
Potential degree completion program students “have to dig deep to find what you’re really
wanting.” She said the website was “not designed to recruit adult students.” Tim said a
comprehensive marketing plan for the degree completion program was missing; however, he
also pointed to policy. He said no “enforcement of a minimum GPA requirement” also
impacted the quality of potential degree completion program students being reached.

**Negative comments from administrative staff.** Paul also recognized that the current
contact pool of potential degree completion program students was smaller than in the past.
He said recruiting practices had lost their effectiveness. Peggy stated, “We have yet to figure
out how to recruit the online student well.” She said a strong “online presence” was missing:
“We’re just staying the same.” Kathy said the university was missing an online presence, but
she described it as the university missing not having digital admissions resources. Anthony
said a “vision” was missing for degree completion program recruiting and admissions
procedures and practices. He particularly mentioned the “systems and processes to address
the two things that are least helpful”: slowness of admissions processes and the requirement
of applicants to obtain official transcripts from prior institutions. The university was missing
“a system and implementation of quick and ready turnaround.” Anthony described the
obtainment of transcripts as an expectation of potential degree completion program students
to engage the “administrative apparatuses” of at least two institutions: “Why don’t those two
just talk to each other?” He said “inter-institutional collaboration” was needed. Anthony
also said alignment of policies, procedures, policies, and practices was needed. Admissions policies provided near open enrollment structure, but admissions procedures and practices demonstrated more selective enrollment structure. He explained that admissions policies assumed that most applicants were eligible, but procedures and practices demonstrated that applicants were required to prove their eligibility. He said the process expected applicants to “jump through hoops.”

**Negative comments from students.** Brenda and Diane mentioned a couple of aspects missing from their transfer experience with the university. Brenda would have liked to have had specific transfer credit information at the recruitment stage. Diane would have liked to have had more assistance with researching scholarships. Brenda and Susan said the community college could have been more helpful with their transfer to the university. Brenda said the community college did not have a transfer office. Brenda and Susan said the community colleges did not offer specific transfer advising. Susan described a lack of advisement about transfer pathways to the university. She said a lack of reliance on the community college to assist in transfer to the university could cause a student to “get on the wrong path.” Tables 1, 2, and 3 summarize positive and negative comments concerning recruiting and admissions policies of potential degree completion program students.
### Table 1

*Summary of Positive and Negative Comments from Admissions Staff Concerning Recruiting and Admissions Policies, Procedures, and Practices*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aspects</th>
<th>Positive</th>
<th>Negative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Policies</strong></td>
<td>“Transfer-friendliness”; few prerequisites; no time limit on transfer work; no references or test scores required; exception allowed; appropriate GPA requirements</td>
<td>Programs with many prerequisites; cost; transfer hours exceptions allowed admittance of unprepared students; no stated GPA allowed admittance of unprepared students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Procedures</strong></td>
<td>Simple, streamlined; “one-stop-shop”; good response time to inquiries; admittance decisions were simple</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Practices</strong></td>
<td>Visits to community colleges; helpful and knowledgeable staff; flexible programs; no application fee, pathway agreements; flexible enrollment; interaction between staff and potential students; staff understand needs of adult students; recently added incentives</td>
<td>Program with no online options; scarce resources; undisclosed information; strategies were “out of date”; not visible enough at recruiting locations; university still unknown to many; inadequate online presence; inadequate marketing plan</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2

Summary of Positive and Negative Comments from Administrative Staff Concerning Recruiting and Admissions Policies, Procedures, and Practices

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aspects</th>
<th>Positive</th>
<th>Negative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Policies</td>
<td>“Transfer-friendliness”; no time limit on transfer work; nearly open enrollment; “policy of opportunity”; flexible transfer credit policy</td>
<td>Requirement of prior college credit for admittance; “cost structure”; denied transfer credit viewed as “stumbling block”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Procedures</td>
<td>Simple; accessible</td>
<td>Gets “bogged down” during peak periods; bottleneck in transfer evaluation; obtainment of transcripts; applicants do not know transfer credit until they reach success coach; “too slow”; obtainment of transcripts takes too long; requiring applicants to obtain transcripts was a “disservice”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practices</td>
<td>Cross-trained staff, Pathway agreements; new success coach model; staff are committed to helping people</td>
<td>“Still very old school”; ineffective recruiting; lack of online presence; few digital resources; transcript evaluation only depicted coursework completed at 2.0 GPA or higher; “vision” was missing. DCP was not integrated to University</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Table 3

*Summary of Positive and Negative Comments from Students Concerning Recruiting and Admissions Policies, Procedures, and Practices*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aspects</th>
<th>Positive</th>
<th>Negative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Policies</td>
<td>Transferability of prior coursework</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Procedures</td>
<td>“Smooth”; easy transition; “can’t imagine the transfer process being any easier”; quick feedback; helpful</td>
<td>“A little off”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practices</td>
<td>Online and onsite classes available, assistance from academic advisor, helpful staff</td>
<td>Recruiter could not explain program or transfer credit questions; inaccurate information; no information on program prerequisites; little support from academic advisor; lack of information on the website</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Improvements and recommendations for recruiting and admissions experience.**

Admissions and administrative staff and students were asked how the university could improve the recruiting and admissions experience of potential degree completion program students. Alison and Laura mentioned the incentive program as one improvement that was being implemented. Tim said the incentive program would “help with bringing prospects to the table.” Brad mentioned the new success coach model as another recent improvement. Alison’s response focused on improving the visibility of the university: “Community
colleges should recognize recruiters.” She stressed the importance of recruiters making frequent visits “making people aware of our program.” She also said more effort was needed in marketing the degree completion program: “Don’t leave out DCP.” Tim also recognized the need to increase the visibility of the university through a “consistent marketing plan” and constant presence in the marketplace. Laura said recruiting strategies could be improved. She recognized the importance of recruiting at community colleges, but new locations needed to be explored. Laura also said recruiting practices could be improved by implementing an admissions staff of “inside sales and recruiters out in the field.” She described inside sales staff as “follow[ing] up with everything inside.” Laura also said the website needed improvement. She suggested that online programming should be a feature on the university’s homepage instead of the current rotation of personal “success stories.” Adult student prospects “know what they are looking for.” She did not think personal stories were the primary information adult student prospects were seeking.

Brad said connecting potential degree completion program students early was important to the enrollment process. He suggested holding information sessions on the main campus. He believed that visiting the main campus helped connect potential degree completion program students to the university. Anthony also believed connecting potential applicants early to a university representative who would assist from admission to graduation was the most significant improvement needed. The degree completion program needed to establish continuity of personnel who help with acceptance and integration into academic programs until completion. He said this type of connection created continuity in student
experience. However, Beverly thought returning to separate admissions and academic advising staff would be an improvement. She said admissions processes should be handled by only admissions staff. Admissions staff should be the contact for prospects and applicants not the contact for academic program information. She said having separate admissions and academic advising staff was more effective and created proficiency. She stressed the need for clear communication to students concerning advisor assignments. Beverly agreed contact and personal connection were important to establish early in the admissions process.

Anthony added the university needed to “make life easier on students.”

According to Beverly, the visibility of the university could be enhanced by visiting additional community colleges, industries, and small businesses. Additional awareness could be gained by utilizing university alumni. Paul suggested another way to increase visibility of the university could be to set up recruiting offices at remote locations. Peggy said the success coach model being implemented was a needed improvement. She believed the new model “would be well-received by potential students.” Kathy suggested that the website should have a transfer worksheet where potential degree completion program students could input prior college coursework and receive a close estimate of what would transfer to the university. She said the transfer worksheet “would be a nice tool” for potential degree completion program students. Peggy also recognized the need to incorporate technology to improve recruiting and admissions experiences of potential degree completion program students.
Students responded similarly to admissions and administrative staff. Brenda said more “up front” information about what programs are offered and transfer credit allowed would be an improvement for the transfer student recruiting and admissions experience. Cynthia said more information was needed on the website. The nature of the program needed to be illustrated. A better description of how the program can be completed would be an improvement. She also said to include program completion plans on the website. George said the university needed more presence at the community colleges: “Being very visible in the community college would be a great asset for the university and students.” Susan agreed that early contact was needed. She suggested connecting with students during the early stages of their programs at the community college: “Get to them early.” However, Diane said the university was “well-known” at the community college she attended. She said the community college consistently promoted the university. She said the university was “well-covered.”

Recommendation codes presented several suggestions to improve the recruiting and admissions policies, procedures, and practices of potential degree completion program students. Responses from Anthony resulted in a recommendation to develop a plan to streamline the obtainment of prior institution transcripts. His responses concerning what was missing from admissions policies, procedures, and practices resulted in two recommendations: (a) develop a plan for alignment of admissions policies, procedures, and practices; and (b) develop a plan to improve inter-institutional communication and collaboration. Responses from Brad resulted in the recommendation to evaluate current
personnel roles for cross-training between enrollment development officers and success coaches.

Responses from George concerning how the university could improve the transfer experience resulted in a recommendation to discuss and implement strategies to increase the university’s visibility at community colleges. Responses from Brenda resulted in the recommendation to train and equip recruiters in the field to assist with transfer credit questions from prospective students. Cross-training enrollment development officers and success coaches could help address the recommendation.

**General description of the orientation of new degree completion program students.** Admissions and administrative staff were asked to describe the orientation of new degree completion students. Students were asked the same question but regarding their particular orientation experience.

**Admissions staff.** Alison said the orientation had changed over the years from on-site to the university website. She said orientation helped students connect with various university departments. Brad described an orientation in the form of a PowerPoint presentation, which was accessible from the website. He was unsure if the PowerPoint was still used. Laura described a similar orientation available on the website. She said the orientation as “information students can click on and read.” She said students also received a “Getting Started” document via email. The document contained information on ordering books, obtaining ID, and withdrawing from classes. In addition to the “Getting Started” document, the email included an introduction to an advisor (success coach) and a program
completion plan. Laura said new students received the “Getting Started” document multiple times. Kayla said, “We still send out a lot of documents to new students for them to read.”

**Administrative staff.** Anthony and Peggy also said new students were oriented via email. Beverly, Kathy, and Paul were unable to describe the specifics of the degree completion program orientation. None of them had direct experience orienting new degree completion students.

**Students.** George mentioned the PowerPoint presentation on the website. He said the presentation acquainted him with the learning management system for online courses and to the main campus. Cynthia and Susan mentioned completing a learning management system tutorial available through the online university portal. Brenda travelled to main campus before classes began to meet with her advisor (success coach) who provided her with needed information. Cynthia and Susan mentioned the information received via email. Diane and Susan said they completed a course on information literacy during their first term of enrollment. Diane said the information literacy course provided a map of online resources and instruction on how to write research papers.

**Positive comments from admissions staff.** Brad, Kayla, and Laura said the most helpful aspect of the orientation was the email with the information sent to new students. Brad and Kayla said the email provided the kind of information new students needed. Kayla said, “We give them information to empower them so that they can be successful.” Laura said the email was available to students to access multiple times. She and Kayla said the emailed information gave students what they needed. She also said email “works with online
adult population.” Kayla said students were also assured that they have an advisor (success coach) to help answer any questions. Brad said with the email, “It’s rare that they have questions.” Tim mentioned the accessibility of the PowerPoint on the website as being the most helpful aspect of the orientation. Kayla added comments pertaining to the university’s academic support services as being most helpful to new students. She noted a writing center, online tutoring, and a center for students with disabilities. She said being helpful was “everything we do.”

**Positive comments from administrative staff.** Anthony said the most helpful aspect of orientation was the comprehensiveness of the information sent via email. The review of academic requirements during orientation was also helpful to new students. He added there was some orientation at the classroom level. Peggy said the “Getting Started” document sent via email was the most helpful to new students. She added that the type of information in the document suited the format of the document and the mode of delivery well. Paul said the information literacy course that new students completed in their first term helped with the orientation experience.

**Positive comments from students.** Diane agreed the information literacy course was most helpful in her orientation experience. She said the course assisted her in completing other courses in the program. Cynthia found the layout of the schedule and coursework required of the program most helpful in her orientation experience. George said the presentation on the website was “user-friendly” and “gave you what you needed.” Susan said the resources emailed to her was most helpful. She added the “library has been wonderful.”
**Negative comments from admissions staff.** Alison and Kayla did not think there were any aspects of the orientation that were least helpful to new students. Laura and Tim said the orientation was not interactive. Tim added that orientation was also not required. He said orientation was “just a PowerPoint presentation.” Brad said the lack of an on-site orientation was the least helpful aspect.

**Negative comments from administrative staff.** Anthony could not identify additional helpful aspects of the orientation. He said the current orientation was “inadequate” and varied in consistency and reliability. He described the orientation as “information overload.” The information was “too much” for what concerned new students at the orientation stage of the process: “We take it to be valuable information to students because it’s ultimately important to the institution.” Beverly said the university needed to “reexamine” the orientation of new degree completion program students. Kathy also said an orientation that was simply a “data dump” was not helpful to new students. Peggy said the current orientation did not address degree planning, how to understand the transfer evaluation, or remaining requirements to complete the program. She said the orientation format did not assist students in navigating more difficult questions. She described the least helpful aspects of the orientation as only documents sent to new students. She also was unsure if orientation was encouraged.

**Negative comments from students.** Brenda, Diane, and George could not think of any least helpful aspects of their orientation experience. Cynthia said that, although it was “nice,” she did not need the tour of main campus. Susan said, “I honestly don’t remember an
orientation.” Susan’s comments focused on aspects pertaining to university academic support services. She did not think the support services were as good as they could be because distance students could not meet with someone on-site.

**Perceptions of the experience of attending first classes at the university.** Admissions and administrative staff were asked to describe their perceptions of the experience of new degree completion program students attending their first classes at the university. Students were asked to describe their experiences of attending their first classes at the university.

**Positive comments admissions staff.** Alison said the first term experience for most new degree completion program students was “good.” Students appeared to be “comfortable with classes, with their instructors.” Laura said, “Most of the time, initial classes go smoothly.” Any issues with on-site classes were usually resolved by the next class meeting. There were very few complaints. Laura reiterated, “Students have what they need to begin classes.”

**Positive comments from administrative staff.** Anthony said new students who previously attended a community college where the university held classes were familiar with the campus and classrooms: “They’re in the same place.” Familiarity produced confidence. He added that these students fully engaged with faculty and fellow students. Community college students were typically familiar with online class structure. Anthony said, “Online is nothing to them.” Peggy agreed that community college students may not
experience much transition attending university classes. Paul also believed that the university provided the necessary support for new students to be successful in their first term.

**Positive comments from students.** Brenda expected university courses to be difficult, but completed her first term successfully. Cynthia said her first term “wasn’t bad” and “could have been a whole lot worse”:

The first semester, I took five class but most of them were prereqs. One was a nursing class and the rest were prereqs. It was a little rocky at first because I did overload everything, but I was trying to get as much of it out of the way as I could. It was just a matter of getting everything organized enough and getting the schedule set out, and then once that happened it was fine.

George said the smaller class sizes “made the transition very easy.” He made good connections with professors. He received “a lot of feedback” and educational, faith-based support. Susan described her first term experience as “welcoming.”

**Negative comments from admissions staff.** Alison said, “Sometimes you hear a complaint” concerning another student’s conduct. Laura said that occasionally a student went “to the wrong classroom or a professor [did] not show up.” Kayla said, “Students who have been out of college for a long time are nervous, scared, unsure of abilities.” Brad said the first term experience depended on the course. He said the first term experience was different in online classes. Kayla and Laura said that online courses could be difficult because expectations may not be fully understood or navigation was dissimilar between
courses. Kayla described some new students feeling “overwhelmed” during their first term at the university.

**Negative comments from administrative staff.** Anthony described the first term for some new students as “everything is new to them.” They were not comfortable. He also said the first term could be very different among students in online classes. Beverly also said the first term was overwhelming for some students. However, she believed that community college students were more overwhelmed than others. She described the feeling as, “How am I going to juggle my family, my coursework, my employment, and get all it all done?” She added that the work-life-school balance was more difficult for full-time students. Kathy described the first term for some new degree completion program students as “culture shock.” She added that some new students were ill-prepared for university level work. Paul also said many new students did not know what to expect. Peggy agreed the first term was challenging for some students and noted a lack of transition support for struggling students.

**Negative comments from students.** Brenda described not knowing what to expect from the first term at the university. Brenda experienced feelings of “fear,” “anxieties,” and “excitement.” George said, “Well, of course, the first classes are always a little intimidating. When you transfer in, you don’t know what to expect.” Cynthia described her first term as “a little rocky at first.” She explained there was a lack of advisement on an appropriate course load.

**Perceptions of new degree completion program students to take university classes.** Admissions and administrative staff were asked their perceptions of the
preparedness of new degree completion program students to take university classes. Students were asked to describe their feelings of preparedness for university coursework.

Positive comments from admissions staff. Kayla said that new students were “generally” prepared to take university classes. She added that degree completion program students were motivated to learn and wanted to be successful. Laura said that degree completion program students were more prepared to complete university coursework than traditional students. She credited their prior experiences in the community college and the workforce. Tim was unsure of new students’ prior college experience, but hoped that their previous experiences academically prepared them for junior and senior level coursework. He said success coaches should send new students information about how to function at the university level. Alison said students who transferred from community colleges were the most prepared to complete university coursework.

Positive comments from administrative staff. Anthony said new students who attended supportive and challenging community colleges were “extraordinarily prepared.” He added that admissions policies gave new students a chance to be successful at the university level. Beverly and Paul said some new students were very well-prepared for the next level of college work. Kathy believed that students who transferred from community colleges had similar experiences in university-level courses. Peggy also said most new degree completion program students were well-prepared, but more prepared in the major courses since many of them completed applied science programs at the community college.
**Positive comments from students.** Cynthia and Susan said they “didn’t have any issues” with preparedness for university coursework. Cynthia credited familiarity with Blackboard, the learning management system used by the university to deliver online classes. Susan credited prior experience with the major courses from the community college and workforce. George was also ready to be successful in university level classes:

> Once I got done with the community college level, I felt that I was able to successfully come into the university level and successfully complete those classes.

There were also a lot of classes that you take as a new student at the university as far as learning how to navigate the library system. Any hesitation that I would have had about coming from the community college to the university level, I feel like it was addressed very well. I felt like that whatever I was not prepared for, which I felt that I was very prepared for it, but whatever hesitation that I did have, it was addressed upon the first semester at [Trust University].

**Negative comments from admissions and administrative staff.** Laura suggested that some underprepared students demonstrated a lack appropriate guidance from the community college. Anthony said underprepared students were on a “wider continuum”: “The range is very broad.” He explained that some students find university programs to be easier than community college, and some students “have no chance of successfully completing them.” Anthony said the admissions policies of near open enrollment caused the university to admit students who were significantly underprepared. Kathy described the level of preparedness as a “mixed bag.” Beverly agreed that under-preparedness was due to more than one factor: “I
don’t think you can point to one thing.” Paul was also unsure why some new degree completion program students were not prepared for university coursework. He suggested that some community college students “didn’t respond to that challenge in a way that prepared them for further study.” Kathy said the level of preparedness depended on the community college, the subject studied, and the student. Paul and Kathy noted that some degree completion program students had been out of college for many years. Speaking to the changes in technology, Kathy said, “Somebody coming back to the university today who hasn’t done that in 10 to 15 years; I think there’s whole different learning curve.” Overall, Beverly described preparedness as a “50/50 shot.” She recognized the rigor among community colleges and universities varied. She and Peggy noted that “reading and writing” were areas in which degree completion program students were least prepared.

*Negative comments from students.* Brenda said, “I was definitely not prepared.” She described her feelings of unpreparedness:

> My best-case scenario—this way I can explain it. [Community college name] was kind of like you're in a little kiddy pool. The day after graduation and classes started at [University], it's like you take one step and you're going from kiddy pool to ocean.

Diane said she was “intimidated by writing research papers,” but lost some of the intimidation of writing after attending the university. Susan was surprised by the level of work required in the general education courses. She said she had spent more time on the general education courses than the major courses:
I have put more hours into Old Testament this semester than I have my other class, which is a business class. I think these are courses that it’s nice to have the knowledge, yes it teaches you research, but in the real world are we really using that? I am not going to use Old Testament out here.

**Impressions of professors at the university.** Admissions and administrative staff and students were asked their general impressions of the professors at the university. The university utilized a combination of full-time and adjunct faculty to teach online and on-site courses in the degree completion program.

**Positive comments from admissions staff.** Alison described the degree completion program professors as excellent: “We are very fortunate.” Kayla said she was “impressed” by the professors: “Some are the best.” Alison and Kayla said most of the degree completion program professors wanted students to succeed. Kayla added that most professors “go the extra mile.” Tim said the degree completion program professors were not “doing it for the money.” Most of the professors taught “for the love of teaching.” Brad described the professors as “experts.” He said most of the professors “come from their field.” Professors brought work experience to the discipline they taught and provided practical knowledge to students.

**Positive comments from administrative staff.** Anthony described his impression of professors as “positive.” He said most professors “want to teach and take pride in being a teacher.” He added that most of the degree completion program professors met expectations and requirements. Paul agreed, “We have excellent faculty.” He added that student feedback
was positive. Beverly also said most of the professors wanted students to succeed. She and Peggy said most of the professors enjoyed teaching in the degree completion program and understood the unique needs of adult students. Beverly added that some “go beyond the call of duty.” Speaking to accountability, Anthony said, “When faculty succeed, students succeed.” University policies should provide clear guidelines, opportunities for professional development, and feedback and counsel for continuous improvement. Kathy said full-time faculty received training twice a year and adjunct faculty received training once a year.

Positive comments from students. Brenda described professors as “wonderful.” Cynthia described professors as helpful:

For the most part, most of them were understanding to technical issues and whatnot because during that time there was a lot of updating of Blackboard, so there was a lot of downtime that required a delay in papers being submitted or assignments being done. The biggest thing I found is as long as you reach out to them, they were understanding about it.

Diane said, “I have not had one that I didn’t like.” George described professors as “very personable.” Susan also said some professors understood adult student work-life balance. Speaking about one particular professor’s teaching, Susan said he “applied it to real life.”

Negative comments admissions and administrative staff. Alison said she heard of “some complaints along the way.” Kayla said sometimes professors were unable to connect with students. Beverly said some professors were more rigorous than others. Paul said some student feedback suggested that some professors were not highly engaged. He said
engagement could be a challenge in online classes. He said unless effort was made by the professor, students could easily feel disconnected. Tim believed the use of “a lot of adjuncts” caused issues for students. Peggy agreed that communication with adjuncts could be difficult. She said connecting adjuncts to the university could be difficult. However, she said full-time faculty were not as engaged as adjuncts with the degree completion program. Anthony said any weaknesses in professors was the responsibility of the university. He said current policies and procedures lacked clear guidance on expectations and support for professors teaching in the degree completion program. Kathy recognized the current evaluation of adjunct faculty was insufficient. She and Paul also recognized the need for more professional development and training opportunities for adjunct faculty. Paul suggested teaching adult students was not intuitive for most professors. He said it “requires some training.”

Negative comments from students. Brenda described some professors as “stern, strict, intimidating.” Susan described one professor as not as good as others. She said he expected memorization: “You make someone memorize it, they’re going to memorize it for that term and forget it the next term.” She also said the professor did not understand the unique needs of adult students.

General classroom setting and atmosphere. Admissions and administrative staff and students were asked to describe the general classroom setting and atmosphere. Tim described the on-site classroom setting as lecture-style with group discussions. Anthony said the on-site classroom setting was a traditional college environment: “Rows of seats or in a
circle…Very standard.” Paul mentioned the on-site setting of community colleges where the university leased classroom space. Peggy added that the on-site courses were held two evenings per week at each center. Degree completion program classes were currently held on the main campus and 11 additional sites across North Carolina. Extensive online delivery was also provided. Nine of the 10 degree completion programs could be completed entirely online. Tim said online classes required a high degree of dedication and motivation. Brad agreed that students must be highly self-motivated to complete online classes. He added that online classes required a high degree of self-reliance. Peggy described the classroom atmosphere as “different than a traditional undergrad class.” Adult students typically had different class discussions. Class discussions were based in life and work experiences.

Positive comments admissions staff. Alison, Brad, Kayla, and Paul described the classroom atmosphere as engaging, interactive, and encouraging. Kayla said the atmosphere was “very professional.” Alison said the professors did a “great job of engaging students.” Brad said students received more direct help from professors and classmates in an on-site classroom setting. Alison said students connected through discussion boards in online classes. She said students could get to know each other without seeing each other. Kayla said the online class atmosphere was similar to the on-site classroom. Brad agreed that “professors do a good job of making coursework the same in either seated or online classes.” Laura described the online class atmosphere as “open and welcoming.” She said professors could structure the online class “almost like sitting in the same room with a person.” She said the online “atmosphere is as good online as it is in the seated environment.” Brad and
Tim credited small class sizes for the high level of engagement. Laura was complimentary to
the community colleges where the university leased classroom space. She said the
community college facilities were “exceptional learning environments.”

**Positive comments from administrative staff.** Paul agreed the community college
facilities were “well-equipped.” He said university students were allowed to use the
community colleges facilities fully. Beverly also credited small class sizes. She said smaller
classes promoted better discussion and learning. Students “feel more comfortable asking
questions.” She said faculty get to know students better in smaller classes. Anthony also
said the classroom atmosphere was “open” and “supportive.” Students could communicate
freely. Anthony believed online classes could be designed to have a high level of
relationship, engagement, and learning. Paul also said online classes could be welcoming
and helpful. He added that various strategies were used to engage and welcome students.
Kathy agreed the university had “great tools in [its] online arsenal.” Beverly also said
professors could integrate the same type of environment fairly close to the on-site classroom
experience.

**Positive comments from students.** Brenda also mentioned the free flow of discussion
in on-site classes. She said, “You can learn better that way.” George described on-site
classes:

As far as in the class, the instructors make you feel a part of what you're learning.
They take the time to make sure to explain what you need to know. They use a
variety of materials to make sure that you're successful in the class that you are
taking, as far as computers and PowerPoints and interactive learning objects, which are very helpful as a student in the classroom. With it being a smaller classroom size, they are able to help you as an individual with things that you might be struggling with.

Susan said the on-site classroom atmosphere was “very nice,” “comfortable,” and “easy to get to.” She added that it was “easier to learn in an on-site classroom atmosphere. In online classes, George said he felt like he was in a classroom:

    Whether it be through online Skype sessions, or through the discussion board. You always feel that you can reach out to your professors, and they're always reaching out to you. Not only to let you know about coursework, but to offer a word of encouragement.

Diane also said professors held discussion boards in online classes to keep students involved with each other: “They [professors] try to keep you, even though you're not in a classroom setting, try to keep you in a group together whether it be with live chats each week or the discussion board.” Cynthia said professors set parameters early to ensure professional and courteous interactions among students:

    With online it is a different world when you're typing something versus how you say it because it can be taken out of context. So, you have to be careful what you type and how you type it because it can be misinterpreted very easily. A lot of the professors I had were very good at the very beginning saying in their orientation, be careful how you do this, and reminding everybody about the etiquette of online
classes. So, that did help a lot but every once in a while, things will get tense until somebody explained what they were meaning.

**Negative comments from admissions staff.** Alison said, “I don’t think there really is an atmosphere” in online classes. Laura said navigation could be difficult for students because there could be major differences in design among the online classes: “Some student cannot find links” because “tabs and links are called different things.” Tim said the class setting in “online and face-to-face are different.” Brad said the online class atmosphere could be “self-driven[…]Sometimes there is some self-teaching.” Tim agreed that students experienced more difficulty managing due dates of assignments in online classes.

**Negative comments from administrative staff.** Anthony said thinking there was not an atmosphere on online classes indicated professors were not implementing best practices. Anthony, Beverly, and Peggy said online classes varied in design and quality. Beverly and Peggy said online class quality “depends on the professor.” Anthony said some online classes could have little faculty interaction. Peggy said online class quality depended on professors’ “responsiveness and willingness to integrate technology.” Peggy and Paul agreed some degree of improvement was needed in online class quality. Kathy said on-site classroom quality also “varies very much with professors.” Paul also compared the differences in design in online classes to on-site classes being held in different buildings each semester. Changing classroom locations every semester “creates a sense of disorientation.”

**Negative comments from students.** Brenda recognized the differences in on-site classroom atmosphere, and Susan recognized online class quality depended on the professor.
Susan described a poor online experience was due to an unresponsive professor who was “lackadaisical in grading.” The professor did not provide study resources or regular feedback: “There was no help.” Cynthia described the online class atmosphere as “a different world.” George said some students could feel on their own in online classes. Diane struggled with having time to interact with each classmate through the discussion boards. Susan said online classes were a disadvantage compared to on-site classes because online classes did not have a set time to attend. She added that learning from classmates was more difficult in an online class setting. Tables 4, 5, and 6 summarize positive and negative comments concerning orientation and first term experience.
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aspect</th>
<th>Positive</th>
<th>Negative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Orientation</td>
<td>Email with ‘Getting Started’ document; Power Point on website; information was what new students needed</td>
<td>Not interactive; not required; no on-site information; “just a power point”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Most new students were “comfortable”; most first classes go smoothly; “students have what they need to begin classes”; motivated to learn; community college students are most prepared</td>
<td>Unprepared students may have been out of college for extended period of time; some students were “overwhelmed”; online classes could be difficult for some student; lack of guidance from community college</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preparedness</td>
<td>We are very fortunate”; “impressed”; most wanted students to succeed; not teaching “for the money”; taught “for the love of teaching”</td>
<td>Some professors were unable to connect with students; some professors were less rigorous than others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professors</td>
<td>On-site classes were engaging, interactive, and encouraging; discussion boards were used to engage students in online classes; online classes were “open and welcoming”; small class sizes produced high level of engagement; community college facilities were “exceptional learning environments”</td>
<td>Engagement can be difficult in online classes; “I don’t think there is an atmosphere” in online classes; navigation could be difficult for some students; class setting in “online classes and face-to-face are different”; “sometimes there is self-teaching” in online classes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class Setting and Atmosphere</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
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Table 5

*Summary of Positive and Negative Comments from Administrative Staff Concerning Orientation and First Term Experience*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aspect</th>
<th>Positive</th>
<th>Negative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Orientation</td>
<td>Comprehensiveness of emailed information; academic requirements were reviewed; ‘Getting Started’ document; information literacy course</td>
<td>“Inadequate”; “information overloaded”; “data dump”; need to “reexamine”; only documents sent to students; unsure if encouraged</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preparedness</td>
<td>Community college students were familiar with campus and classrooms; most students were fully engaged; most students were well-prepared; policies gave students more chance</td>
<td>“Everything is new to them”; some student “have no chance of successfully completing”; level of preparedness was “mixed bag”; preparedness was a “50/50 shot”; overwhelming for some students; some students did not know what to expect; lack of transition support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professors</td>
<td>Most “want to teach and take pride in being a teacher”; “we have excellent faculty”; most understood needs of adult students; “go beyond the call of duty”; “when professors succeed, students succeed”</td>
<td>Use “a lot of adjuncts”; full-time faculty were not as engaged as adjuncts; weakness was responsibility of university; evaluation of adjuncts was insufficient</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class Setting and Atmosphere</td>
<td>Community college facilities “well-equipped”; small class sizes promoted better discussion and learning; “open” and “supportive”; online classes could have high level of relationship, engagement, and learning</td>
<td>Use “a lot of adjuncts”; full-time faculty were not as engaged as adjuncts; weakness was responsibility of university; evaluation of adjuncts was insufficient</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 6

**Summary of Positive and Negative Comments from Students Concerning Orientation and First Term Experience**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aspect</th>
<th>Positive</th>
<th>Negative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Orientation</td>
<td>Information Literacy course was helpful; layout of schedule and requirements; presentation was “user-friendly”; “gave you what you needed”; emailed resources; “library was wonderful</td>
<td>Did not need a tour of main campus; “I honestly don’t remember an orientation”; lack of on-site support services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preparedness</td>
<td>Made good connections with professors; “a lot of feedback”; “welcoming”; “no issues”; community college prepared for university level coursework; ready to be successful</td>
<td>“Little intimidating”; “fear, anxieties”; “a little rocky at first”; not knowing what to expect; “I was definitely not prepared”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professors</td>
<td>“Wonderful”; “generally helpful”; “very personable”; “I have not had one that I didn’t like”; some professors understood adult student work-life balance</td>
<td>Some professors were “stern”; “strict”; “intimidating” some expected memorization; some did not understand unique needs of adult students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class setting and atmosphere</td>
<td>Free-flow of discussion in on-site classes; students received individualized assistance; “very nice”; “comfortable”; “easy to get to”; in online classes students felt “as if you are in the classroom”; discussion boards kept students with each other</td>
<td>Online class quality depended on the professor; online classes were a “different world”; some students could feel on their own in online classes.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
University support of student completion. Admissions and administrative staff and students were asked how the university supported student completion.

Admissions staff. Alison said, “Every person at the university wants to see students succeed,” and that it “goes from the bottom all the way to the top.” Brad said, “There’s a lot we do that encourages students to complete.” Laura said completion was a priority of the university. Brad, Kayla, Laura, and Tim said success coaches were the primary staff that demonstrated the university’s commitment to student completion. Brad and Laura noted that success coaches were highly invested in student completion. Kayla said success coaches informed students early concerning completion requirements by developing completion plans and course checklists that guided student to graduation. Kayla added that the completion plans allowed students to have reasonable completion expectations: “We try to get you in and out in the shortest possible time.” Brad and Tim also noted the completion plans as supportive to student completion. Kayla and Laura said that the flexibility of readmissions policies and course schedules were supportive to student completion.

Administrative staff. Anthony agreed the university put a huge investment in course completion. He also said success coaches took great care to plan courses that led to completion in the best timeframe possible. The longitudinal planning by success coaches was an asset to students. Kathy, Paul, and Peggy also said success coaches were the primary staff who supported student completion. Anthony, Kathy, and Paul noted frequent and ongoing communication by success coaches demonstrated support of completion. Paul added that faculty were supportive of student completion. He said faculty understood the
unique situation of working adult students. Anthony agreed that strong course rotations and scheduling courses for the benefit students demonstrated support of completion.

**Students.** Brenda described the support of her completion by the university as “100%,” “encouraging,” and “wonderful.” Cynthia described her faculty advisor as “extremely helpful.” Diane said of her advisor (success coach), “She was very helpful. Very nice. Helped me any time I had a question.” George said his advisor (success coach) laid out the completion plan to provide the best path to completion:

As far as the advisors, as I said before, the advisors are always there. They're just so helpful. They basically lay it out for you. They still let you make your own decisions, which I like, but they do give you what they feel would be the best path for you to take in order to complete the program in the time frame that you want to complete it in. Being able to have options, but also being told what they thought was best, that was a good feeling. You felt like you had control of your education. But at the same time, you feel like you have the support of the staff to help guide you in the direction that you were trying to go in.

Cynthia encountered personal issues during the last semester she attended the university. She said her advisor offered to help. Susan said the most supportive aspects of the program were “letting me take two at a time” and not imposing a deadline on completion. She said, “I didn’t feel pressured.”

**University inhibits student completion.** Admissions and administrative staff and students were asked how the university inhibited completion.
Admissions and administrative staff. Brad and Tim were unsure that the university inhibited completion. Alison did not believe the university intentionally inhibited completion. Laura said, “There are some things we can’t fix.” Anthony described inhibit as a “strong word.” Kayla, Laura, and Peggy said continuously raising the tuition rate was inhibitive to student completion. Peggy said financial aid was not structured to cover costs for adult students. Kayla added that the tuition rate prevented many students from being able to pay residual costs after financial aid was applied. Laura said students deferred enrollment until enough financial aid was available. Brad said there was a mindset at the university that adult students did not need as much financial assistance as traditional, residential undergraduate students. Laura noted a decline in retention for the first time since the degree completion program began. Kathy also was unsure about the retention efforts for the program. She said degree completion program retention efforts were “nothing proactive.” Paul was also concerned about retention efforts in online classes. Beverly believed the university did not fully recognize the unique needs of degree completion program students. She said academic support services did not fully meet the needs of distance students. Anthony said curricula designed by personnel whose priorities were not the same as students or employers in the field were inhibitive to completion. He said some programs were set up by academic priorities rather than professional and educational needs of students. He said such curricula presented “academic hurdles” inhibiting some students’ completion. Anthony also mentioned the practice of developing completion plans not as inhibiting but as weakening of student resolve: “We take too much responsibility for the completion plan.”
There is “not enough ownership, collaboration, or communication with the student” about the completion plan. The practice diminished student ownership and investment in completion. He said we “need to strike a better balance.” Brad also recognized a weakness in practice that did not equip recruiters to discuss completion plans with potential degree completion program students.

*Students.* Brenda, Diane, and George said the university did not inhibit their completion. George said, “If I could rank you guys on a scale of 1 to 10, you’d get an 11 or 12.” Susan was also unsure if “anything rises to that level.” Susan, who was still enrolled at the time of the interview, only mentioned that general education courses made completion more difficult. She said the university should not emphasize general education courses more than major courses. Cynthia, who was not enrolled at the time of the interview, said, “They haven’t, except for financial aid, that part.” She explained:

> With all the classes I took, because I didn't know how many, because it wasn’t listed on the website about how many prereqs needed to happen to complete all of it. I racked up $21K in student loans quickly whereas I could have kept it down if I would have known about all the prereqs and been able to take them prior. One thing that I did find, when I did go in, I asked during that first semester about taking some prereqs outside of [Trust University] to try to keep cost down, and by that point I was in and they said, you have to take this many in order to complete. That would have been nice to know ahead of time, which I didn't until I was already in.
Cynthia mentioned personal issues as primary reasons preventing her from completing:

At the time they [professors and advisor] were extremely helpful and they tried to accommodate during my last semester when I got burned out and I just couldn't handle it. They tried to work with me and I tried working with them. But at that point I was done and I just couldn't do it.

Diane, who was not currently enrolled at the time of the interview, also cited personal issues preventing her from completing:

After I started my first semester, no, second semester, my husband and I at the time started going through a divorce. With two small children and working and that stress, I just couldn't finish, and I had to withdraw mid-semester. It took me a while to get started back. Then, being a single mom and trying to go to school at 37 years old, it's not easy. The idea of student loans at 37 kind of makes my stomach turn. I want to finish, definitely, and that's a goal, but I don't know when it will be.

Table 7 summarizes responses of how the university supported and inhibited completion.
Table 7

*Summary of Responses of How the University Supported and Inhibited Completion*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respondents</th>
<th>Supportive</th>
<th>Inhibitive</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Admissions staff</td>
<td>Completion was a priority of the university; success coaches; completion plans; flexible readmission policy</td>
<td>Unsure that the university inhibited completion; continuously raising tuition; financial aid structure;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>University puts huge investment in completion; success coaches; frequent ongoing communication; faculty; course rotations and schedules</td>
<td>Weakening of student resolve (not inhibit) by success coaches taking too much responsibility for completion plans; curricula designed by academic priorities not professional and education needs of students; lack of support services for distance students; retention efforts were “nothing proactive”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students</td>
<td>“100 percent”; “Encouraging”; “Extremely helpful”; Faculty advisor and success coaches; Completion plans; “Letting me take two [classes] at a time”</td>
<td>“I didn’t have much interaction with the university”; transfer credit policy prevented taking prerequisites after entering the last 32 hours of a program</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Improvements and recommendations for first term experience.** Admissions and administrative staff and students were asked how the university could improve the first term experience of transfer students.

Anthony and Beverly believed the best way to improve degree completion program students’ first term experience was to develop a credit-bearing course similar to the traditional, residential students’ University 111 course. The course would address students’
concerns of academic expectations; teach students how to navigate policies, procedures, and practices; and show them how to take responsibility for completion plans. Beverly said degree completion program students relied too much on success coaches. She said the course would also go beyond orientation and teach new students about the university mission and values. Anthony said, “We can design a dynamite course.”

Brenda believed transfer students needed to be more prepared to attend the university. Adding a University 111-type course could address gaps in preparation for university-level coursework. George and Susan could not think of anything to improve the first term experience. George said he experienced a great transition to university. Susan said, “I had a good first term.”

Recommendation codes presented several suggestions to improve the first term experience of nontraditional transfer students. Responses from Beverley, Brad, and Tim concerning orientation resulted in a recommendation to use existing technology to provide virtual orientation sessions. Responses from Beverly and Kathy concerning how the university supported completion resulted in two recommendations: (a) develop comprehensive retention practices specific to degree completion program students, and (b) develop academic support options that meet the needs of distance students. Responses from Paul concerning professors teaching in the degree completion program resulted in the recommendation to develop year-round professional development and training on teaching adult students.
Summary of interviews. Interviews were conducted to collect data to answer the research questions. Interview participants included five university admissions staff, five university administrative staff, and five students with complete status ($n = 2$) and not complete status ($n = 3$). Interview questions included:

- describing recruiting and admissions policies, procedures, and practices;
- identifying recruiting and admissions policies, procedures, and practices that were most and least helpful to potential degree completion program students;
- identifying what was missing from recruiting and admissions policies, procedures, and practices;
- suggesting how the university could improve recruiting and admissions policies, procedures, and practices;
- describing the orientation of new degree completion program students;
- identifying aspects of the orientation that were most and least helpful;
- perceptions of student preparedness to take university level courses;
- impressions of professors, classroom setting and atmosphere;
- suggesting how the university could improve first term experience;
- describing how the university supported student completion; and
- describing how the university inhibited student completion.

Findings were presented in the order of the interview questions and by positive and negative magnitude-coded responses. Findings from interviews concerning admissions policies were
positive. Most interview responses, positive and negative, focused on admissions procedures and practices.

**Observations**

Two types of recruitment events, a transfer fair and a classroom presentation, were conducted to gain a better understanding of recruiting and admissions practices of nontraditional students at Trust University. Observing the communication between recruiter and potential degree completion program students captured admissions policy and procedure in action. Hearing descriptions of what is said and how it is said to recruit potential degree completion program students assisted the researcher in gaining a better understanding of the case. An observation protocol was used (see Appendix O).

**Transfer fair.** The transfer fair was located at a community college in southwestern North Carolina. The event was set up in a gymnasium with various tables representing North Carolina universities and four-year colleges. Trust University had a good table location; the recruiter said, “I got here early so I could get the best spot.” The atmosphere was noisy and busy with a large crowd of potential degree completion program students. The activity consisted of community college students visiting various tables to discuss transfer to four-year colleges and universities. The recruiter dressed in business casual attire. The researcher observed that the recruiter demonstrated professional, personable, and knowledgeable characteristics that the student participants said were helpful to their transfer experience. He said of his attire, “I discovered that wearing a suit and tie is intimidating to a lot of students [for a transfer fair]. They seem more likely to approach the table when I wear this sweater
vest.” There was good traffic at Trust University’s table. The recruiter remained very busy during the time of observation. There were more students visiting the table than he was able to speak to personally. The recruiter did not know the demographics of the students before the day of the transfer fair. All of the students were in Early College and only asked about Trust University’s traditional, residential undergraduate programs. The Early College students did not fit the degree completion program student profile. With the exception of the current number of residential students at the university, the recruiter’s communication was accurate and consistent with admissions policies, procedures, and practices. The recruiter adapted well to communicating the traditional, residential program information to the student visitors.

Classroom presentation. The presentation was conducted at a community college in northwestern North Carolina. The classroom was small with a traditional lecture-style layout. The classroom was well-appointed with multimedia teaching tools. The recruiter dressed in business casual attire. The researcher observed the recruiter demonstrate friendly, personable, and knowledgeable characteristics that the student participants noted as being important to their transfer experience. The recruiter was prepared to present for approximately 10 minutes of class time. Students in attendance were currently enrolled in a human services program. Students were in various stages in completing program requirements. There were seven students in the classroom. The recruiter distributed materials to students as they entered the classroom. She said the materials included degree completion program information and an inquiry card. She asked the students to fill out the
inquiry cards, “so [she could] keep up with [them] along [their] education journey.” One student submitted an inquiry card while waiting for other students and the instructor to arrive. The instructor arrived and introduced and welcomed the recruiter. Three students entered the classroom at varying times during the presentation.

The recruiter began the presentation describing how the human services program at the community college transferred well to the human services program at the university. Students received 64 hours of transfer credit from the applied science program. She compared the transferability of the human services program to public universities. Students who completed the human services program at the community college could enter Trust University as juniors as opposed to freshmen or sophomores at the public universities. She explained that Trust University’s tuition was higher per credit hour than public universities, but the transfer-friendliness resulted in less time required to complete the bachelor’s degree. She said the total program cost was about the same as at public universities. The recruiter described the importance of completing a bachelor’s degree. She said students were receiving a good foundation at the community college, but that most employers expected applicants to have a bachelor’s degree. The recruiter introduced the new incentive approved by the university and explained the application process.

The recruiter asked for questions. One question concerned where the university classes were held. The recruiter responded that the university held classes at the community college’s higher education center located approximately five minutes from its main campus. The recruiter reiterated the “transfer-friendliness” of the program. One student expressed
amazement at how many credit hours transferred to the university. She said, “I’m sold.”

Another question concerned the tuition rate. The recruiter stated the tuition rate was $422 per credit hour with a $35 technology fee associated with online classes. There were no other questions.

The recruiter concluded the presentation by distributing her business card and novelty items. Of the seven students, five submitted inquiry cards. Overall students were attentive and appreciative of the information. Communicating cost of the program continues to be a challenge for recruiters. Based on the per credit hour rate, the university can be perceived as too expensive. The recruiter attempted to overcome the perception by emphasizing the impact of transferability on total program cost. With the exception of not mentioning the “Pathway Agreements” and two new online course options in the human services program, the recruiter’s communication was accurate and consistent with admissions policies, procedures, and practices.

Summary of observations. Two types of recruitment events, a transfer fair and a classroom presentation, were conducted to gain a better understanding of recruiting and admissions practices of nontraditional students at Trust University. The transfer fair provided Trust University an opportunity to recruit community college transfer students who were a targeted audience for the degree completion program. The transfer fair was located at a community college in southwestern North Carolina. The event was set-up in a gymnasium with various tables representing North Carolina universities and four-year colleges. All of the students were in Early College and only asked about Trust University’s traditional,
residential undergraduate programs. The Early College students did not fit the degree completion program student profile. The recruiter adapted well to communicating the traditional, residential program information to the student visitors. With the exception of the current number of residential students at the university, the recruiter’s communication was accurate and consistent with admissions policies, procedures, and practices.

The classroom presentation was conducted at a community college in northwestern North Carolina. Students were currently enrolled in a human services program and in various stages in completing program requirements. There were seven students in the classroom. The student audience fit the primary degree completion program student profile. The recruiter emphasized the “transfer-friendliness” of the degree completion program. She explained that Trust University’s tuition was higher per credit hour than public universities, but that the transfer friendliness resulted in less time required to complete the bachelor’s degree. She said the total program cost was about the same as at public universities.

Communicating cost of the program continues to be a challenge for recruiters. Based on the per credit hour rate, the university can be perceived as too expensive. The recruiter attempted to overcome the perception by emphasizing the impact of transferability on total program cost. With two minor exceptions, the recruiter’s communication was accurate and consistent with admissions policies, procedures, and practices.

**Document Analysis**

Documents were reviewed that stated and described admissions policies and procedures such as a program catalog and university website (see Appendix Q). Additional
documents reviewed were those used to facilitate recruiting and admission processes such as brochures and admission application. Archived newspaper articles and institutional data provided a description and historical perspective of Trust University’s service to nontraditional students.

**Catalog.** The 2013–2014 catalog was reviewed for admissions policies and procedures at the time student participants transferred to the university. Admissions criteria for the degree completion program are located in Appendix Q. Stated policies were consistent with interview responses from admissions and administrative staff. Admissions procedures were also consistent with interview responses from admissions and administrative staff and students. Stated policies in proceeding catalogs were also consistent with interview responses concerning changes in the transfer credit hour threshold required for admittance from 60 to 48 hours.

**Website.** The current homepage presented a featured admissions page where visitors selected among a traditional undergraduate program, degree completion program, or graduate program. The degree completion program admissions homepage featured a photo of adults in graduation regalia with a headline, “Finish your degree.” Above the featured photos were links for how to apply, cost and financial aid, success coaching, and contact information. Scrolling down below the featured photo there were links to view programs, request information, and repeated links to apply and contact information. Scrolling further down the page, there were three featured aspects of the degree completion program: (a) online excellence, (b) transfer-friendly, and (c) student-centered. Each featured aspect contained
descriptions and links to additional information about each aspect. The degree completion program “How to Apply” page presented admissions policies and procedures consistent with interview responses from admissions and administrative staff. The application was easily accessible from the “How to Apply” and “Apply Today” links from the degree completion program admissions homepage. There was an optional “Quick Application,” but the link was not easily located. The transfer-friendly feature linked to another page with more information on transfer credit. The transfer credit page mentioned the Independent Comprehensive Articulation Agreement (ICAA) between North Carolina community colleges and North Carolina independent colleges and universities and the Pathway Agreements between Trust University and six community colleges were also mentioned. Additional links were provided to North Carolina community college course equivalencies and how ICAA transferred to Trust University degree completion majors. Established Pathway Agreements were not presented on the website. Specific transfer credit information was not available on the website as described in interview responses from admissions staff and students.

**Recruiting materials.** At the time student participants transferred to the university, recruiting materials consisted of a general program brochure and program-specific fact cards. Stated policies and procedures were consistent with interview responses from admissions and administrative staff and students. Current materials also accurately stated admissions policies and procedures.
**Historical documents.** Several newspaper articles and advertisements highlighted the degree completion program debut in 1978. Proceeding articles and advertisements focused on openings of additional sites and development of new programs. The message was Trust University provided greater opportunities for adult learners. Historical institutional data depicted enormous growth in degree completion program enrollment in 1990s. Since 2013, degree completion program enrollment has experienced a steady decline from approximately 1,100 students to a current enrollment of approximately 600 students.

**Summary of document analysis.** Documents were reviewed that stated and described admissions policies and procedures such as a program catalog and university website. Additional documents reviewed were those used to facilitate recruiting and admission processes such as brochures and admission application. Archived newspaper articles and institutional data provided a description and historical perspective of Trust University’s service to nontraditional students. Admissions procedures were also consistent with interview responses from admissions and administrative staff and students. Although stated policies and procedures for the degree completion program were accurate and consistent on the website, specific transfer credit information was not available as described in interview responses from university staff and students. Stated policies and procedures in recruiting materials were consistent with interview responses from university staff and students. Current materials also accurately stated admissions policies and procedures. Archived newspaper articles to current advertisements proclaimed a message that Trust University provided greater opportunities for adult learners.
Interpretation of Findings

**Admissions policies, procedures, and practices.** Overall, findings from interviews concerning admissions policies were positive. Trust University was considered “transfer-friendly” among all interview participants. Admissions and administrative staff described admissions requirements as demonstrating near open enrollment. Some staff recognized the risks of allowing the opportunity for academic success to a wider range of applicants. However, one administrator, Paul, was adamant that a structure of support was in place to minimize “admissions casualties.” Observation findings from the classroom presentation supported the positivity expressed by potential students of the university’s transfer credit policy. One student expressed amazement at how many credit hours transferred to the university. She said, “I’m sold.” Document analysis depicted the degree completion program admissions website as “transfer-friendly.”

Most interview responses focused on admissions procedures and practices. Findings concerning procedures are summarized under the category: Transfer Credit. Findings concerning practices are summarized under the category: Communication.

**Transfer credit.** Tim said obtaining transcripts from applicants was the least helpful aspect of the admissions process. During peak recruiting, Brad said the transcript evaluation process created a “bottleneck.” Anthony, Beverly, and Peggy recognized the length of time to obtain and evaluate transcripts was also least helpful to potential students. Anthony stated the university subjected applicants to perform a function they were “unaccustomed to and uncomfortable with.” Beverly described the process as a “disservice to the student.”
Communication. Positive and negative responses from interview participants could be characterized as what was communicated with potential students about admissions policies and procedures, how it was communicated, and when it was communicated. Although four of the students described the admissions staff as helpful and the admissions process as smooth, there were issues with communication. Brenda said there was a lack of transfer credit assistance at the beginning of the process. Cynthia said she was not informed of the number of prerequisite courses that were required: “That shocked me a little bit”. She said had she known, she would have completed the prerequisites prior to applying to the university: “I could have been a little more successful in finishing.” Cynthia also expressed some frustration with the website for a lack of program information. She was unable to find specific information on transfer credit or program prerequisites. Susan said there was a lack of guidance and explanation of the program. She expressed particular frustration with not receiving accurate information about course delivery. One staff member expressed similar concerns about communication. Laura admitted that not all information was disclosed during recruiting, such as details of transfer credit and remaining courses needed. Since students may not know exactly how many hours were needed to complete the program until they reached a success coach, some students could feel misled by recruiters. Laura added that the online presence of the program did not meet the needs of potential students. Potential students “have to dig deep to find what you’re really wanting.” She said the website was “not designed to recruit adult students.” Observation findings from the transfer fair and classroom presentation demonstrated that the recruiter communication was accurate and
consistent with admissions policies, procedures, and practices. Document analysis, as expressed by students and staff, revealed that specific transfer information was not available on the website.

Transfer credit and communication are interconnected. The length of time needed to obtain and evaluate transcripts impacts the timing of communication of transfer credit to applicants. Three of the students expressed a lack of specific transfer credit and remaining program requirement information in the early stages of the admissions process. Brenda brought her transcripts to an admissions fair. Even though the delay of obtaining transcripts was eliminated, the recruiter was unable to provide Brenda with specific transfer credit information. Success coaches (advisors) have the expertise in evaluating transcripts to provide a close estimate of transfer credit to applicants. In 2013, however, success coaches (advisors) did not enter the admissions process until accepted students had been registered for their first term.

**First term experience.** Most of the interview responses were positive concerning the first term experience including impressions of professors and classroom atmosphere. Interview responses were not as positive concerning the orientation of new degree completion program students. Admissions staff described the orientation as not interactive. Tim said the orientation was “just a PowerPoint.” Administrative staff described the orientation as inadequate; only documents were sent to students. Several staff expressed concern that the orientation was an overload of information. Anthony said the information was “too much” for what concerned new students at the orientation stage of the process: “We
take it to be valuable information to students because it’s ultimately important to the
institution.” Beverly said the university needed to “reexamine” the orientation of new degree
completion program students. Student, Susan, said, “I honestly don’t remember an
orientation.” Interview responses revealed some concerns about the support services
provided to degree completion program students. Staff member, Beverly, said academic
support services did not fully meet the needs of distance students. Student, Susan, did not
think the support services were as good as they could be because distance students could not
meet with someone on-site.

Supportive of completion. Based on interview responses from admissions and
administrative staff, Trust University is committed to nontraditional transfer student
completion. Based on interview responses from each group, student success coaches
primarily demonstrated this commitment to completion. Numerous responses credited the
completion plan that success coaches developed and provided to students as most supportive
of completion. In addition to the work of success coaches, flexible course rotations and
enrollment were noted several times by students and staff as supportive of completion.

Inhibitive of completion. Most respondents were unable to identify policies,
procedures, and practices they perceived to directly inhibit completion. A few participants
said the university’s cost and financial aid structures for nontraditional transfer students were
inhibitive to completion. One administrator, Anthony, specified curricula that were designed
with academic priorities over professional and educational needs of students inhibited
completion. Responses from staff and one of the students, Susan, indicated the academic
support services inadequately designed to meet specific needs of distance students inhibited completion. Anthony described a secondary influence, not as strong as inhibitive, of university practice on completion. Success coaches bore too much responsibility for the completion plans which could result in weakening student resolve.

**Summary**

Chapter 4 presented research findings of collected data from interviews, observations, and document analysis. Research findings related to research questions guiding the study. Positive and negative interview responses provided insight to the university’s support of nontraditional transfer student completion through recruiting and admissions policies, procedures, and practices in the degree completion program. Positive and negative interview responses provided insight to the university’s support of nontraditional transfer student completion through the first term of enrollment. Positive and negative interview responses provided insight to the university’s inhibition of nontraditional transfer student completion through recruiting and admissions policies, procedures, and practices in the degree completion program. Positive and negative interview responses provided insight to the university’s inhibition of nontraditional transfer student completion through the first term of enrollment.

Observations conducted at a transfer fair and a classroom presentation at two North Carolina community colleges demonstrated consistency with interview responses concerning recruiting and admissions policies, procedures, and practices. Observations also demonstrated accuracy of communication-stated admissions policies and procedures.
Document analysis included reviewing the program catalog, website, recruiting materials, and archived articles and advertisements. The documents accurately stated admissions policies, procedures, and practices. The website in particular was consistent with interview responses from staff and students. Chapter 5 focuses on the discussion of these findings and implications for further study and practice.
CHAPTER FIVE
DISCUSSION

This discussion includes a restatement of the purpose of the study, research questions, and, problem studied; connections to the literature; discussion of findings; limitations of the study; implications to practice and research; and conclusions.

Introduction

The purpose of this single, intrinsic, evaluative case study was to examine the problem of nontraditional transfer student completion at a private, religious-based, doctoral degree-granting, moderate research university in North Carolina. The following research questions guided the study.

1. How do institutional policies, procedures, and practices encountered during the process of admission and first term of enrollment at a four-year university support completion of nontraditional transfer students?

2. How do institutional policies, procedures, and practices encountered during the process of admission and first term of enrollment at a four-year university inhibit completion of nontraditional transfer students?

The focus of the research was to evaluate institutional policies, procedures, and practices that influence nontraditional transfer student completion of a bachelor’s degree and ways the institution can enact supportive policies, procedures, and practices to reduce or eliminate barriers to nontraditional transfer student completion.
Problem

Since 1978, Trust University has met the needs of nontraditional students through the Degree Completion Program (DCP). The DCP was designed to serve students who had earned a degree in a technical field, designated as an A.A.S. or Associate in applied science degree, from a community college. Trust University accepted the A.A.S. degree as representative of the completion of freshman and sophomore years of college. Trust University, through the DCP, provided general education coursework in combination with junior and senior curricula in a major field which would culminate into a bachelor’s degree. Students completed a minimum of 64 credit hours, approximately half representing general education coursework and approximately half representing major coursework. The DCP established a reputation for being transfer-friendly particularly to students who had completed applied science programs. Until the establishment of a new articulation agreement in 2015 between public community college and universities, Trust University was the only institution among public universities and one of only a few private institutions to accept A.A.S. degrees or up to 64 credit hours of an applied science program toward a bachelor’s degree.

Before the advent of online education, Trust University’s degree completion program was a unique system of delivering distance education to nontraditional students. Early locations of Trust University’s degree completion program ranged from community colleges to a renovated school turned visitor information and community center. Trust University understood the importance of taking education where the student resided. Commuting to the
university campus or attending classes during the day did not serve the needs of most nontraditional students. At peak enrollment in 2004, the DCP had almost 1,100 students enrolled. In early 2000, Trust University began adding a few online courses each semester to its DCP offerings. Trust University has admitted to slowness in full adoption of online education but demonstrates a sense of pride in currently having nine of the 10 DCP majors available entirely online. During the past six years, Trust University’s DCP has experienced a decline in face-to-face enrollment in preference to online courses and programs.

A 2-year rotation of coursework designs each degree program in the DCP. Students can attend part-time or take additional hours to extend or accelerate completion. In a 2015 enrollment and retention trends report (see Appendix B), Trust University listed graduation rates for students in fall 2013 at only 13.07% after 2.3 academic years. With an additional academic year, students reached completion at about a 54% rate. However, students remained six and eight academic years to near an 80% graduation rate. This data prompted the initial interest and selection of the case. The low completion rates identified for the nontraditional transfer student population at Trust University was a problem of practice that required further study.

**Connections to the Literature**

National initiatives by foundations and the U.S. Department of Education are focused on developing policy and institutional practices that improve the completion rates and other measures of success for community college students (Bailey & Alfonso, 2005; Rutschow et al., 2011). This national initiative has been driven by the Obama administration and
Achieving the Dream (ATD) launched by the Lumina Foundation in 2004 (Rutschow et al., 2011, p. 1). The objective of the initiative was to help community colleges build a “culture of evidence,” using data to examine student performance over time and to identify barriers to academic progress (Rutschow et al., 2011, p. 1).

Student success at community colleges impacts completion at four-year colleges and universities through the function of transfer. Students who start at community colleges to transfer to four-year universities are at a disadvantage in completing a bachelor’s degree compared to students who start at a four-year college or university (Long & Kurlaender, 2009; Sandy, Gonzalez, & Hilmer, 2006). This disadvantage is occurring due to a number of personal challenges such as having low socioeconomic status, lacking academic preparation, working full- or part-time, being a first-generation college student, and being of nontraditional age (Miller, 2013). Transfer students over the age of 24 with an associate’s degree are 31% less likely to complete a bachelor’s degree than those 20 years old and younger (The National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2015). Mullin and Phillippe (2013) stated that researchers rarely examine the university role in transfer or the extent to which students’ post-transfer success is due to the actions of the receiving institution. In a Texas case study, Miller (2013) identified challenges specific to the institutional transfer process encountered by community college students at a four-year university: (a) integration problems, (b) financial aid problems, (c) transfer credit problems, (d) academic problems, (e) specific transfer needs, and (f) cross-institution curriculum problems (Miller, 2013).

Townsend (2008; 1993; 1995) also identified challenges specific to the institutional transfer
process. By far the most-mentioned frustration was the application process due to the lack of prior credits accepted toward completing a desired major (Townsend, 2008, p. 71). In other case studies, Townsend (1993; 1995) found that transfer students felt very much on their own during the application and admission processes, citing a failure of some institutions to communicate with the prospective transfers. Either the transfer students received no information or incomplete orientation information (Townsend, 1993, p. 8).

Transfer students experience adjustment to an environment that can differ significantly from the community college (Townsend, 2006, p. 73). Townsend (2008) noted that students felt “like a freshmen again” (p. 73) in their lack of knowledge of how their new college worked. The responsibility for assisting transfer students to have successful transitions to four-year universities rests with both community colleges and four-year universities (Berger & Malaney, 2001, p. 18). Institutions should focus on achieving a seamless transfer process and the integration of transfer students once at the receiving institution (Townsend, 2006, p. 452). Transfer students need to know in advance about what credit will and will not transfer to a receiving institution (Townsend, 2008, p. 74). Townsend (2008) urged administrators and faculty at both community colleges and four-year universities to work together on articulation agreements. The approach to orienting transfer students needs to be reexamined (Townsend, 2006; 2008). Some community college transfer students did not want to be treated as freshman (Townsend, 2006, p. 452) but would like to have an orientation that emulated the one for freshman by providing multiple opportunities for students to get to know one another and form connections that would last beyond
orientation (Townsend, 2008, p. 73). Institutions should concentrate on what specific action can be taken to facilitate transfer students’ transitions (Townsend, 2008, p. 76). Neither community colleges nor four-year universities can ignore the responsibility for developing institutional policies to ease the transfer process (Townsend, McNerny, & Arnold, 1993, p. 442).

**Discussion of Findings**

Admissions and administrative staff and students were asked how the university could improve the recruiting, admissions, and first term experiences of potential degree completion program students. Recommendation codes also presented suggestions for improvement. The following section summarizes those improvements and discusses the viability of implementation.

**Admissions policies, procedures, and practices.** Admissions and administrative staff and students recognized the need to improve the timing and quality of communication of program characteristics (i.e. course delivery), transfer credit, and remaining program requirements for completion. Staff member, Kathy, suggested that the website should have a transfer worksheet where potential students could input prior college coursework and receive a close estimate of what would transfer to the university. She said the transfer worksheet “would be a nice tool” for potential students. Students responded similarly to admissions and administrative staff. Brenda said more “up front” information about what programs are offered and transfer credit allowed would be an improvement for the transfer student recruiting and admissions experience. Cynthia said more information was needed on the
website such as illustrating the nature of the program and a better description of how the program can be completed. She also said to include program completion plans on the website. Recommendations ranged from training and equipping recruiters in the field to assist with transfer credit questions to streamlining the obtainment of prior institution transcripts. Additional recommendations included improving inter-institutional communication and collaboration.

Utilizing a transfer credit estimator on the website would help satisfy the need to communicate specific transfer credit information to potential students early in the admissions process. Implementing the digital transfer worksheet would require extensive and complex programming. Unknowns include the extent that current technology staff possess the appropriate programming expertise, the comparability of needed programming with current software platforms, the availability of current human resources to be deployed to the project, and the need to invest in additional software programs and human resources to produce the transfer credit worksheet. Launching a transfer credit estimator may also not align with current university marketing priorities. Cross-training enrollment development officers (recruiters) and success coaches (advisors) would also assist in meeting the need to communicate specific transfer credit information earlier in the admissions process. The task of training enrollment development officers to learn how to estimate transfer credit from prior institution transcripts would fall to success coaches. One challenge to implementation is the mindset that transfer credit evaluation is an academic function. The findings show a
need for a shift in the process of transfer credit evaluation, but first there needs to be a shift in
thinking about which staff should be capable and responsible for that part of the process.

Streamlining the obtainment and evaluation of prior institution transcripts is another
way to meet the need of communicating specific transfer credit information earlier in the
admissions process. Currently, applicants are responsible for obtaining prior institution
transcripts and submit them for evaluation. Staff member, Anthony, asked, “Can’t the two
institutions just talk to each other?” At the time of this study, preliminary discussions among
university administration had not yielded a plan to shift the responsibility of requesting
official transcripts from prior institutions to the university. The university can obtain
transcripts from the National Student Clearinghouse, but only from participating institutions.
In 2014, the university began establishing the official program Pathway Agreements with
individual North Carolina community colleges to provide clearer transfer pathways for
students in A.A.S. programs. At the time of the study, the university had secured agreements
with six community colleges for the ten major degree completion programs. The university
accepts the belief that inter-institutional communication and collaboration are effective in
supporting nontraditional transfer student completion. However, with 58 North Carolina
community colleges, Pathway Agreements have not demonstrated the most efficient strategy
of implementation.

Admissions and administrative staff and students recognized the need to the increase
the visibility of the university’s degree completion program. Alison emphasized that
“community colleges should recognize recruiters.” She stressed the importance of recruiters
making frequent visits “making people aware of our program.” Student, George, also said the university needed more presence at the community colleges: “Being very visible in the community college would be a great asset for the university and students.” Alison recognized that more effort was needed in marketing the degree completion program: “Don’t leave out DCP.” Tim also recognized the need to increase the visibility of the university through a “consistent marketing plan” and constant presence in the marketplace. Kayla noted that the university was still unknown to many. Laura added that the online presence of the program did not meet the needs of potential degree completion program students. Potential degree completion program students “have to dig deep to find what you’re really wanting.” She said the website was “not designed to recruit adult students.”

Interview responses resulted in a recommendation to discuss and implement strategies to increase the university’s visibility at community colleges. Visiting current community college partners more frequently and establishing additional community college relationships are two strategies to target the problem of visibility. One challenge to implementation is the lack of current human resources to provide coverage for additional visits. Admissions personnel are strained under the current recruiting schedule. University priorities could prevent investment in additional recruiting and admissions staff for the degree completion program. Administrator, Paul, suggested one way to increase visibility of the university could be to set up recruiting offices at remote locations. The university currently has offices at two North Carolina community colleges and owns a facility an hour northeast of the main campus. The offices are located in higher education centers where degree completion
program classes are held, but have been underutilized by admissions staff. The university-owned facility is used to hold degree completion program and graduate classes, but has not been fully integrated in strategic plans for recruiting and enrollment. The current admissions staff level is inadequate for implementing additional remote recruiting offices. More than just the level the of human resources, additional visits and recruiting offices would require considerations of deployment and purpose. A lack of deployment and purpose strategies has challenged the effectiveness of current remote office locations.

**University inhibits completion.** Admissions staff said cost and financial aid structures were inhibitive to student completion. Peggy said financial aid for nontraditional transfer students was not structured to cover costs of the program. Brad said there was a mindset at the university that adult students did not need as much financial assistance as traditional, residential undergraduate students. Kayla added that the tuition rate prevented many students from being able to pay residual costs after financial aid was applied. Laura said nontraditional transfer students deferred enrollment until enough financial aid was available. At the time of this study, several incentives had been implemented: Early Registration discount, Refer a Friend grant, and Legacy grant. Amounts ranged from $250 to $500. Additional study on the effectiveness of these incentives is needed. Implementing comprehensive cost and financial aid structure changes that support nontraditional transfer student completion remain a challenge for the university.

**First term experience.** Admissions and administrative staff and students were asked how the university could improve the first term experience of nontraditional transfer
Recommendation codes also presented several suggestions to improve the first term experience of nontraditional transfer students.

**Orientation.** The orientation could be improved by using existing technology to provide virtual orientation sessions. The orientation should also be focused on the immediate needs of new degree completion program students. At the time of this study, a virtual new student orientation was being developed. Additional study is needed on the effectiveness of the virtual orientation.

**University 111.** Anthony and Beverly believed the best way to improve degree completion program students’ first term experience was to develop a credit-bearing course similar to the traditional, residential students’ University 111 course. The course would address student concerns of academic expectations; teach students how to navigate policies, procedures, and practices; and show them how to take responsibility for their completion plans. Beverly said degree completion program students relied too much on success coaches. She said the course would also go beyond orientation and teach new students about the university mission and values. The course could also address the shortcomings of the current orientation which provides too much information at one time. The course would provide multiple, targeted interventions of the information that new students need to be successful at the university. Anthony said, “We can design a dynamite course.” Implementing a University 111-type course for degree completion program students faces challenges, as Anthony describes:
But will we be able to staff it and will we be able to get it through our system of shared governance with the faculty? I would expect so, but we don't know. Let's just say we can't staff it because it would come out of academic resources, and there aren't enough academic resources, then are we going to have the creativity to take it out of the academic box and say this is actually a required co-curricular activity? What does that look like and what kind of teeth we have put in it? Wouldn't it be ironic if something that is onboarding as a graduation requirement but not necessarily an academic requirement?

Impression of professors. Responses concerning the impression of professors teaching in the degree completion program resulted in the recommendation to develop year-round professional development and training on teaching adult students. At the time of this study, the Center of Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL) had begun augmenting professional development and training with a focus on adjunct faculty and teaching adult students. Also, at the time of this study, the university had implemented a new evaluation program for adjunct faculty. Additional study on the effectiveness of these efforts is needed.

University inhibits completion. Responses concerning how the university inhibited completion resulted in two recommendations to improve the first term experience of degree completion program students: (a) develop comprehensive retention practices specific to degree completion program students and (b) develop academic support options that meet the needs of distance students. Past and current practice of utilizing professional advising staff (success coaches) has resulted in good retention rates of degree completion program students.
However, at the time of this study, the retention rate had dropped 6% over the last academic year.

One factor impacting retention is the degree completion program’s transition to more online delivery. Supporting completion of nontraditional transfer students through retention practices as online delivery grows will continue to be a challenge for the university. The university has adapted academic support services to help meet the needs of distance students. The library has a distance student instructional librarian focused on the research needs of degree completion program students. There is a writing center that supports distance students using virtual conference software. Tutoring is also offered online through a third-party software provider. University survey data showed high satisfaction among distance students who used these services; however, overall usage by degree completion program students was very low. Recent anecdotal data revealed a discomfort in using these types of services among degree completion program students. Susan, a student in this study, remarked that the support services were not as good as they could be because distance students could not meet with someone on-site. Additional study on the effectiveness of the delivery of current support services for distance students is needed.

Anthony said curricula designed by personnel whose priorities were not the same as students or employers in the field were inhibitive to completion. He said some programs were set up by academic priorities rather than professional and educational needs of students. He said such curricula presented “academic hurdles” inhibiting some students’ completion.
He described the challenge to implementing changes in curriculum quickly enough to meet student and employer demand:

When you come to talk about that first-term experience we're actually talking about things that by university governance are actually in the hands of the faculty. We have to negotiate our way into the improvement of that experience when it's around the academic part, so that's a slower slog in transition.

**Limitations**

The homogeneity of the sample may limit generalizing the findings beyond the population. The case study design binds the data to one institution limiting the applicability of the findings across all four-year universities.

**Implications for Practice**

The findings from the study will be used to improve institutional policy, procedure, and practice decisions that will result in the increase of enrollment, persistence, and completion of nontraditional transfer students at a local four-year university. The study provides insight to both community colleges and four-year universities on what policies, procedures, and practices support and inhibit nontraditional transfer student completion. The identification of institutional factors that support and inhibit persistence can lead to needed policy, procedure, and practice changes that improve completion rates for both types of institutions. This study provides much needed empirically-based findings to a four-year university to make strategic policy, procedure, and practice decisions that support better completion rates of nontraditional transfer students.
Improvements to admissions procedures and practices with the likelihood for immediate implementation include streamlining the obtainment and evaluation of transcripts. The university should expand the use of the National Student Clearinghouse to obtain official transcripts of applicants. Additional exploration is needed to consider the university offering a service to applicants to obtain official transcripts from institutions not affiliated with the clearinghouse. The university should consider allowing applicants to submit unofficial transcripts to determine preliminary acceptance decisions. Recruiters should be trained to evaluate transcripts to identify preliminary transfer credit information. These improvements should help address the need for communicating transfer credit information and a transfer-friendly message to potential students earlier in the admissions process. The task of training enrollment development officers to learn how to estimate transfer credit from prior institution transcripts would currently fall to success coaches. One challenge to implementation is the mindset that transfer credit evaluation is an academic function. The findings show a need for a shift in the process of transfer credit evaluation, but first there needs to be a shift in thinking about which staff should be capable and responsible for that part of the process.

First term improvements that will be pursued due to this study are a redesign of orientation and a University 111-type course. An inaugural virtual orientation was conducted for new students entering in the fall of 2017 and is expected to continue in future terms. Initial results from student satisfaction surveys were positive. These initial results provide a basis for developing a University 111-type course as the mechanism to communicate additional academic and non-academic policies, procedures, and practices that students need
to know to be successful at the university. Until a University-111 course can be implemented, success coaches will need to develop additional advising interventions to address the academic and non-academic policies and procedures no longer presented in the orientation. The University 111-type course can be designed by current admissions and administrative leadership in the degree completion program. A course proposal would go through the university’s shared governance structure. Several committees such as degree completion program council, undergraduate curriculum, and general education require approval of the new course. Finally, the course is presented to full faculty for approval. Degree completion program leadership should include faculty in the design stage to create early acceptance of the course.

**Implications for Research**

This study adds to current case study research on transfer student adjustment. This study is one of the first to focus on the institutional policies, procedures, and practices encountered during the process of admission and enrollment in the first transfer semester and to observe the influences of those encounters on completion. The study is also one of the first to apply a theoretical framework of adult student attrition beginning at transfer from the community college to the four-year university and the completion of junior- and senior-level coursework that culminates in the attainment of a bachelor’s degree. This study is also one of the first to focus solely on nontraditional, commuter, transfer students who attended community college prior to transferring to a four-year university. Other four-year universities with significant populations of nontraditional transfer students may consider
using this study as a model to learn more about what affects completion rates of nontraditional transfer students enrolled at their particular institutions.

**Suggestions for Further Research**

For Trust University, additional studies are needed to determine the influences of current initiatives including the new success coach model, virtual orientation, incentives, and new adjunct evaluation on nontraditional transfer student retention and completion. Additional study on student use of online support services is needed to understand the current underutilization of these services. The findings from this study suggest that Trust University should also research specific influences of cost, financial aid, and curricula structures on nontraditional transfer student retention and completion. A quantitative approach to understand influences on nontraditional transfer student completion by focusing on transfer credit hours and GPA variables would complement this case study.

**Conclusion**

College completion is one of the most compelling policy issues in higher education (McClendon, Tuchmayer, & Park, 2009). A private, liberal arts, religious-based institution, Trust University discovered completion rates for nontraditional transfer students in the degree completion program declined during the last couple of academic years. The declining trend was new to Trust University. Despite research findings that students who start at community colleges and transfer to four-year universities are at a disadvantage in completing a bachelor’s degree (Long & Kurlaender, 2009; Sandy, Gonzalez, & Hilmer, 2006), Trust University had enjoyed strong completion rates among nontraditional transfer student
populations since the beginning of the degree completion program in 1978. The purpose of this single, intrinsic case study was to examine the problem of declining nontraditional transfer student completion at Trust University. Since the phenomenon was new to the institution, the focus of the research was to gain a better understanding of institutional policies, procedures, and practices at the beginning, or admission stage, of enrollment that influence completion of the nontraditional transfer student population.

Findings showed Trust University supported completion in several ways. Interview responses emphasized a university commitment to nontraditional transfer student completion. Admissions policies demonstrated a transfer-friendliness for nontraditional students with prior community college experience. Admissions staff were described as helpful with the admissions process. Student participants described their advisors as supportive by citing completion plans and course checklists advisors provided them as essential to their completion. Admissions and administrative staff said the new success coach model, advisors entering the admissions process earlier to assist applicants, had strengthened the level of completion support demonstrated by the university. The university also provides flexible course schedules with a wide range of online delivery and multiple centers across North Carolina. Academic support services are better designed for distance students than in past with virtual conferencing and online tutoring platforms. Findings demonstrated how these policies, procedures, and practices supported completion. Helpful and knowledgeable staff were credited for a smooth transition from community college to the university. According to the Theory of Student Departure in Commuter Colleges and Universities propositions, the
more the student perceives the institution exhibits institutional integrity, the lower the likelihood of the student’s departure; and the more a student perceives the institution is committed to the welfare of its students, the lower the likelihood of the student’s departure (Braxton et al., 2004). University staff and student participants expressed a strong commitment by the university to assist nontraditional transfer students to realize the goal of completing a bachelor’s degree. As Alison said, speaking of the university staff as a whole, “We’re here for the student.” Transfer-friendly credit policies applied more prior college credit toward the university, reducing remaining credit and time required to complete a degree completion program. The level of transfer credit allowance significantly influences initial commitment to an institution (Townsend, 2008). Braxton et al. (2004) theoretical framework proposition 14 states that the initial level of institutional commitment to the institution affects the subsequent commitment to the institution.

Figure 8 provides an illustration of the findings of current recruiting admissions policies, procedures, and practices. Findings showed Trust University inhibited completion in several ways. Staff indicated that the cost and financial aid structures did not meet the needs of nontraditional transfer students. Program curricula designed with academic priorities over the employment needs of students indicated an inhibition to completion. Although, transfer credit policies appeared to support completion, staff and student participants said that specific transfer credit information was not communicated early enough in the admissions process. The obtainment and evaluation of prior college transcripts caused a delay in communicating specific transfer information until later in the admissions process.
Figure 8. Conclusions concerning recruiting and admissions policies, procedures, and practices.
Some students did not have a clear understanding of transfer credit and remaining program requirements until during or after the first term of enrollment. Findings demonstrated how these policies, procedures, and practices inhibited completion. Cynthia, a non-completer, said not being informed of the number of prerequisite courses “shocked me a little bit”. She said had she known, she would have completed the prerequisites prior to applying the university: “I could have been a little more successful in finishing.” Not having a clear understanding of transfer credit earned and remaining requirements early in the admissions process can extend students’ time to completion. Students who do not have sufficient financial aid to cover program costs simply cannot persist or must defer enrollment until a financial pathway is secured. Students who find program curricula do not provide the means to achieve employment and career goals may switch programs, thus delaying completion or transfer to other institutions with curricula they to perceive align with employment needs.

The findings presented Trust University with several opportunities to improve current efforts to support nontraditional transfer student completion. Figure 8 illustrates how recruiting and admissions policies, procedures, and practices would change based on the findings of this study. One suggestion was to improve the admissions processes by instituting a mechanism that streamlines obtaining and evaluating transcripts from prior institutions. There needs to be a shorter turnaround time on communicating transfer credit information to potential students. Another suggestion to streamline the transfer credit process was to train recruiters to evaluate prior institution transcripts for estimations of transfer credit. Creating a digital transfer credit estimator for the website would also provide
potential students with specific transfer credit information early in the process.

Improvements in admissions procedures and practices will strengthen current transfer-friendly policies.

Figure 9 illustrates findings of current first term policies, procedures, and practices and how improvements would change the first term policies, procedures, and practices. Providing only the information needed to begin the first term of enrollment would be an improvement to the current orientation of new degree completion program students. Too much information too soon was considered unhelpful to new students. Delivering orientation through a virtual conference platform would allow personal connections and relationship-building more effectively than email. Establishing a University 111-type course would allow additional interventions with new students to communicate important information that the current orientation attempts to provide. University 111 designed and delivered for nontraditional transfer students could also address integration problems encountered during transition to the university (Miller, 2013). Student participants who are overwhelmed or unsure what to expect would benefit from the content of a University 111-type course. Shifting responsibility for developing and maintaining completion plans to students should strengthen student resolve. Success coaches would work with students to develop the completion plans during the first term of enrollment. In successive
Current First Term Policies, Procedures, and Practices

- Orientation (Procedures/Practices)
  - Information overload/Static

- Attend Classes (Practices)
  - Under-prepared students

- Academic Environment (Procedures/Practices)
  - Not sufficient adjunct training

- Academic Outcomes (Policies)

Improved Recruiting and Admissions Policies, Procedures, and Practices

- Orientation (Procedures/Practices)
  - Condensed/interactive

- University 111-Type Course (Procedures/Practices)
  - Prepares students

- Attend Classes (Procedures/Practices)

- Academic Environment (Procedures/Practices)
  - Professional development/Evaluation

- Academic Outcomes (Policies)

*Figure 9.* Conclusions concerning first term policies, procedure, and practices.
terms of enrollment, success coaches would remind and assist students in updating completion plans instead of taking full responsibility for development, revision, and maintenance.

Trust University has several opportunities to address current institutional policies, procedures, and practices that inhibit nontraditional transfer student completion. To strengthen university commitment completion, Trust University will need to restructure financial assistance to demonstrate that nontraditional transfer students are a priority of the institution. Academic departments should reexamine current degree completion programs and evaluate the curricula with current employment and market demands in mind. Academic departments should also consider new program development. The degree completion program and university administrative leadership will need to work with faculty to design programs that not only provide credentials but also prepare nontraditional students for what current employers require. New partnerships with community colleges, employers, and like institutions must be established and nurtured. Improvement in the success of nontraditional transfer students cannot be accomplished in isolation. The university should research why distance students underutilize current support services. Is underutilization a sign of discomfort with online delivery of support? Do support services need to be offered on-site at distance centers? Support services designed and delivered specifically for distance students is a primary demonstration of commitment to nontraditional transfer student completion.
REFERENCES


http://aacc.nche.edu/AboutCC/whsummit/Documents/Conference_Papers_Booklet.pdf#page=37


APPENDICES
## APPENDIX A

### Summary of Literature

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Type of Inquiry</th>
<th>Findings/Conclusions</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Nontraditional Students</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Bamber &amp; Tett, 2010</td>
<td>Organizational and pedagogical implications of the inclusion of working class adults in higher education.</td>
<td>Case study</td>
<td>Negative effects of inequality must be countered at institutional and course levels.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bash, 2003</td>
<td>Influence of adult learning programs on institutional thinking and planning for the 21st century.</td>
<td>Historical and institutional analysis</td>
<td>Curricular, policy, and institutional changes needed to underwrite, promote, and support universal access to lifelong learning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bean &amp; Metzner, 1985</td>
<td>Describes rise in nontraditional student enrollments, defines the nontraditional undergraduate student, and develops a conceptual model attrition process for these students.</td>
<td>Literature review and conceptual model</td>
<td>Main difference between the attrition process of traditional and nontraditional students is that nontraditional students are more affected by the external environment than by social integration variables.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beaudin, 1982</td>
<td>Improving persistence of adult students.</td>
<td>Descriptive report</td>
<td>Programs should address real needs, learning environment should be supportive, programs should counter barriers to participation, institutions should communicate accurately</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reference</td>
<td>Methodology</td>
<td>Analysis Type</td>
<td>Findings</td>
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<tr>
<td>Burton et al, 2001</td>
<td>Investigates whether recognized barriers to learning still exist for adult learners in a higher education.</td>
<td>Mixed-methods analysis</td>
<td>Barriers of accessibility of the institution, finance and family commitments were minimized by contact with students early in the process of retuning to college.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Choy, 2002</td>
<td>Summarizes important developments and trends in education.</td>
<td>National report</td>
<td>Nontraditional students beginning postsecondary education were more likely than traditional students to drop out without earning any degree.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deggs, 2011</td>
<td>Develops a contextualization of the meaning of barriers among adult learners.</td>
<td>Phenomenological study</td>
<td>Identified three types of barriers: intrapersonal, career and job-related barriers, and academic-related.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ekstrom, 1972</td>
<td>Examines situational, dispositional, and institutional barriers to women’s participation in higher education.</td>
<td>Literature review</td>
<td>Identified institutional barriers including admissions practices, financial aid practices, institutional regulations, types of curriculum and services adopted, and faculty and staff attitudes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ellsworth et al, 1991</td>
<td>Discusses student perceptions of barriers at a four-year university</td>
<td>Quantitative study, factor analysis</td>
<td>Identified institutional barriers including lack of response to inquiries, frustration with admissions, academic</td>
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<tr>
<td>Author(s) and Year</td>
<td>Focus</td>
<td>Methodology</td>
<td>Findings</td>
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<tr>
<td>Garland, 1993</td>
<td>Discusses variables associated with persistence and withdrawal.</td>
<td>Qualitative study, ethnography</td>
<td>Identified institutional barriers including cost, poor communication, course scheduling problems, lack of tutorial assistance, and instructional design problems.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hadfield, 2003</td>
<td>Discusses attracting and retaining adult students.</td>
<td>Descriptive report</td>
<td>Other than quality of academics, customer service is the most important factor in success or failure of adult education programs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kasworm, 1993</td>
<td>Discusses the misuse of the term nontraditional.</td>
<td>Descriptive report</td>
<td>The term, nontraditional, used to label people as “other”, weak and deficient. Higher education should seek to empower adult students.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kassworm, 2003</td>
<td>Synthesizes research and understanding of adult student participation in undergraduate studies.</td>
<td>Literature review</td>
<td>New theory and understanding needed to provide broader and more complex frameworks to support adult student participation in undergraduate studies.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kasworm, Sandmann, &amp; Sissel, 2000</td>
<td>Suggests ways to reframe and redefine relationship of higher education to adult learners.</td>
<td>Descriptive report</td>
<td>Programs and services for adult learners must move from the periphery to mainstream of institutional culture.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Source</td>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>Methodology</td>
<td>Findings</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Molhotra et al, 2007</td>
<td>Argues focusing on adult learners benefits institutions.</td>
<td>Quantitative study, factor analysis</td>
<td>Identified six factors: bad experience, institutional reasons, lack of resources, course offerings, cost/benefit ratio, and childcare</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pusser et al, 2007 Shepherd &amp; Nelson, 2012</td>
<td>Identifies adult perceptions of deterrents to reentry to higher education.</td>
<td>Lumina Foundation report</td>
<td>Identified several areas of concern and opportunities for change. Institutions must provide adult learners convenient and affordable access, create flexible subsidies, and develop innovative planning tools to increase student success.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shugart, 2008</td>
<td>Discusses ways to meet challenge of educating 54 million workers without degrees.</td>
<td>Descriptive report</td>
<td>Business and policy imperatives drive need to adapt to growing adult learner population. Institutional focus on traditional students (financial aid, curricula, course delivery) must adapt to adult learners.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theil, 1984</td>
<td>Examines roles of institutions pertaining to access, response to expectations, and adaptation adult learners.</td>
<td>Literature review</td>
<td>Substantiated that adults face situational, dispositional, and institutional barriers to participating in higher education.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Recommended the</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>U.S. Department of Labor, 2007</strong></td>
<td>Explores the obstacles adult learners face in trying to earn credentials for the job market, innovative practices that target adult learners, and changes in institutional and governmental policies to help more adults earn higher education credentials.</td>
<td><strong>National report</strong></td>
<td>following: develop federal-state partnerships to promote and test innovative approaches to increasing access and success for adults in higher education, update federal student financial aid programs to stimulate and support postsecondary education of working adults, and create a national system to track and report educational and employment outcomes for adult learners over time.</td>
</tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Completion</strong></td>
<td><strong>Alfred, Ewell, Hudgins, &amp; McClenny, 1999</strong></td>
<td>Addresses policymakers’ concerns regarding “high performance” and provides a model for institutions to assess effectiveness.</td>
<td><strong>AACC report</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Author(s)</td>
<td>Methodology</td>
<td>Findings</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bailey &amp; Alfonso, 2003</td>
<td>Presents critical analysis of the state of research on the effectiveness on practices to increase persistence and completion at community colleges.</td>
<td>Research on persistence and completion yield few concrete insights on the effects of institutional policies on community college retention and completion.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belfied, Crosta, &amp; Jenkins, 2013</td>
<td>Introduces an economic model of student course pathways linked to college expenditures and revenues.</td>
<td>Indicated substantial differences in institutional efficiency across student pathways and significant institutional efficiency across strategies to support student completion.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clotfelter, Ladd, Muschkin, &amp; Vigdor, 2012</td>
<td>Measures success of community colleges by two dimensions: attainment of diploma or degree or completion of coursework required to transfer to four-year college or university. Summarizes a quantitative study, multiple regression.</td>
<td>Proportion of students who succeed according to either or both measures varied widely across community colleges. Illustrated significant challenges in identifying meaningful variation in performance of community colleges.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jenkins, 2006</td>
<td></td>
<td>Indicated clearest</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Author(s)</td>
<td>Study Description</td>
<td>Methodology</td>
<td>Findings/Conclusions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>McClenny, 2013</td>
<td>prior quantitative study on practices that promote community college student success.</td>
<td>Descriptive report</td>
<td>difference between high and low impact colleges was with support of minority students. Effectiveness was also indicated by alignment of programs and services to support student success. Comparing performance of different institutions should be approached with caution.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>McHewitt &amp; Taylor, 2003</td>
<td>Describes Achieving the Dream initiative and provides insights into leadership needed to transform institutional culture.</td>
<td>Descriptive report</td>
<td>Indicated a shift from access to success produced changes in admissions assessment and placement practices, redesign of courses and methodology, cooperative learning, and supplemental instruction, and early alert systems for struggling students.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miller, 2013</td>
<td>Describes study completed for a Virginia community college that analyzed transfer rates. Defines transfer rate, academic performance, and completion rate.</td>
<td>Descriptive report</td>
<td>Students who completed three to four courses, nearly one in four enrolled in a four-year college or university within 4 years of first enrolling in the Virginia community college.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Presents findings from two Pell Institute studies using mixed methods to</td>
<td>Descriptive report</td>
<td>First study indicated two-year institutions that have structured academic pathways, student centered culture,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Author(s)</td>
<td>Methodology/Findings</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monroe, 2006</td>
<td>Explore characteristics and experiences of low-income, first-generation community college students. Experiences and culturally sensitive leadership experience higher than expected transfer rates. Second study indicated that transfer students at four-year colleges experienced multiple problems with engagement, financial aid, and academics, and unmet need of specific transfer support. Illustrated the influences of past and present experiences, personal issues, institutional fit, academic integration, and institutional communication and procedures to nontraditional student attrition. A better understanding of how nontraditional students make meaning of transfer and departure experience may help institutions improve nontraditional student retention efforts.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rutschow et al., 2011</td>
<td>Examines the first 26 community colleges to join Achieving the Dream and tracks their progress through 2008. Found four of five Round 1 colleges adopted practices with moderate to strong culture of evidence. Colleges instituted a wide range of strategies to improve student achievement, but many</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wang, 2009</td>
<td>Studies baccalaureate attainment and college persistence of community college transfer students to four-colleges or universities.</td>
<td>Quantitative study, logistic regression</td>
<td>remained small in scale. With only a few exceptions, trends in student outcomes remained unchanged. Colleges that made the greatest strides had a broad-base involvement from administrators, faculty, and staff; strong research departments; regular program evaluations; and successful program to scale.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wyner, 2012</td>
<td>Discusses standards in U.S. community college education, using the author's experience working to select winners for the Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence.</td>
<td>Descriptive report</td>
<td>Indicated probability of attaining a bachelor’s degree was significantly associated with gender, SES, high school curriculum, educational expectation upon entering college, GPA earned at community college, college involvement, and math remediation. Four domains of excellence described:</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
college degree completion rates, learning outcomes, labor market outcomes, and equitable outcomes. Also addressed correlation of community college education to labor-market demands and U.S. community college program Achieving the Dream.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Transfer</th>
<th>Examinations</th>
<th>Methods</th>
<th>Findings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Berger &amp; Malaney, 2001</td>
<td>Examines how pre and post-transfer experiences influence adjustment (measured by academic achievement and student satisfaction) of community college transfer students on a four-year college campus.</td>
<td>Quantitative study, factor analysis and regression</td>
<td>Indicated that students who are best informed who most actively prepared for transfer were most likely to achieve higher grades and were more satisfied in the university environment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hills, 1965</td>
<td>Summarizes research on conducted from 1928 through 1964 pertaining to success of two-year college transfer students.</td>
<td>Descriptive report</td>
<td>Concluded that transfer students should expect to suffer an appreciable drop in grades in the first semester, after transfer grades tend to improve in direct relation to length of schooling, and native students, as a group, perform better than transfer students.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laanan, 2001</td>
<td>Explores the phenomenon of</td>
<td>Descriptive report</td>
<td>Transfers students are likely to experience a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Townsend, 1993</td>
<td>transfer shock, research on transfer adjustment process, and perspectives on college adjustment.</td>
<td>Describes obstacles to transfer and retention of urban community college transfer students to an urban public university.</td>
<td>Case study</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Townsend, 1995</td>
<td>Focuses on perceptions of urban community college transfer students to a private, four-year, religious-based institution on two aspects: transfer process and academic environment.</td>
<td>Exploratory case study</td>
<td>Suggested community college students who succeeded at the university were fairly self-reliant and able to persist with little institutional assistance. Additional findings indicated that community college students were confused and shocked by different standards and expectations of the university.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Authors</td>
<td>Focus</td>
<td>Methods</td>
<td>Findings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------</td>
<td>-------</td>
<td>---------</td>
<td>----------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Townsend, 2008</td>
<td>Describes transfer students’ experiences at large, public, research-extensive university</td>
<td>Focus groups</td>
<td>Transfer credit evaluation was the most frequent frustration expressed by transfer students pertaining to the admissions process at the four-year university. Transfer students did not want to be treated as freshmen. Transfer students wanted orientation to be geared toward their specific needs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Townsend &amp; Wilson, 2006</td>
<td>Describes factors affecting academic and social integration of community college transfer students to a large, public, research-extensive university</td>
<td>Case study</td>
<td>Indicated that community college transfers students needed more initial assistance than was given. Four-year institution needed to take more responsibility for integrating these transfer students into the university.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Townsend, McNerny, &amp; Arnold, 1993</td>
<td>Focuses on academic performance of community college transfer students at a four-year university.</td>
<td>Quantitative study, correlation analysis</td>
<td>Indicated the best predictor of academic success of community colleges transfer students at the university was community college GPA.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### APPENDIX B

**Enrollment and Retention Trends Report**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reference Semester</th>
<th>Enrollment</th>
<th>Graduation Date</th>
<th>Graduates</th>
<th>Continuing Semester</th>
<th>Continuing Semester</th>
<th>Potential Continuing Students</th>
<th>Actual Continuing Students</th>
<th>Retention Rate</th>
<th>Semester Retention Rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Spring 2004</td>
<td>540</td>
<td>May-04</td>
<td>163</td>
<td>Spring 2004</td>
<td>777</td>
<td>627</td>
<td>80,685</td>
<td>Spring to Summer</td>
<td>71.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fall 2004</td>
<td>817</td>
<td>Aug-04</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>Spring 2005</td>
<td>541</td>
<td>721</td>
<td>84,077</td>
<td>Fall to Spring</td>
<td>75.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spring 2005</td>
<td>579</td>
<td>May-05</td>
<td>134</td>
<td>Spring 2006</td>
<td>645</td>
<td>656</td>
<td>84,733</td>
<td>Spring to Summer</td>
<td>75.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fall 2005</td>
<td>823</td>
<td>Aug-05</td>
<td>128</td>
<td>Spring 2006</td>
<td>720</td>
<td>726</td>
<td>86,236</td>
<td>Spring to Fall</td>
<td>77.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spring 2006</td>
<td>562</td>
<td>May-06</td>
<td>157</td>
<td>Spring 2007</td>
<td>761</td>
<td>647</td>
<td>81,025</td>
<td>Spring to Fall</td>
<td>72.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fall 2006</td>
<td>840</td>
<td>Aug-06</td>
<td>155</td>
<td>Spring 2007</td>
<td>761</td>
<td>942</td>
<td>84,360</td>
<td>Spring to Fall</td>
<td>72.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spring 2007</td>
<td>1525</td>
<td>May-07</td>
<td>131</td>
<td>Spring 2008</td>
<td>808</td>
<td>700</td>
<td>83,125</td>
<td>Spring to Fall</td>
<td>74.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fall 2007</td>
<td>1021</td>
<td>Aug-07</td>
<td>130</td>
<td>Spring 2008</td>
<td>808</td>
<td>1,092</td>
<td>84,520</td>
<td>Spring to Summer</td>
<td>71.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spring 2008</td>
<td>521</td>
<td>May-08</td>
<td>142</td>
<td>Spring 2009</td>
<td>723</td>
<td>781</td>
<td>80,058</td>
<td>Spring to Fall</td>
<td>71.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fall 2008</td>
<td>1057</td>
<td>Aug-08</td>
<td>126</td>
<td>Spring 2009</td>
<td>723</td>
<td>1,080</td>
<td>84,597</td>
<td>Spring to Summer</td>
<td>71.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spring 2009</td>
<td>546</td>
<td>May-09</td>
<td>136</td>
<td>Spring 2010</td>
<td>656</td>
<td>656</td>
<td>84,962</td>
<td>Spring to Fall</td>
<td>71.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fall 2009</td>
<td>1072</td>
<td>Aug-09</td>
<td>131</td>
<td>Spring 2010</td>
<td>656</td>
<td>1,059</td>
<td>84,360</td>
<td>Spring to Summer</td>
<td>71.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spring 2010</td>
<td>577</td>
<td>May-10</td>
<td>137</td>
<td>Spring 2011</td>
<td>761</td>
<td>629</td>
<td>82,054</td>
<td>Spring to Summer</td>
<td>75.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fall 2010</td>
<td>1025</td>
<td>Aug-10</td>
<td>132</td>
<td>Spring 2011</td>
<td>761</td>
<td>1,077</td>
<td>84,442</td>
<td>Spring to Fall</td>
<td>73.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spring 2011</td>
<td>534</td>
<td>May-11</td>
<td>133</td>
<td>Spring 2012</td>
<td>656</td>
<td>656</td>
<td>84,962</td>
<td>Spring to Fall</td>
<td>71.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fall 2011</td>
<td>1035</td>
<td>Aug-11</td>
<td>130</td>
<td>Spring 2012</td>
<td>656</td>
<td>1,080</td>
<td>84,597</td>
<td>Spring to Summer</td>
<td>71.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spring 2012</td>
<td>554</td>
<td>May-12</td>
<td>135</td>
<td>Spring 2013</td>
<td>782</td>
<td>704</td>
<td>84,716</td>
<td>Spring to Fall</td>
<td>77.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fall 2012</td>
<td>1052</td>
<td>Aug-12</td>
<td>130</td>
<td>Spring 2013</td>
<td>782</td>
<td>1,077</td>
<td>84,442</td>
<td>Spring to Summer</td>
<td>73.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spring 2013</td>
<td>570</td>
<td>May-13</td>
<td>133</td>
<td>Spring 2014</td>
<td>656</td>
<td>656</td>
<td>84,962</td>
<td>Spring to Fall</td>
<td>71.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fall 2013</td>
<td>1039</td>
<td>Aug-13</td>
<td>132</td>
<td>Spring 2014</td>
<td>656</td>
<td>1,077</td>
<td>84,442</td>
<td>Spring to Summer</td>
<td>73.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**New Student Tracking**

- New students: 105,105
- Retaining: 105,105
- One semester retention rate: 71.9%
- Eventual graduation rate: 77.1%

**Continuing Student Tracking**

- Continuing students: 105,105
- Retaining: 105,105
- One semester retention rate: 71.9%
- Eventual graduation rate: 77.1%
APPENDIX C

Invitation for Participation to Students

(Date)

Hello (Name),

I am writing to request your participation with research I am conducting for my doctoral dissertation at North Carolina State University. As part of the requirements for completion of my degree, I am conducting research on the topic of institutional influences on bachelor’s degree completion for adult transfer students. After reviewing your University data, I identified you as a possible participant in my research.

I am very interested in speaking with you to learn more about your transfer and first term of enrollment experiences at the University. Additionally, I would like to learn your perspective on the University’s support of completion of your bachelor’s degree.

To provide you full-disclosure, my interest in this topic is also a professional one. As director of the program in which you were enrolled, I seek to learn more about the issue of completion of the bachelor’s degree to improve the educational experiences of adult transfer students at the University.

Your participation in the study is voluntary and will not affect your current standing with the University or influence your re-enrollment in the University.

If you think you might be interested in speaking with me, I can contact you by phone to share more details and answer questions about the research. If you grant me permission to conduct an interview, we can then set up a face-to-face meeting at a location of your choice.

Thank you in advance for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Elizabeth Pack
empack@ncsu.edu
704-974-3975
APPENDIX D

Invitation for Participation to Admissions Staff

(Date)

Hello (Name of admissions representative),

I am writing to request your participation with research I am conducting for my doctoral dissertation at North Carolina State University. As part of the requirements for completion of my degree, I am conducting research on the topic of institutional influences on bachelor’s degree completion for adult transfer students. As a degree completion program admissions representative, I identified you as a possible participant in my research.

I am very interested in speaking with you to learn more about the University’s recruitment and admissions policies, procedures, and practices. Additionally, I would like to learn your perspective on the University’s support of adult transfer student completion of the bachelor’s degree.

To provide you full-disclosure, my interest in this topic is also a professional one. As director of the program, I seek to learn more about the issue of completion of the bachelor’s degree to improve the educational experiences of adult transfer students at the University.

Your participation in the study is voluntary and will not affect your standing with the University.

If you think you might be interested in speaking with me, I can contact you by phone to share more details and answer questions about the research. If you grant me permission to conduct an interview, we can then set up a face-to-face meeting at a location of your choice.

Thank you in advance for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Elizabeth Pack
APPENDIX E

Invitation for Participation to Administrative Staff

(Date)

Hello (Name of administrator),

I am writing to request your participation with research I am conducting for my doctoral dissertation at North Carolina State University. As part of the requirements for completion of my degree, I am conducting research on the topic of institutional influences on bachelor’s degree completion for adult transfer students. As a degree completion program administrator, I identified you as a possible participant in my research.

I am very interested in speaking with you to learn more about the University’s recruitment and admissions policies, procedures, and practices. Additionally, I would like to learn your perspective on the University’s support of adult transfer student completion of the bachelor’s degree.

To provide you full-disclosure, my interest in this topic is also a professional one. As director of the program, I seek to learn more about the issue of completion of the bachelor’s degree to improve the educational experiences of adult transfer students at the University.

Your participation in the study is voluntary and will not affect your standing with the University.

If you think you might be interested in speaking with me, I can contact you by phone to share more details and answer questions about the research. If you grant me permission to conduct an interview, we can then set up a face-to-face meeting at a location of your choice.

Thank you in advance for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Elizabeth Pack
Student Interview Protocol

Student Name or Pseudonym: __________________________
Date: __________________ Time: __________________ Location: __________________________

Purpose:
- Collect new data to answer research questions:
  1. How do institutional policies, procedures, and practices encountered during the process of admission and first term of enrollment at a four-year university support completion of nontraditional transfer students?
  2. How do institutional policies, procedures, and practices encountered during the process of admission and first term of enrollment at a four-year university inhibit completion of nontraditional transfer students?
- Triangulate with admissions and administrative staff interviews

Introduction
Thank you for meeting with me today. I am researching institutional influences on completion. As part of my dissertation, I would like to talk with you about your experiences with transferring to the University and your perspective on the recruiting and admissions processes. Additionally, I would like to talk with you about your experiences with attending your first term at the University. Lastly, I would like to talk with you about your perspective on the University’s influence on completion.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview Questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Please begin by describing your transfer experience with the University.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. What aspects of the admissions policies, procedures, and practices did you find most helpful? Least helpful?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. What is missing from the University’s recruiting and admissions policies, procedures, and practices for transfer students?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. How can the University improve the recruiting and admissions experience of potential transfer students?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Describe your orientation experience with the University.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. What aspects of the orientation were most helpful? Least helpful?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Describe your experience of attending your first classes at the University.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Describe your feelings of preparedness for University coursework.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. What was your general impression of the professors at the University?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Describe the general classroom setting and atmosphere.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. How can the University improve the first term experience of transfer students?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Has the University supported your completion of a bachelor’s degree?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. How has the University inhibited your completion of a bachelor’s degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Is there anything else you would like to tell me about transfer experience with the University - anything I should have asked but didn’t?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. Is there anything else you would like to tell me about your first term experience with the University - anything I should have asked but didn’t?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX G

Admissions Staff Interview Protocols

Admissions representative: ________________________ Title: ________________________
Date: ______________ Time: ______________ Location: ________________________

Purpose:
- Collect new data to answer research questions:
  1. How do institutional policies, procedures, and practices encountered during the process of admission and first term of enrollment at a four-year university support completion of nontraditional transfer students?
  2. How do institutional policies, procedures, and practices encountered during the process of admission and first term of enrollment at a four-year university inhibit completion of nontraditional transfer students?
- Triangulate with student and administrative staff interviews.

Introduction
Thank you for meeting with me today. I am researching institutional influences on completion. As part of my dissertation, I would like to talk with you about your role in the recruiting and admissions policies, procedures, and practices for degree completion program (DCP) students. Additionally, I would like to talk with you about your role in DCP students’ experience in their first term of enrollment. Finally, I would like to talk with you about your perspective on the University’s influence on completion.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview Questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Please begin by describing the University’s recruiting and admissions policies, procedures, and practices of potential degree completion program (DCP) students?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. What aspects of DCP recruiting and admissions policies, procedures, and practices are most helpful to potential DCP students?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. What aspects of DCP recruiting and admissions policies, procedures, and practices are least helpful to potential DCP students?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. What is missing from the University’s recruiting and admissions policies, procedures, and practices for DCP students?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. How can the University improve the recruiting and admissions experience of potential DCP students?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Describe the orientation of new DCP students.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. What aspects of the orientation are most helpful? Least helpful?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Describe your perception of the experience of new DCP students attending their first classes at the University.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. How do you perceive the preparedness of new DCP students to take their first University classes?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. What is your general impression of the professors teaching DCP students?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Describe the general classroom setting and atmosphere.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. How does the University support completion?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. How does the University inhibit completion?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Is there anything else you would like to tell me about the University’s recruiting and admissions policies, procedures, and practices for DCP students - anything I should have asked but didn’t?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. Is there anything else you would like to tell me about the first term experience of DCP students with the University - anything I should have asked but didn’t?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX H

Administrative Staff Interview Protocols

Administrator: __________________________ Title: __________________________
Date: _______________ Time: _______________ Location: __________________________

Purpose:
- Collect new data to answer research questions:
  1. How do institutional policies, procedures, and practices encountered during the process of admission and first term of enrollment at a four-year university support completion of nontraditional transfer students?
  2. How do institutional policies, procedures, and practices encountered during the process of admission and first term of enrollment at a four-year university inhibit completion of nontraditional transfer students?
- Triangulate with student and admissions staff interviews

Introduction
Thank you for meeting with me today. I am researching institutional influences on completion. As part of my dissertation, I would like to talk with you about your role in the recruiting and admissions policies, procedures, and practices for degree completion program (DCP) students. Additionally, I would like to talk with you about your role in DCP students’ experience in their first term of enrollment. Finally, I would like to talk with you about your perspective on the University’s influence on completion.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview Questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Please begin by describing the University’s recruiting and admissions policies, procedures, and practices of potential degree completion program (DCP) students?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. What aspects of DCP recruiting and admissions policies, procedures, and practices are most helpful to potential DCP students?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. What aspects of DCP recruiting and admissions policies, procedures, and practices are least helpful to potential DCP students?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. What is missing from the University’s recruiting and admissions policies, procedures, and practices for DCP students?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. How can the University improve the recruiting and admissions experience of potential DCP students?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Describe the orientation of new DCP students.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. What aspects of the orientation are most helpful? Least helpful?</td>
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<tr>
<td>8. Describe your perception of the experience of new DCP students attending their first classes at the University.</td>
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<td>9. How do you perceive the preparedness of new DCP students to take their first University classes?</td>
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<td>14. Is there anything else you would like to tell me about the University’s recruiting and admissions policies, procedures, and practices for DCP students - anything I should have asked but didn’t?</td>
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<td>15. Is there anything else you would like to tell me about the first term experience of DCP students with the University - anything I should have asked but didn’t?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX I

Demographics Data Sheet

Student Participant

Name or Pseudonym:__________________________________________________________

Age:
18-24_____25-30_____31-36_____37-42_____43-48_____49 or older_____

Race/Ethnicity:
Caucasian_____African American_____Hispanic_____Asian_____Other_______

Gender:
Female_____Male_____

Major:_______________________________________________________________

Attendance status:
Fulltime (12 credit hours or more)_____Part-time_____

Employed:
Yes_____No_____# of hours per week_____________________

Marital status:_________# of Children_____________________

Number of higher education institutions attended prior to TU____

Program Completion Status as of August 2016:
Completed_____Not Completed_____ 

Verified with TU Admissions:
Number of credit hours completed at prior higher education institutions_____
Credit hours allowed for transfer to TU_______
APPENDIX J

Demographics Data Sheet

Admissions Staff Participant

Name or Pseudonym: ________________________________

Age:
18-24____ 25-30____ 31-36____ 37-42____ 43-48____ 49 or older____

Race/Ethnicity:
Caucasian____ African American____ Hispanic____ Asian____ Other____

Gender:
Female____ Male____

Job title: ______________________________________________

Years of experience:____
APPENDIX K

Demographics Data Sheet

Administrative Staff Participant

Name or Pseudonym:__________________________________________________________

Age:
18-24____25-30_____31-36______37-42______43-48______49 or older____

Race/Ethnicity:
Caucasian_____African American_____Hispanic_____Asian_____Other_______

Gender:
Female_____Male_____

Job title:_______________________________________________________________

Years of experience:_____

APPENDIX L

Informed Consent Form for Interviews – Students

Title of Study: The Influence of Institutional Policies, Procedures, and Practices on Completion of Nontraditional Transfer Students at a Four-Year University

Principal Investigator: Elizabeth Pack Faculty Sponsor: Dr. James Bartlett

What are some general things you should know about research studies?
You are being asked to take part in a research study. Your participation in this study is voluntary. You have the right to be a part of this study, to choose not to participate or to stop participating at any time without penalty. The purpose of research studies is to gain a better understanding of a certain topic or issue.

You are not guaranteed any personal benefits from being in a study. Research studies also may pose risks to those that participate. In this consent form you will find specific details about the research in which you are being asked to participate. If you do not understand something in this form it is your right to ask the researcher for clarification or more information. A copy of this consent form will be provided to you. If at any time you have questions about your participation, do not hesitate to contact the researcher(s) named above.

What is the purpose of this study?
The purpose of the study is to better understand the issue of completion within the private, liberal arts, religious-based institution for its nontraditional transfer student population. A better understanding of the completion issue is important to discover ways to improve the completion rates of nontraditional transfer students enrolled at the University.

What will happen if you take part in the study?
You will be asked to allow me to interview you once during the period of student. The interview should last no longer than two hours. The interview will take place at a location that is convenient to you. A phone interview will be considered as an alternative if a face-to-face meeting is not possible. The interview will be audio recorded.

Risks and Benefits
There are minimal risks associated with participation in this research. I will honor your requests if you are unable to share some information you might consider confidential. The benefits are indirect to you. Primarily, the benefit for your participation is improving policy, procedure, and practice decisions by documenting your transfer and first term of enrollment experiences with the University.
Confidentiality
The information in the study records will be kept confidential to the full extent allowed by law. Data will be stored securely in a password-protected laptop computer that will remain in my possession at all times, and on a password-protected desktop computer that is located in a secured office. No reference will be made in oral or written reports which could link you to the study. After the study is completed, all information including written, audio and video taped, transcribed, and electronic will be destroyed.

Compensation
You will receive no compensation for participating.

What if you have questions about this study?
If you have questions at any time about the study itself or the procedures implemented in this study, you may contact the researcher, Elizabeth Pack, empack@ncsu.edu, 704-974-3975.

What if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?
If you feel you have not been treated according to the descriptions in this form, or your rights as a participant in research have been violated during the course of this project, you may contact Deb Paxton, Regulatory Compliance Administrator at dapaxton@ncsu.edu or by phone at 1-919-515-4514.

Consent To Participate
“I have read and understand the above information. I have received a copy of this form. I agree to participate in this study with the understanding that I may choose not to participate or to stop participating at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which I am otherwise entitled.”

Subject's signature ___________________________ Date ________________
Investigator's signature ___________________________ Date ________________
APPENDIX M

Informed Consent Form for Admissions Staff – Interviews

Title of Study: The Influence of Institutional Policies, Procedures, and Practices on Completion of Nontraditional Transfer Students at a Four-Year University.

Principal Investigator: Elizabeth Pack  Faculty Sponsor: Dr. James Bartlett

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Subject's signature________________________________________ Date ____________________

Investigator's signature____________________________________ Date ____________________
APPENDIX N

Informed Consent Form for Administrative Staff – Interviews

Title of Study: The Influence of Institutional Policies, Procedures, and Practices on Completion of Nontraditional Transfer Students at a Four-Year University.

Principal Investigator: Elizabeth Pack  Faculty Sponsor: Dr. James Bartlett

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You will be asked to allow me to interview you once during the period of student. The interview should last no longer than two hours. The interview will take place at a location that is convenient to you. A phone interview will be considered as an alternative if a face-to-face meeting is not possible. The interview will be audio recorded.

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Subject's signature________________________________ Date ________________

Investigator's signature____________________________ Date ________________
## APPENDIX O

### Observation Protocol

#### Admissions Staff Participant

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Observational Protocol</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Date: ________ Time: ________ Length of activity: ____ minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Site: ______________________________________________________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant(s): ____________________________________________</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| RQ1: |
| RQ2: |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Descriptive Notes</strong></th>
<th><strong>Reflective Notes</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Physical setting: visual layout</td>
<td>[Reflective comments: questions to self, observations of nonverbal behavior, my interpretations]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Description of participants</td>
<td>[Reflective comments: questions to self, observations of nonverbal behavior, my interpretations]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Description of activities</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Description of individuals engaged in activity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sequence of activity over time</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interactions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unplanned events</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants comments: expressed in quotes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[The researcher’s observation of what seems to be occurring]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX P

Informed Consent Form for Admissions Staff – Observation

Title of Study: The Influence of Institutional Policies, Procedures, and Practices on Completion of Nontraditional Transfer Students at a Four-Year University.

Principal Investigator: Elizabeth Pack       Faculty Sponsor: Dr. James Bartlett

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The purpose of the study is to better understand the issue of completion within the private, liberal arts, religious-based institution for its nontraditional transfer student population. A better understanding of the completion issue is important to discover ways to improve the completion rates of nontraditional transfer students enrolled at the University.

What will happen if you take part in the study?
You will be asked to allow me to observe a recruiting event that you are conducting. The time needed to observe should not exceed two hours.

Risks and Benefits
There are minimal risks associated with participation in this research. I will honor your requests if you are unable to share some information you might consider confidential. The benefits are indirect to you. Primarily, the benefit to you is adding to your knowledge of the issue of student completion that may help you in your professional practice. A benefit for your participation is improving policy, procedure, and practice decisions by documenting your perspectives on nontraditional student transfer and first term of enrollment experiences with the University.

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**Consent To Participate**
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Subject's signature_______________________________ Date _________________

Investigator's signature___________________________ Date _________________
APPENDIX Q

Document Analysis

- 2013-2014 Catalog

Admissions Criteria

The admissions profile for full admission to the Degree Completion Program (DCP) is as follows (all programs except Nursing and Elementary Education):

1. Completion of the admissions application and receipt of official transcripts from all colleges and universities previously attended. There is no application fee.

2. About 60 transferable semester hours in an academic curricular area from a regionally accredited institution approved by Gardner-Webb University for inclusion in the Degree Completion Program. The maximum number of hours that can be transferred from a two-year institution is 64 and from a four-year institution is 96.

3. All transfer work completed at an accredited college and/or university will be considered for transfer at full value, assuming the courses are passed with a grade of ‘C’ or better (2.00) provided they are comparable to Gardner-Webb University curriculum.

4. Completion of specific prerequisite course work as required by the department of the chosen major. These prerequisite courses are listed under each major in the DCP catalog.

5. Complete a pre-registration discussion with an admissions counselor to discuss course delivery options, financial aid opportunities, tuition, method of payment, textbook purchases, and any additional program questions.

DCP ADMISSIONS PROCEDURES

1. The prospective student completes the admissions application (either online or a hard copy) and forwards it to the DCP Enrollment Office. Concurrently, the student requests official transcripts from all colleges previously attended to be sent to the DCP Admissions Office.

2. Upon receipt of all the above information, the folder is forwarded to the Transcript Evaluation Officer of the University for analysis of transfer credits.

3. Upon completion of this analysis, the Assistant Vice President of DCP Enrollment Management determines student eligibility for the program based on admissions criteria. Any exceptions to the academic admissions criteria must be approved by the Associate Provost for Adult and Distance Education. Students may be fully accepted or accepted with stated conditions. The Assistant Vice President of DCP Admissions will forward a letter of full acceptance, acceptance with conditions, or deferral to a future term, along with a copy of the transcript evaluation to the applicant.

4. The admissions counselor will make the pre-registration call to the student to discuss
course delivery options, financial aid opportunities, tuition, method of payment, textbook purchases, and any additional program questions.

5. The academic advisor is forwarded a copy of all materials for academic advising of the student. DCP Academic Advising will notify the student of any missing prerequisites for full acceptance into an academic major.

- Website
- Recruiting materials
- Historical documents (articles and advertisements)