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## The senior year : a study of transition, liminality and students' perspectives of their final year as undergraduates.

Brian T. McCoy  
*University of Massachusetts Amherst*

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THE SENIOR YEAR: A STUDY OF TRANSITION, LIMINALITY AND STUDENTS'  
PERSPECTIVES OF THEIR FINAL YEAR AS UNDERGRADUATES

A Dissertation Presented

by

BRIAN T. McCOY

Submitted to the Graduate School of the  
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

February 2003

Higher Education

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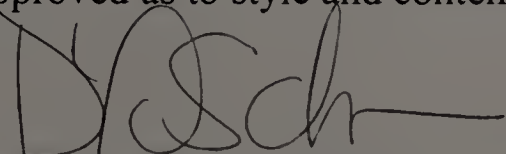
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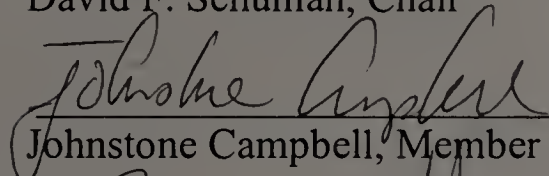
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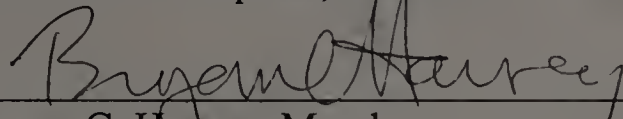
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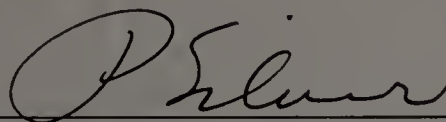
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Johnstone Campbell, Member



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Bryan C. Harvey, Member



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Andrew Effrat, Interim Dean  
School of Education

DEDICATION

In loving memory of my sister

Lisa J. McCoy  
(1966-1997)

&

To my patient, loving and understanding wife

Monique A. McCoy

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would first like to thank my advisor and dissertation chair, Dr. David Schuman, for your support, guidance and belief in my abilities to achieve this life goal. I would also like to thank the other members of my committee, Johnstone Campbell and Bryan Harvey, for their assistance.

I thank my parents, Thomas and Jeannette McCoy, for your lifetime of support and encouragement. I cherish your love, guidance and self-sacrifice in giving me the chance to accomplish this educational goal. I would never have made it to this point in my life without you.

I wish to thank my in-laws, George and Wanda Beaupré, for your phenomenal support and love. To Alan Reinhardt, Debra Murphy, Jim Douglas, Ed Kolek, Hollie Ingrahm, Barbara Fienman, Jay Toporoff, Jim Conrad, Cheryl Barnard and Kay Young – thank you for your encouragement, insight and assistance in completing this dissertation. To the entire Nichols College community (especially my staff), thank you for the constant words of encouragement. To the members of my dissertation cohort (Lindy, Michael, Katy, Bruce), thank you for your constructive and helpful feedback. A special thank you to Dr. Charlene Martin – I will always treasure the rides to Amherst.

A special acknowledgement and my deepest appreciation need to be expressed to my brother-in-law, John Beaupré. I would never have been able to finish this without you – thank you John.

And finally, I want to thank the participants in this study, Jennifer, Lou, Tim and Jackie. Your willingness to be honest and open with your life stories is the heart and soul of this dissertation.

## ABSTRACT

### THE SENIOR YEAR: A STUDY OF TRANSITION, LIMINALITY AND STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVES OF THEIR FINAL YEAR AS UNDERGRADUATES

FEBRUARY 2003

BRIAN T. McCOY, B.A., ANNA MARIA COLLEGE

M.A., ASSUMPTION COLLEGE

Ed.D., UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS AMHERST

Directed by: Dr. David F. Schuman

The purpose of this study was to gain insights into the undergraduate senior year of college. Through the use of in-depth, phenomenological interviewing, four college seniors shared their previous experiences with life transitions and described how they were experiencing their final year as undergraduates. This study described the experiences of the participants and explored these questions: 1) What is the senior year of college like? 2) What are the challenges that students face in their senior year? 3) How does the undergraduate experience and cope with this transition? 4) Are the experiences in the senior year consistent with transition theory and inclusive of a liminal stage? The exploration of these types of questions sought the deeper meaning of the senior year experience and how it impacts the undergraduate.

The results of this study were consistent with existing literature that identifies the undergraduate senior's two primary challenges as securing post-college employment and deciding where to live after college. The significant findings of this study emerged through examining the senior year as its own unique slice of the undergraduate



experience. In doing so, it became evident that the participants' experiences during their senior year reflected the first-two stages of Schlossberg's theory of adult transitions, and identified much of the senior year as a liminal state. Additionally, what surfaced from the participants' insights was how the liminal experience of the participants was strongly influenced (positively and negatively) by two factors - 1) the individual's success in securing a post-college life and 2) friends.

This study also demonstrated that the experiences of these participants, while not representative of all college seniors, call for further concentrated research of the undergraduate senior year experience, with emphasis on the impact of friends on this life transition.

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## INTRODUCTION

### THE SENIOR YEAR: A STUDY OF TRANSITION, LIMINALITY AND STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVES OF THEIR FINAL YEAR AS UNDERGRADUATES

It was late afternoon on May 18, 1985 when I drove down that long driveway of Anna Maria College. It was my graduation day and a day to celebrate my academic accomplishments. I had spent the past four years as an undergraduate at this institution and I was leaving to begin a new chapter in my life. I am not sure if it was intentional, but I was the last undergraduate of my class to leave that day. Alone (my family and well-wishers had already left), I drove through the campus and proceeded down the roadway to leave. Filled with the conflicting emotions of joy and sadness, I began to cry.

I stopped at the entrance/exit of the college, my car packed with my personal belongings and the memorabilia of the past four years. I felt paralyzed. For what may have only been moments, I sat there looking at the road ahead and then at the reflection of "My College" in my rear view mirror. I recalled the first day I drove on campus, the tears streaming down my cheeks as I said goodbye to where I had come from. I remembered the stupid things I did my first year, how cool I thought I was during my sophomore year, the fact that my junior year was my busiest academically and socially, and how fast my senior year flew by. What happened to my senior year? That was my last chance to do everything I had set out to do when I was a freshman. I don't think I said goodbye to everyone. Is this how an undergraduate is supposed to feel?

I sat there, remembering the social life, the academic challenges, my peers, my moments of greatness and the moments that I was an idiot. I laughed to myself as I wiped away my tears. My left leg began to tremble, causing the clutch to engage and then release. The car, like myself, was in gear and ready to move ahead, but for some reason I kept pushing the clutch in and letting the car roll back a bit. I knew the road ahead of me, but didn't want to travel it yet. I wanted to roll back to where I had spent the past four years. It was safe and I knew my place. Then, in an instant, I took a deep breath, released the clutch and went ahead. In that moment "My College," and home for the past four years, became "My Alma Mater" and I transitioned from an undergraduate to alum. The joy, pain, happiness and anxiety of that moment are as real for me today as they were on that late afternoon in May.

The 1999-2000 Almanac Issue of the *Chronicle of Higher Education* projected that at the end of the 1999-2000 academic year, 1.16 million of the 8.8 million undergraduates at 2,267 private and public four-year institutions would receive their bachelor's degrees. These individuals — 518,000 men and 648,000 women; commuters and residents; of traditional college age (18 to 22) and nontraditional college age; diverse in their cultures, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation and socioeconomic backgrounds — would successfully meet the academic criteria their institutions required for graduation. And each of them would have their own set of perceptions of the undergraduate experience and their own unique senior year experiences.

Gardner & Van der Veer (1998) argue that the senior year is a time of intensity and contradictions. There is a sense of personal comfort and familiarity with current surroundings, but there is also growing excitement over everything one has accomplished

— and this excitement can breed anxiety over what lies ahead. Some seniors see years of work and persistence come together and ask, “So, what’s next?”

During the undergraduate senior year, many colleges and universities work with seniors to make sure they have finished their course work and are making the necessary decisions about their future. They help students interview for jobs, decide on graduate or professional schools and assess their post-college financial obligations (Gardner & Van der Veer, 1998). The cognitive and emotional focus of these rituals is to direct seniors toward the future — little of this rite of passage involves an appreciation of the present or a reflection of the undergraduate’s experiences. For some students, these tasks can breed a sense of urgency and a feeling that time is running out, and awaken them to the reality that “This is it!” (Levin-Coburn & Lawrence-Treger, 1997).

In March 1990, John Gardner, nationally known in higher education for the development of The National Resources Center for The Freshman Year Experience and Students in Transition, sponsored the first Senior Year Experience (SYE) Conference. Gardner (1990), in the SYE conference proceedings, commented that the senior year of an undergraduate is as pronounced and stressful a transition as the first year of an undergraduate’s life. He stated, “whether they are aware of it or not, seniors are moving in and through a period of personal transition” (Gardner, 1990, p. 1). Similar to the transitional issues of the first-year student, “the transitional issues for some graduates may be larger or more complex than for others” (Gardner & Van der Veer, 1998, p. 5). Despite their differences in personal characteristics, degrees of academic success, academic majors and future goals, most students share the same experience of uncertainty that accompanies a clear shift in personal circumstances.

Dramatic transitional events, such as entering college, graduating from college, first-time employment, marriage, or parenthood, will shape the direction and quality of a person's life (Noble & Walker, 1997). The period of time<sup>1</sup> prior to a clear shift in personal circumstances often produces feelings of ambiguity and uneasiness about one's current world, identity or role, and the new social context one will be entering. The terms liminal and liminality are used to describe and identify this period of uneasiness and ambiguity (Van Gennep, 1960).

According to Van Gennep (1960), a state of liminality occurs between the stages of separation from one's current world and reincorporation into one's new world (Schrier & Mulchay, 1988). Turner (1969) further defines liminality as "being on the threshold," or "a state or process which is betwixt-and-between the normal day-to-day cultural and social status or process of getting and spending, preserving law and order, registering structural status... it is a time of enchantment when anything might, even should happen" (Benamou & Carmello, 1977, p. 33). He describes liminality as standing on a doorway or threshold, being in a state of "roomlessness," physically not part of either room. In the doorway, one can choose to move forward into a new room or attempt to retreat back into the room from which one came. In retreating it is impossible to experience the room the same way.

### Statement of the Problem

According to Feitler-Karchin & Wallace-Schutzman (1982), understanding the transitional issues of the senior year of an undergraduate's life is critical to student

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<sup>1</sup> The period of time that individuals experience the feelings of ambiguity and uneasiness will vary and are based on the type, context and the level of impact the life transition will have on their worlds.



development, and there exists in higher education a missed opportunity for all students to reflect on and make meaning of the undergraduate experience. The literature in higher education abounds with studies of the emotional and developmental needs of the first-year undergraduate, while “research on the senior year is limited because the topic has only recently received attention in the higher education community” (Gardner & Van der Veer, 1998, p.4). In regard to the senior year, “more has been written about related concepts such as the purpose of higher education, desired outcomes of the undergraduate experience, and student development than the transitional issues during the final college years” (Gardner & Van der Veer, 1998, p. 4).

Schillings & Schillings (1998) note that since the 1984 release of the National Institute of Education Study Group’s report *Involvement in Learning*, and the first conference on assessment held in 1985 by the American Association for Higher Education, higher education has focused predominantly on quantitative assessment to support the positive impacts of the college experience. The assessment tools used to measure the impact of college on the undergraduate were standardized tests that produced quantitative measures comparing the first-year and the senior-year student. But, according to one study, “tests failed to invite senior students into the kind of reflective experience that might be the most useful as they made the transition from college to work” (Schillings & Schillings, 1998, p. 249).

Available research has failed to study the senior year as a transition period. It places more emphasis on the senior year as an end point, not as a unique transition experience. How do undergraduate seniors experience this life transition? How does it

compare with their previous experiences with life transitions? How do they manage this anticipated life transition? The available literature provides no real clues.

To answer these questions and to understand and appreciate what the senior year is like for an undergraduate, we need to engage them in a deeper conversation reflective of this experience. We need to ask them what the senior year is like. We need to find out how they are experiencing and coping with this life transition. Through this purposeful dialogue of reflection and by listening to the deeper meaning of a few individual experiences, we can truly begin to understand the essence of the senior year experience.

#### Purpose of this Study

The purpose of this study is to gain insights into the lives of four college undergraduates in their senior year, and through in-depth phenomenological interviews and qualitative analysis, to understand this transitional process. This study describes the experiences of the four participants and explores these questions: What is the senior year of college like? What are the challenges that students face in their senior year? How does the undergraduate experience and cope with this transition? Are the experiences in the senior year consistent with transition theory and inclusive of a liminal stage? The exploration of these types of questions seeks the deeper meaning of the senior year and how it impacts the undergraduate.

This study does not provide interventions to help seniors with issues they may be struggling with as they prepare to graduate. Rather, it explores the meaning and effect of the senior year experiences of a few individuals. It offers a deep understanding of their

lives and their previous experiences with life transitions as well as an awareness of the impact, from their points of view, of the senior year experience.

### Theoretical Perspective

There are several different ways to examine the undergraduate senior. Some studies have looked at intellectual gains made by the senior over his or her tenure at an institution, while others quantify the social, emotional and even spiritual growth of the undergraduate. This study takes a different perspective. Rather than evaluate the changes in the undergraduates' academic competencies or surmise their level of interpersonal growth, this study engages four students in an in-depth dialogue about their experiences as undergraduate seniors.

One of the theoretical perspectives of this study is that the entire senior year is a transition period for the undergraduate, and that through the exploration of past and present experiences with life transitions, a greater awareness and understanding of the unique dynamics of the senior year will surface. Using Schlossberg's (1981) theories on adult transition as a theoretical foundation, as well as an expanded discussion of the concept of liminality, this study differs from the typical approach taken when studying transition issues for graduating seniors. In most such studies, researchers look at graduation as the onset of a transition and investigate the experiences of undergraduates as they begin their post-graduation employment. This study puts forward the idea that the transition process for undergraduate seniors begins when they return to campus at the beginning of their fall semester. Connecting this broader view of the senior year to a theoretical paradigm offers a deeper investigation into the essence of the senior year.

This study also embraces the theoretical perspective that the senior year is a unique experience, different in many ways from other transitional experiences. The research identifies some parallels that can be drawn in comparing the transition experience of a first-year college student to the experiences of a graduating senior. While both populations of students may face changes in their social supports and living arrangements, and may encounter new challenges to past attitudes, values and behaviors (Feldman & Newcomb, 1969; Johnston & Statton, 1990; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991), the manner and meaning of the transition for the undergraduate senior is very different.

High school seniors experience the transition from high school to college as a transition to a new academic experience. Graduating seniors experience the transition out of college as the beginning of life in the “real world.” This does not imply that either transition is not, in some cases, difficult for the individual experiencing it, but rather that the transition for the college senior is a shift to a significantly larger social context. Additionally, the undergraduate senior enters this transition with greater maturity and different intellectual and interpersonal skills (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Astin 1993).

This study attempts to present the essence of the senior year. It presents and analyzes the experiences and life stories of four real people experiencing their senior year. The phenomenology of their worlds illustrates the complexity of the senior year and the uniqueness of this life transition.

### Methodological Perspective

To gain insight into the essence of the undergraduate senior’s world, this study uses the qualitative research methodology of in-depth, phenomenological interviewing

(Schuman, 1982; Seidman, 1991). There are three reasons why this methodology is very appropriate for studying the undergraduate senior year.

First, examples and actual narratives best explain the issues facing the undergraduate in the senior year. Rubin and Rubin (1995) identify a research topic as appropriate for qualitative interviewing if the researcher wants to learn the how, what or why of a participant's experiences. In this study, the decision was made to move away from "learning" about the undergraduate senior based on responses to a prepared survey and instead move toward "understanding" them by listening to what their experiences have been and how they make meaning of them. Using an in-depth, phenomenological interviewing methodology aids in this understanding as it "is a way of finding out what others feel and think about their worlds" as well as to "understand experiences and reconstruct events in which you did not participate" (Rubin & Rubin, 1995, p. 1).

In-depth interviewing provides the opportunity to be descriptive and interpretative. It also offers the researcher a deeper immersion into the multi-layered complexities of a focused topic and into the experiences of the participants as they perceive and articulate them. In its application, the purpose of the phenomenological interviewing is "not to get answers to questions, nor to test hypotheses" but rather to provide the researcher with a way toward "understanding the experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience" (Siedman, 1991, p. 3). The result is not a statistical fact but rather a richer understanding of the experiences of the participants from their own points of view.

Second, in-depth interviewing allows for reciprocity between the participant and the researcher in investigating a focused topic. Qualitative interviewing is reciprocal,

conversational and deeply emotional engagement between the researcher and the participant can occur (Rossman & Rallis, 1997). This deeper level of engagement illuminates the social context of the participant's world, and assists with another goal of this study: to present the social context of the participants, i.e., their worlds, their real feelings, emotions and personal points of views.

Third, this methodology allows, through a combination of narratives and life stories, to share what is important about this time in their lives. They can offer insights to what the senior year is like for them, and can describe how they experience and manage this life transition. They can provide answers to the question of whether or not this transitional experience is different from previous educational transitions. Is it easier or more difficult? Do they feel more connected to their current environment or to the world after college? How does this transition experience fit into the context of their lives?

Surveys, even those that strive to be "qualitative," lack the detail, depth and richness that can be found by using an in-depth qualitative interviewing approach. Surveys do not have the ability to ask the participants to "elaborate, provide incidents and clarifications, and discuss events at length" (Rubin & Rubin, 1995, p. 8). The thick descriptions "rooted in the interviewee's firsthand experience [that] forms the material that researchers gather up, synthesize, and analyze as part of hearing the meaning of the data" are lost (Rubin & Rubin, 1995, p. 8). Surveys ask what is important to the researcher. In qualitative interviewing, what is shared is also important to the participant.

### Significance and Limitations of this Study

This study is significant in two ways. First, it does not look at the senior year as a static end point, but rather as a slice of the whole undergraduate experience. The focus is on current experiences — the “here and now” of the senior year. Therefore, significance emerges from the student’s insights to what he or she is feeling — rather than on a summary of the student’s academic accomplishments in comparison to their first year as an undergraduate.

Comparative and longitudinal studies that examine changes in students (from freshmen year to senior year) represent a large portion of the research literature on college seniors and have provided much quantitative data on the impact of the college experience. In fact, Pascarella & Terenzini (1991) found in a 20-year research study of college students that “students not only make statistically significant gains in factual knowledge in a range of general cognitive and intellectual skills; they also change on a broad array of value, attitudinal, psychosocial, and moral dimensions” (p. 557). Astin’s (1993) research found that in the affective realm, students “develop a more positive self-image, as reflected in a greater sense of interpersonal and intellectual competency” (p. 396). In cognitive development, he found that students report “substantial growth in most areas of knowledge and skills, especially in knowledge of a field or discipline” (p. 397).

These studies focus on outcomes. Little attention has been directed to the current issues facing the undergraduate senior. As Schillings and Schillings (1998) state:

Traditionally, a great deal of assessment has been focused on the first-year students and seniors. However, this work has not concerned itself with the fact that the first and senior years are important transition periods. Instead, it has

conceptualized the first and senior years as static end points: the before and after, the pretest and posttest drawn from social science. (p. 247)

In reviewing contemporary research on the senior year, there is a prevalence of outcome-based research and many anecdotal assertions that see the transitional experiences of the first-year student and senior are the same. Additionally, brief quotations from a current senior or recent graduate are often found in the literature. They are used as an epigraph in research articles, to set a tone or feeling for the article, but they are not fully analyzed.

This study presents the “voices” of four undergraduate seniors and then goes one step further by analyzing their insights. The participants’ perceptions, life stories and views of the senior year are presented in a manner that offers a richer, deeper description of the essence and meaning of the senior year to these participants. It offers new knowledge about understanding the senior year from a different perspective — specifically, the student’s.

Second, this study applies transition theory to the context of the entire senior year. Most research on the senior year focuses on the transition occurring from graduation to the work place. This study offers the position that the senior year, viewed as a separate and distinct slice of the undergraduate experience, consists of the detachment and liminal phase of the transition process. Through the application of Schlossberg’s (1981) theory of adult transition to the context of the entire senior year, beginning on their first day back, this study implies that the transition process for seniors is large and complex.

The primary limitation of this study is that the findings cannot be generalized to all undergraduate seniors. This limitation is the result, in part, of the study’s small



sampling. While the results are revealing, it is impossible to assume that all college seniors will experience their own senior year similarly.

A second limitation is that personal biases in the solicitation and interpretation of the data collected are inherent in the method used for this study. As a result, objectivity in presenting the results may be questioned. I acknowledge that in presenting the lives of these students, my role as researcher and interviewer contributed to a degree of subjectivity in the data collection and analysis. Rather than viewing subjectivity as a negative, I believe that it aided in making sense of the worlds of these students.

A third limitation is that this study does not propose a model for what colleges should be doing to help seniors during this transitional phase. But offers for consideration four students' experiences as a way of expanding the discussion and encouraging further research on what might or could be done to help other undergraduate seniors with this life transition.

## Chapter Descriptions

### Chapter One

In Chapter One, a review of the literature provides a profile of the class of 2000 and some demographic information about its parents, families, age, race and their opinions on political and social issues. It begins with a review of their responses to the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) survey administered to them when they were freshmen. This summary is also put into a historical context, as it offers a comparison of their responses in 1996 with data that has been collected since 1966.

Next, a Generation Theory-based portrait of the class of 2000 is presented and includes a discussion of their values, beliefs and attitudes that were influenced by the world events and social issues they experienced. It also identifies specific characteristics, a “peer personality,” of this population of students that were very different from previous cohorts of students.

The final section reviews the literature written about the impact of the college experience. These studies measured the college experience’s impact on the values, beliefs and attitudes of students regarding political and social issues, as well as their cognitive and interpersonal skill development.

## Chapter Two

Chapter Two discusses the various characteristics of a life transition, the transition process, and the challenges college seniors face. Using Schlossberg’s theory of adult transition as a foundation, the first section of the chapter defines a transition, classifies the three different types of transitions, and reviews other factors that contribute to the impact of a life transition on an individual. Following the overview of Schlossberg’s theory, the chapter’s second section identifies and describes the three stages of the transition experience (detachment, liminality and new beginning). The third section of the chapter uses a discussion of the issues undergraduates face in their senior year to challenge the great myth that all seniors enter their senior year prepared to graduate.

### Chapter Three

This chapter details the in-depth phenomenological interviewing methodology used for this study. It includes a discussion of why this methodology is appropriate for this study, the selection of the participants, data collection process, and the data management and analysis. Also included is a description of the participants' colleges.

### Chapter Four

This chapter begins to present the results of this study and introduces the four undergraduate seniors. The information presented about the participants includes their personal background, family, education and experiences with life transitions from childhood up to their undergraduate senior year. In presenting their personal histories, emphasis is placed on describing their perceptions and experiences with their life transition as they moved from one educational environment to the next. Their life stories and descriptions of how they developed their own personal "style" of coping with previous life transitions contributes to the analysis of their descriptions of what the senior year is like in Chapter Five.

### Chapter Five

Chapter Five continues to present the results of this study and focuses on the participants' descriptions of their lives during their senior year. Their stories and reflections describe the range of positive and negative experiences they had as they faced the anticipated transition of graduation. Additionally, their stories are analyzed to

determine if there are patterns or themes that are consistent with the transition process and the challenges students face in the senior year.

## Chapter Six

The final chapter summarizes the results of this study and compares them with what is already known from existing research on the senior year and transition theory. Chapter Six also offers suggestions for further research on the transition process for college seniors.

## CHAPTER I

### THE CLASS OF 2000: DEMOGRAPHICS AND PEER PERSONALITY AS MEMBERS OF GENERATION X AND THE IMPACT OF THE COLLEGE EXPERIENCE

They [the class of 2000] have been shaped by different political and social events. They are coming to college more career-oriented but in need of academic remediation. They are more damaged psychologically, and they socialize differently. (Levine & Cureton, 1998, p. 31)

In May 2000, more than one million college undergraduates in the United States filed down the ceremonial aisle to accept their baccalaureate degrees. Their four years of work, laughter, strife, and growth culminated in a day filled with tradition and accolades. But, prior to this momentous day, who made up the class of 2000? What were they like as freshmen? What impact did college have on them? And, what did it mean when popular culture identified them as “Generation X?”

The goals of this chapter are to present the literature<sup>2</sup> on members of the class of 2000 as well as provide the reader with insights into their worlds. To accomplish these goals, this chapter is divided into three sections. The first section begins with a review of demographic information about the class of 2000 based on their responses to the Cooperative Institutional Research Program<sup>3</sup> (CIRP) survey administered to them when

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<sup>2</sup> The literature presented in this chapter reflects the opinions, experiences and research findings of the traditional age (18 to 22 years old) undergraduate.

<sup>3</sup> “The Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) is a national longitudinal study of the American higher education system. Established in 1966 at the American Council on Education, the CIRP is now the nation’s largest and longest empirical study of higher education, involving data on some 1,400 institutions, over 8 million students, and more than 100,000 faculty. The Annual CIRP freshmen and follow-up surveys are now administered by the Higher Education Research Institute at the University of California, Los

they were freshmen. This summary is put into a larger context, as it offers a comparison of their responses in 1996 with data that has been collected since 1966.

A Generation Theory-based portrait of the class of 2000 is presented in the second section including a discussion of their values, beliefs and attitudes that were influenced by the world events and social issues they experienced. It also identifies specific characteristics, a “peer personality,” of this population that is very different from previous cohorts of students.

The final section reviews the literature written about the impact of the college experience on an undergraduate using a review of longitudinal and comparative studies of students during their freshmen and senior years. These studies measured the college experience’s impact on the values, beliefs and attitudes of students regarding political and social issues, as well as their cognitive and interpersonal skill development. Contributing factors such as on-campus living, involvement in activities, interactions with the faculty and student motivation are presented to illustrate the positive or negative impact of the college experience.

#### Class of 2000: Demographics and the CIRP Results

Since 1966, the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP), in collaboration with colleges and universities, has “collected survey data, in the fall semester, to profile the background characteristics, attitudes, values, educational achievements, and future goals of the new students entering college in the United States”

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Angeles, under the continuing sponsorship of the American Council on Education. The survey covers a wide range of student characteristics: parental income and education, ethnicity, and other demographic items; financial aid; secondary school achievement and activities; educational and career plans; and values, attitudes, beliefs and self-concept” ([www.gseis.ucla.edu/heri/cirp.html](http://www.gseis.ucla.edu/heri/cirp.html), retrieved 1/7/2000).

(Astin, Parrott, Korn & Sax, 1997, p. 1). This data reflects changes in student profiles that directly affect higher education and “can also be viewed as an indication of our changing society” (p. 1). The CIRP data presented in this chapter are results from the responses of the traditional-age freshmen (18 to 19 years of age) who were members of the class of 2000, unless otherwise specified.

The college class of 2000 began their college careers in the fall of 1996. At that time, approximately 1.5 million first-time, full-time, traditional age freshmen entered the world of higher education. These freshmen joined an estimated 14.3 million other students enrolled in public and private two- and four-year institutions across the United States (National Center for Education Statistics, 1998). Developing a profile of this particular cohort of students begins with a review of demographic information regarding their parents, families, ages and races.

The CIRP survey provides information concerning parents’ income and education. In a review of 30 years of survey results (1966 to 1996) the median income of the parents is significantly higher than it was in 1966. In 1996 the average combined parent income was \$52,600 versus \$9,600 in 1966. “Incomes of \$50,000 or more, which in 1966 accounted for far less than 5% of students’ families, now accounts for the majority of parental incomes” (Astin, Parrott, Korn & Sax, 1997, p. 3). In the 1996 survey students indicated that their combined parents’ income, for the majority (60.4%), ranges from \$30,000 to \$99,999 per year, while 23.8% reported that their parents income was below \$30,000 and 15.8% reported above \$100,000 per year (CIRP Survey, [www.gseis.ucla.edu/heri/cirp.html](http://www.gseis.ucla.edu/heri/cirp.html), retrieved 1/7/2000).

On the surface, it appears that families in 1996 had more financial resources to send a student to college. But these figures are deceiving, as the 1966 figures are not adjusted for the inflation that took place between 1966 and 1996. Using the Consumer Price Index to calculate the average change in prices over time with respect to inflation, an income of \$9,600 in 1966 translates, in real dollars, to a salary of \$46,489 in 1996. The adjusted figures in the median combined salaries of college students' parents in 1966 clearly show that the median salaries of parents in 1996 were only slightly higher than the median salary of college students' parents in 1966.

A second factor that must be considered when presenting parental income is the cost of higher education in 1966 versus its cost in 1996. In 1966, the average tuition, room and board costs at a four-year public institution were \$947. At a private four-year college in 1966, the average tuition, room and board costs were \$2,007 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2000). Had the cost of higher education increased in step with inflation, the cost of attending a public four-year college, in current dollars, would have risen to \$4,586, and the cost of attending a private four-year college cost would have risen to \$9,719. In actuality, the costs of higher education in 1996 rose to \$6,730 at public colleges and to \$16,994 at private colleges (National Center for Education Statistics, 2000). While income levels in current dollars more than quadrupled from 1966 to 1996, the tuition at public colleges increased six fold and at private colleges almost seven and a half fold. If the growth rate of income is the constant, public college tuition grew 1.64 times faster than income, and private college tuition grew 3.03 times faster than income.

The cost of higher education has clearly outpaced inflation and increases in families' incomes, resulting in less money available for families to support college



attendance and greater worries about how to pay for it. The CIRP survey highlights student concerns about how they will afford college: In the fall of 1996 survey, 50.9% had some concern but had enough funds to finance college, 31.1% had no concerns and 18% had major concerns about affording their education. Between 1966 and 1973, the percentage of students that expressed "major concern" about their ability to pay for college nearly doubled (from 8.6% to 16.6%).

At the same time, record high percentages of freshmen say that they will have to 'get a job to help pay for college expenses' and record numbers say they plan to work full-time while attending. These latter trends are especially troubling in light of recent Higher Education Research Institute's studies suggesting that working off campus and especially full-time work increases the likelihood that the student will drop out of college. (Astin, 1993 cited in Astin, Tsui & Avalos, 1996, p. 26)

A second segment of the questionnaire provides information about parents' education. The CIRP data indicated that 44.4% of students' fathers have a college degree. This represents a two-thirds increase since 1966. The proportion of college-educated mothers has more than doubled to 49.6% in 1996. This increase of college-educated mothers has had another impact on the family:

By far the largest single change during the two decades is the decline in the proportion of students' mothers who are homemakers. Twenty years ago fully one student in three came from a family where the mother was a homemaker; today it is fewer than one in eight. (Astin, Parrott, Korn & Sax, 1997, p. 2)

In reviewing the 30-years of data relating to the age and race of students, we see that college students in 1996 "compared to earlier generations, are older and more diverse" (Levine & Cureton, 1998, p. 4). Beginning in the 1980s an unprecedented enrollment growth in the "nontraditional" student population occurred in higher education. The U.S. Department of Education (1996a) reported that in 1994, college students who were 25 or older represented 44% of all college students. In addition, the

majority was female (55%) and working (54 %). “Fewer than one in six of all current undergraduates fit the traditional stereotype of the American college student attending full-time, being eighteen to twenty-two years of age, and living on campus” (U.S. Department of Education, 1996b cited in Levine & Cureton, 1998, p. 49).

In 1996, the majority (80.4%) of all first-time, freshmen identified themselves as White. Since then, there has been a steady, though small, increase in the racial mix on college campuses. In 1966, the racial composition of students in higher education was 90.5% White, 5.6% Black, .7% Asian-American, .6% American Indian and 3% other. The CIRP data did not identify Mexican-American, Puerto Rican and Other Latino as categories until 1971 (Astin, Parrott, Korn & Sax, 1997). By 1996, 80.4% of college students identify themselves as White, 9.7% Black, 4.3% Asian-American, 3% Mexican-American, 2.3% American Indian, 1.6% Other Latino, .9% Puerto Rican and 2.4% other.

The time it took for an undergraduate to complete his or her degree also changed. By 1996, graduation rates showed that fewer “than two out of five [students were] able to graduate in four years” (Astin, Tsui, & Avalos, 1996). And, 28% required a fifth year to earn a baccalaureate degree (U.S. Department of Education, 1996a).

The fact of the matter is that obtaining the baccalaureate degree in four years is an anomaly, particularly at public universities and less selective institutions. Indeed, 46% of colleges and universities report a lengthening of the time to earn a degree during the 1990s. (Levine & Cureton, 1998, p. 129)

The second area the CIRP survey explores are the beliefs, attitudes and values of students regarding political and social issues. In the fall of 1996, the majority of traditional-age freshmen (52.7%) identified themselves politically as “middle of the road,” 2.9% “far left,” 21.7% “liberal,” 21% “conservative,” and 1.7% “far right.” While the percentage of freshmen identifying themselves as “liberal” or “far left” has decreased

substantially since a high of 38.1% in 1971, as a cohort they have increased somewhat from a low of 19.7% in 1981 to 24.6% in 1996.

On the other side of the political spectrum, the percentage of freshmen identifying themselves as “conservative” or “far right” has not fluctuated as dramatically. Rising steadily from a low of 14.5% in 1973, to 21.7% in 1981, the trend in “right-wing” students has hovered in the range of 18.7% to 22.8% ever since, standing at 22.7% in the 1996 survey (Astin, Parrott, Korn & Sax, 1997; CIRP Survey, [www.gseis.ucla.edu/heri/cirp.html](http://www.gseis.ucla.edu/heri/cirp.html), retrieved 1/7/2000).

The most substantial change in political identification in the undergraduate population has occurred in the “middle-of-the-road” category. From a low of 45.5% in 1970, the percentage of freshmen identifying themselves this way rose by almost one-third to 60.3% in 1983, and then declined to 52.7% in 1996. Astin, Parrott, Korn & Sax (1997) also noted that

While gains in the ‘middle-of-the-road’ identification between 1973 and 1983 came almost exclusively at the cost of liberal/far left groups, the decline since 1983 has been matched by virtually equal increases in the liberal/far left and conservative/far right groups. (p. 19)

Their “middle-of-the-road” political ideologies, rather than a full allegiance to one political ideology, are represented in the fact that students are more issues-oriented. The class of 2000 identified themselves as fiscally conservative, yet they don’t believe the government should cut monies to social programs. “While more students support ‘liberal’ positions on such issues as students’ rights, equality for women and homosexuals, their views have become more conservative on [some] ‘law and order’ issues” (Astin, Parrott, Korn & Sax, 1997, p. 19). For example, in what is viewed as a “liberal” political position, students overwhelmingly support handgun control (81.6% of students in the fall 1996

survey indicated that they “strongly agree” that the federal government should do more to control the sale of handguns). On the other hand, opposition to capital punishment declined by more than one-half between 1970 and 1996 (from 56.3% to 22.2%).

An indication of how these students’ views are issue-focused is their increased support of the legalization of marijuana (a “liberal” agenda item): from 16.7% in 1966 to 33.0% in 1996 (Astin, Parrott, Korn & Sax, 1997). On the conservative side, student support for abortion rights has dropped from a high of 64.1% in 1992 to 56.3% in 1996. And, the number of students who believe that “there is too much concern in the courts for the rights of criminals” increased by more than one-third over the same period (from 51.6% to 71.6 %) (Astin, Parrott, Korn & Sax, 1997).

These students “are concerned about a plethora of social problems, and hold opinions, which range across the political spectrum, on how the nation should respond to those problems” (Levine & Cureton, 1998, p. 31). In the fall 1996 survey, students “strongly agree” with the following: the government is not doing enough to control environmental pollution (81.9%); there is a need for a national health-care plan to cover everybody’s medical costs (72.3%); wealthy people should pay a larger share of taxes than they do now (65.7%). Since 1992, there also has been a decrease in the opinion that the federal government can solve all the country’s social and economic issues. Students also indicated the federal government should not “increase taxes on the wealthy to reduce the deficit” (Astin, Parrott, Korn & Sax, 1997, p. 29). These students, according to one study,

can see large-scale problems all around them, from poverty, racism, and crime to environmental pollution, an unequally prosperous economy, and global conflict. Unlike their predecessors of the 1980s, current students have concluded that they do not have the luxury of turning away from these problems. Rather, their

generation has to 'fix everything'. They deeply resent that responsibility, saying, 'It's unfair. We didn't make the problems; we inherited them'. (Levine & Cureton, 1998, pp. 34-35)

Apart from broader world issues, the class of 2000 viewed the reasons for attending college differently than their predecessors. "In the late 1960s developing a meaningful philosophy of life was the top value for students entering college, being endorsed as an 'essential' or 'very important' goal by more than 80 percent" (Astin, Parrott, Korn & Sax, 1997, p. 29). By the fall 1996 survey, freshman respondents noted a very different reason to attend college — specifically, to get a better job (76.7%). The class of 2000 strongly agreed "the chief benefit of a college education is to increase one's earning power." This represented an increase from 53.6% to over 70% between 1969 and 1996. "Similarly, the percentage of students who say they are attending college 'to be able to make more money' increased from 49.9% to 74.7% between 1971 and 1991" (Astin, Parrott, Korn & Sax, 1997, p. 13).

In a sense, committing oneself to making more money as a major goal in life and major reason for attending college may obviate the need to 'develop a meaningful philosophy of life.' Indeed, it could be argued that for many young people today, the making of money has become a kind of 'philosophy of life' in itself. (Astin, Parrott, Korn and Sax, 1997, p. 14)

While making money appears to be a major motivator for students to attend college, they are not without a desire to better their world in some way. The percentage of students who indicated that they have been involved in some sort of volunteer work has steadily risen from 42% to 59% since 1987.

While it might be argued that this increase is yet another sign of students' increasing desire to gain a competitive edge in the college admissions process, it should be noted that this rise in pre-college volunteerism has also been accompanied by a parallel increase in students' intentions to volunteer during college. (Astin, Parrott, Korn & Sax, 1997, p. 28)

In the 1996 survey, 19.3% of new students indicated that there was a “very good chance” that they will be involved in some type of volunteer experience while in college. This is an increase from 14.2% in 1990. “Still, it must be acknowledged that these percentages lag far behind the percent who volunteer before entering college” (Astin, Parrott, Korn & Sax, 1997, p. 28).

In reviewing some of the characteristics, demographics and perceptions of the class of 2000 as they began their college careers, it becomes evident that these individuals were “practical-optimists” who didn’t see their government as providing all the solutions to world or local issues. They were socially aware of the many issues facing their country and hoped to make a difference in their smaller communities. And, while their counterparts of 30 years ago saw college as contributing to the development of a meaningful philosophy of life, the class of 2000 seemed to reject that idea in favor of one that sees college attendance as a step toward fulfilling a philosophy of life that largely involves making money, though not at the expense of their personal time or family.

#### The Class of 2000: Their Peer Personality as Members of Generation X

The world of the class of 2000 was very different from the world of a graduate 20 or even 10 years ago. To better understand who they were, we need to look at what they experienced and witnessed in their lives. Here we will explore the larger social context of the student’s world, including a review of the global events that occurred between their birth and graduation from college, as well as a discussion of the class’ peer personality as members of Generation X.

College seniors of traditional age (21 to 22 years old) who graduated in May 2000 were born between 1978 and 1979. They were born after the assassinations of John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert Kennedy. Before they were born, astronauts had landed on the moon, Richard Nixon had resigned, the war in Vietnam was over, Jimmy Carter had been elected, Apple Computer was in business, and the first Concorde airplane had taken flight (Levine & Cureton, 1998). These students saw the world events that shaped and changed the essence of a previous generation as merely notable events discussed in a high school American history course. An entirely different set of events shaped the lives of the class of 2000.

The traditional-age college senior in this class was

- born the year Americans were taken hostage in Iran, a nuclear accident occurred at Three Mile Island, and the federal government bailed out Chrysler Corporation.
- a year old when Ronald Reagan won a landslide presidential election and John Lennon was shot.
- two when AIDS was identified, MTV made its debut, and the first U.S. software patent was issued.
- three when unemployment hit its highest level in United States since the Depression; the Equal Rights Amendment failed to be ratified; and, for the first time, a majority of their mothers were employed outside the home.
- four when the compact disc was first sold and Sally Ride became the first U.S. woman in space.
- five when the Bell telephone system was broken up.
- six when Gorbachev came to power in the Soviet Union, the United States both invaded Grenada and became the leading debtor nation in the world.
- seven when the space shuttle Challenger exploded, the Chernobyl nuclear accident occurred, the United States bombed Libya for terrorist acts, and Wall Street's Ivan Boesky paid a \$100 million criminal fine.

- eight when the stock market crashed, and Oliver North testified before Congress in the Iran-Contra hearings.
- nine when George Bush, Sr. was elected to the presidency.
- ten when the Berlin Wall came down, China killed thousands of pro-democracy demonstrators in Tiananmen Square, the Exxon Valdez spilled 11 million gallons of oil into Prince William Sound, and the U.S. government rescued the savings and loan industry.
- eleven when America fought in the Persian Gulf, Nelson Mandela was released, and East and West Germany became one nation.
- twelve when the Soviet Union broke apart, apartheid laws were repealed in South Africa, and Clarence Thomas was elevated to the Supreme Court.
- thirteen when Bill Clinton was elected the forty-second president of the United States, 300 current and former members of Congress were named in the House of Representative banking scandal, U.S. troops were sent to Somalia, riots broke out in Los Angeles following the Rodney King verdict, and wars of ethnic cleansing began in Bosnia-Herzegovina.
- fourteen when Itzhak Rabin and Yassar Arafat shook hands after signing the Israeli-Palestinian peace accord, the Branch Davidian stand-off with federal agents occurred in Texas, and 12 western European nations created the European Community.
- fifteen when the World Series was canceled because of a major league players' strike and rock musician Kurt Cobain committed suicide.
- sixteen when Newt Gingrich became the Speaker of the House of Representatives, O.J. Simpson was acquitted in his criminal trial, and a terrorist explosion destroyed the federal building in Oklahoma City.
- seventeen when the prime minister of Israel was assassinated, the Unabomber suspect was arrested, and Bill Clinton was reelected to office.
- eighteen (and in college) when Simpson was found guilty at his civil trial, the Dow Jones industrial average continued its unprecedented upward swing to top 10,000 for the first time, and Diana, Princess of Wales died in an automobile accident in Paris. (adapted from Levine & Cureton, 1998, pp. 7, 8, 9)

During their college years they watched as President Clinton, embroiled in a sex scandal, became the second president in history to be impeached, charged with two



counts of obstruction of justice and perjury, and acquitted by the Senate. The names Monica Lewinsky, Linda Tripp and Ken Starr were part of everyday conversation. As college students, they witnessed a fellow college student at the University of Wyoming, Matthew Shepard, die after having been brutally attacked in an apparent hate crime because of his sexual orientation. They observed a former professional wrestler, Jesse Ventura, win the race for governor of Minnesota and watched John Glenn, at age 77, return to space 36 years after his first flight, which occurred a decade before they were born. They entered their senior year during the autumn of the twentieth century and graduated in a new millennium (Worldbook, 1999).

The class of 2000, according to the generation theory of Strauss and Howe (1991), was part of the Thirteenth American Generation. Levine and Cureton (1998) state “the 1990s signaled the arrival of a new decade and a new crop of young people. With them came the media barrage aimed at naming that generation. Who would be first to coin a name? Which name would stick? Who would get credit?” (p. 3). Demographics provided a rationale for a name. Given their small birth cohort size, this generation was initially referred to as the “baby busters,” or the even more popular “busters.”

Their perceived cultural tastes were celebrated in the name ‘MTV Generation’ (after Music Television). Their personality traits – depending on whether one liked them or not – yielded ‘slackers’ or, alternatively, ‘the repair generation,’ the former stressing social disengagement and the latter emphasizing social involvement. (Levine & Cureton, 1998, pp. 3-4)

Despite the various choices, the name that has stuck is “Generation X,” and the credit for this description went to Douglas Coupland (1991).

The Generation X cohort is inclusive of all people born between 1961 and 1981 (Straus & Howe, 1991). It is important to note that the seniors in this study were at the

tail end of their generation's cohort. According to this theoretical perspective, they may have possessed the characteristics of both their specific generation cohort, Generation X, and some features of the subsequent cohort, the Millennial Generation (Cage, 1993; Komives, 1993; Strauss & Howe, 1991).

The use of generation theory to study traditional-age seniors provides a unique view of some of the sociological factors that may have contributed to their current perceptions of themselves and their world. Generation theory is purely a sociology-based perspective. As such, historians and others have criticized its validity. For, unlike the traditional linear approach to the study of history, the generational approach "presents a history of the American lifecycle and a history of the cross-generational relationships. These relationships – between parents and children, between mid-life leaders and youths coming of age, between elders and heirs – depict history as people actually lived it, from growing up in their teens to growing old in their seventies" (Strauss & Howe, 1991, p. 8). This theory looks at "how [notable] events shape the personalities of different age groups differently according to their phase of life, and how people retain those personality differences as they grow older" (Strauss & Howe, 1991, p. 34). A generation is, therefore, defined as a "cohort-group whose length approximates the span of a phase of life and whose boundaries are fixed by peer personality" (Strauss & Howe, 1991, p. 60).

Since World War I, every generation of college students has been given a generational label to describe their peer personality.

The youth of the 1920s, stamped history wearing raccoon coats, drinking from hip flasks, and dancing the Charleston, were anointed the 'lost' generation. A decade later, young people who were out of work and out of luck were christened the 'Depression' generation – in every sense of the term. The post-World War II youngsters, viewed as having donned gray flannel suits and hurrying to rebuild lives interrupted by the war, were named the 'silent' generation. Then came the

'baby boomers' of the 1960s, the generation of 'sex, drugs, and rock and roll,' forever remembered demonstrating in bell-bottoms, love beads, and tie-dyed shirts. The late seventies and eighties produced what is now thought of as clones of the Michael J. Fox television character Alex Keaton from *Family Ties*. They were conservative and conformist young people – well coifed, well dressed, and striving to be well-off. They were called the 'me' generation. (Levine and Cureton, 1998, p. 3)

While these descriptions of college students appear on the surface as caricatures, the peer personality of the cohort as well as its age can serve as boundaries to identify a generation. As a generational marker, the peer personality of a generation

is its own unique biography... it is essentially a caricature of its prototypical member. It is, in its sum attributes, a distinctively person-like creation. A generation has a collective attitude about family life, sex roles, institutions, politics, religion, lifestyle, and the future. It can be safe or reckless, calm or aggressive, self-absorbed or outer driven, generous or selfish, spiritual or secular, interested in culture or interested in politics. In short, it can think, feel, or do anything an individual might think, feel, or do. (Strauss & Howe, 1991. p. 63)

Critics of generation theory have argued that the theory is not completely inclusive and many of the subcultures of American society do not fit into this theory, as their experiences are not the same as the mainstream population. Straus and Howe (1991) are aware of the imprecise nature of this theory but argue that, "a generation, like an individual, merges many different qualities, no one of which is definitive standing alone. But once all the evidence is assembled, [there is a] persuasive case for identifying (by birth year) thirteen generations over the course of American history" (p. 68).

As members of America's thirteenth generation, what has been the class of 2000's peer personality? The college class of 2000 was four years old in 1983, the same year as the release of the federal report from the Department of Education entitled *A Nation at Risk* that identified the lack of intelligence and ability of students emerging from America's schools. This generation of students was labeled as stupid, lazy, bizarre in

their appearance and void of any morals. Felicity Barringer, a columnist for the *New York Times* wrote that Generation X is “a lost generation, an army of Bart Simpsons, possibly armed and dangerous” (8/19/90). And, according to Strauss and Howe (1991), “right or wrong, the message sent to Generation X and their would-be employers is clear: these kids got an inferior education and are equipped with an inferior mind” (p. 320).

Even with this inferior education, the undergraduates grew up during a technological revolution and they embraced it eagerly and materialistically. They saw the creation of a host of new technologies: personal computers, cell phones, software, genetic engineering, space shuttles, fiber optics, CD-ROMs, digital audio tapes, personal pagers and digital cameras. These new technologies rapidly flooded the retail marketplace, and families transformed their homes to adapt to the technological age. In many ways the technology revolution evolved concurrently with the lives of the members of the class of 2000.

Videocassette recorders were developed two years before the class of 2000 were born; by 1995, VCRs were in 85% of all American homes (Universal Almanac, 1997). In the same year, more than 65% of households had cable television (Universal Almanac, 1997) and over 80% had microwave ovens (World Almanac and Book of Facts, 1997). In 1995 alone, almost 18 million answering machines were sold, 6 million cellular phones, 8.4 million computers (Universal Almanac, 1997). Compact discs, which came to the U.S. marketplace in 1983, when the class of 2000 were four or five, were the most popular format for music less than ten years later. Today, two-thirds of all music is sold on CD (Universal Almanac, 1997). The World Wide Web, created in 1989 when today’s seniors were ten or eleven, now reaches well over 25 million people and is growing exponentially. (Levine & Cureton, 1998, p. 12)

This cohort of students has also lived through the redefining of the stereotypical nuclear family. In 1986, 56% of all children lived in a family with a mother and father who were married just once. Fourteen percent had at least one previously married parent, another 11% lived with stepparents, and 19% lived with just one parent. One in five had

half-siblings (Danziger & Gottschalk, 1995). The number of freshmen from divorced families had tripled since 1972 to one fourth of the new student population. “When we add those with one or both parents deceased, we find that three freshmen in ten come from families where both parents are not present” (Astin, Parrott, Korn & Sax, 1997, p. 4).

The inescapable conclusion is that today’s college students grew up in a time in which everything around them appeared to be changing – and often not for the better. They came of age in that environment without the traditional protection and cushion that the family, church, school, and youth groups offered to their predecessors (Levine & Cureton, 1998, p. 16).

In addition to the changes in their families, their collegiate social life was “lubricated” by alcohol (Levine & Cureton, 1998). “Nationwide, 84% of all undergraduates reported having drunk alcohol within the previous year” (Weschler, 1996 cited in Levine & Cuerton, 1998, p. 105). Drinking was not a new phenomenon on college campuses in the 1990’s. As a result of several widely publicized alcohol-related deaths of under-age students<sup>4</sup> on college campuses, colleges were forced, in some cases by state mandate, to develop stricter alcohol policies and increased alcohol abuse education on campus (Weschler, Eun Lee, Kuo & Lee, 1999, <http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/cas/rpt2000/CAS2000rpt2.html>, retrieved 11/11/2001). The impact of these initiatives had minimal effect in changing the drinking patterns of college students in the 1990’s (Weschler, Eun Lee, Kuo & Lee, 1999, <http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/cas/rpt2000/CAS2000rpt2.html>, retrieved 11/11/2001).

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<sup>4</sup> In 1985, by federal mandate, the drinking age rose from 18 to 21 years old nationwide. For colleges this meant that less than one quarter of the traditional-age undergraduate student population could legally purchase, possess or consume alcohol. This created a legal/cultural clash given the fact that the students have held the perception that “alcohol and college have always gone together” (Levine and Cureton, 1998, p. 105).

Binge drinking, defined as consuming five or more drinks at one time at least biweekly, had become the catch phrase to describe college student drinking in the 1990s. The genesis for this term came from a 1993 study conducted by the Harvard School of Public Health that found that 44% of all college students who drank had binged within the previous two weeks of their research (Wechsler, 1994). In their follow-up studies conducted in 1997 and 1999, the Harvard School of Public Health found that binged drinking on college campuses had only slightly dropped from 44% in 1993 to 42% in 1997 and increased back to 44% in 1999 (Wechsler, Eun Lee, Kuo and Lee, 1999, <http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/cas/rpt2000/CAS2000rpt2.html>, retrieved 11/11/2001). So, in spite of the heightened media exposure, public and parent concerns and college initiatives to address alcohol use, students continued to drink.

Wechsler's research raises the question of why did college students in the 1990s drink? Levine and Cureton (1998) asked 230 college students from twenty-eight colleges across the United States why students drank and why they drank in excessive amounts. The students responded, "People drink to relax. A lot of people drink to get drunk. They think they can express themselves. With alcohol they can be more honest" (p. 108). They also drank "because of stress" (p. 107). And, one student stated that other students drank excessively because they lived by the philosophy that "you are not drunk enough if you still remember" (p. 107). Based on their interviews with students, Levine and Cureton concluded that college students in the 1990's drank primarily as means to escape.

This escape — from campus or from the world — may, in part, be connected to their inability to manage life's stress. From the CIRP data we know that the percentage of freshmen who reported, "being overwhelmed by everything I have to do" has increased

steadily from 16.4% since 1987 (the first year it was asked) to 29.4% in 1996. At the same time, the percentage reporting that they frequently “feel depressed” has been increasing (from 8.3% in 1987 to 10% in 1996) and the percentage rating themselves above average in “emotional health” has been on a decline (59.0% in 1987 to 52.7% in 1996). “Not surprisingly, since 1989 the inclination of entering freshmen to ‘seek personal counseling’ after they enter college has also been on the rise – from 34.7 to 41.1 percent” (Astin, Parrott, Korn & Sax, 1997, p. 27).

Given these findings, it is ironic that this generation of students was remarkably upbeat about the future. As reported in the 1993 Undergraduate Survey<sup>5</sup>, two out of three (66%) said they were optimistic about the future of the country.

Their optimism was not the Pollyannaish variety traditionally associated with youth; this optimism had a hard edge. They gave answers such as ‘I expect things to get worse before they get better,’ ‘I’m pragmatically optimistic,’ and our favorite, ‘I am cynically optimistic’ (Levine & Cureton, 1998, p. 30).

This is in sharp contrast with the students of the 1960s and 1970s. Two-thirds of the students (65%) surveyed in 1969 and 1976 stated that they were “very apprehensive” about the nation’s prospects (Undergraduate Surveys, 1969, 1976 as cited in Levine & Cureton, 1998).

Levine and Cureton (1998) argue that, “hand in hand with this new optimism has come a rising sense of efficacy” (p. 30). Almost three out of four undergraduates (73%) believed that an individual could bring about change in our society. In the two prior surveys, nearly half of all students (45%) rejected this notion (Undergraduate Surveys,

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<sup>5</sup> The 1993 Undergraduate Survey was conducted by the Harvard School of Education and administered by the Opinion Research Cooperation of Princeton, New Jersey with support from the Lily Foundation. Ninety-one thousand traditional-age and non-traditional age undergraduates, nationwide, were sampled from a stratified selection (based on the Carnegie classification) of colleges and universities.

1969, 1976, 1993 as cited in Levine & Cureton, 1998). The reality is that the class of 2000 was part of

a generation that is desperately clinging to its dream, but its hope, though broadly professed, is fragile and gossamer like. The lives of these young people are being challenged at every turn: in their families, their communities, their nation, and the world. What is remarkable is that their hopes have not been engulfed by their fears. (Levine & Cureton, 1998, p. 9)

The CIRP survey provides a glimpse of what the class of 2000 was like when it entered college. Generation theory offers a perspective on the global events that were part of their lives. Neither the data nor the theory tells us if or how the college experience has had an impact on their lives. A discussion of what changes may occur as a result of their college experience follows.

#### The Class of 2000: The Impact of the College Experience

There still remains the question of what the class of 2000 learned in college. How has the student changed since he or she first entered their college or university? "Are they prepared to face the future beyond the hallowed halls of their alma mater?" (Gardner & Van der Veer, 1998, p. 1)

Flannelly (1989) investigated the change in student values, beliefs and attitudes from the freshmen year to the senior year. Using a self-designed instrument, he compared the students' Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) survey responses as freshmen with their responses to his instrument during the senior year. In the analysis of the data, seniors reported a stronger affiliation with "liberal" views on political and social issue (gay rights, abortion and capital punishment) than they did as freshmen.



Additionally, student values changed regarding other topics, including raising a family, helping others who are in difficulty, influencing social values, having administrative responsibility for the work of others, participating in a community action program, and helping to promote racial understanding. As seniors, they rated these life objectives as “essential” to them upon graduation. Furthermore, seniors indicated that valuing artistic work, becoming involved in programs to clean up the environment, and keeping up to date with political affairs will be “very important” in their post-college life.

Lottes and Kuriloff (1994) also identified changes in student attitudes on political and social issues. In the senior year, students scored higher on measures of liberalism, social conscience, tolerance of homosexuality, and feminist issues than they did in their freshmen year. Lottes and Kuriloff (1994) noted that the liberal nature of a college environment and exposure to differing ideologies may have influenced student perceptions and attitudes. They point out that new students may enter college with a singular view of the world, based solely on their experiences in high school and in the home. The college experience may provide a broader interpretation of political and social issues, thus contributing to changes in attitudes about these issues.

In addition to changes in beliefs, values and attitudes, seniors also show changes in educational aspiration during the college years. Lester (1986), using a follow-up study with the fall 1982 incoming freshmen, investigated changes in long-term academic goals pertaining to a degree beyond a bachelor's. He found that by the senior year, there was a decrease in the percentage of students desiring only a bachelor's degree and an increase in the percentages desiring masters' and doctoral degrees. The majority of the students identified the need for lifelong learning as essential to meeting their career objectives. A

smaller percentage indicated that their desire to obtain a graduate degree was related to the acquisition of new knowledge for the sole purpose of learning.

What the research demonstrates is that by their senior year, students look differently at the world after college. The values, beliefs and attitudes they had as freshmen change. This may be due, in part, to changes in their identity.

In redefining their identity, the college experience helps students become more introspective and more aware of their own interests, values and aspirations. The result is the “crystallization” of these various aspects of their personality toward a unified “sense of identity” that is thought to be one of the most important outcomes of the college experience (Chickering, 1969; Feldman & Newcomb, 1969; Bowen, 1977; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991).

Another area in which we see the impact of the college experience is in cognitive and interpersonal skill development. Bauer (1995) notes that “given the renewed emphasis on accountability coming from campus officials, political leaders, parents, and prospective students, assessment of students’ academic and social skills has become an integral part of higher education” (p. 130).

What impact does college have on the undergraduate’s cognitive and interpersonal skill development? By far the most comprehensive analysis of college outcomes has been Pascarella and Terenzini’s (1991) review of 2,600 studies on student growth during and after college. To manage this large-scale study, the researchers divided affective and cognitive outcomes into nine domains: knowledge and subject competence, cognitive skills and intellectual growth, psychosocial changes, attitudes and values, moral

development, educational attainment, career choice and development, economic benefits, and quality of life after college.

Although not every student changes on every domain, on average, college attendance is associated with modest gains in verbal and quantitative skills, substantial gains in knowledge (particularly in the major), and increased cognitive complexity; greater social maturation, personal competence, and freedom from irrational prejudice; increases in appreciation for the aesthetic qualities of life; clarification of religious views; substantial gains in personal autonomy and nonauthoritarianism; and modest decreases in political naiveté and dogmatism. (Kuh, 1993, p. 281)

Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) noted that, in general, college attendance typically was associated with “net” and “long-term” effects in each of the domains. They defined “net” effects as changes due to attending college — changes that did not occur through normal maturation or because of life experiences other than those associated with college. Changes that occur during college and continue after graduation are considered “long-term” effects.

In a different study, Davison (1981) looked at the impact of higher education on the moral, verbal and complex reasoning skills of students. Using a four-year longitudinal comparison of moral reasoning with students who attended college versus students who did not, Davison (1981) found that in the first two years after high school, scores of college attendees and non-attendees increased by about the same amount. In the subsequent two years, the increase for the college attendees was far greater than that of the non-attendees. What was substantiated in this finding is that college seniors were less dualistic in their attitudes, beliefs and values than non-college attendees.

In a second study, Davison (1981) used a case analysis approach to test the verbal and complex reasoning skills of freshman versus senior-year students. The presented cases had no simple right or wrong answer. The seniors in Davison’s study scored higher

than the freshmen and provided a wider range of solutions and possible scenarios for resolution of the cases. The results supported his assertion that the college experience helps students develop critical thinking skills that contribute to broader interpretations of complex situations. Also, by their senior year, the seniors can more effectively assess a situation, verbalize its intricacies and propose more than one solution to the problem than their freshman counterparts are able to do.

In a comparative study on critical thinking, Keeley (1982) found that four years of college could have an impact on the student's critical thinking skills. In this study, freshmen and seniors at a Midwestern university were given either very general instructions or multiple-specific, detailed instructions for critically evaluating one of two articles. The results showed that seniors provided more criticisms and deeper critical thinking skills than freshmen, regardless of what method of instruction was given.

In a longitudinal study at the University of Iowa, Hood (1984) researched student development along three cognitive and three psychosocial dimensions. Using six different research instruments administered to students during their freshman and senior years, Hood focused on the moral development, ego development, and conceptual levels in traditional-age college students. Each of the three measures of cognitive development showed significant increases in the seniors' scores over their scores as freshmen. There was no consistent pattern in the students' college experiences that could be related to growth using cognitive measures.

Regarding the interpersonal measures, scores showed increased tolerance and acceptance of differences among individuals, increased capacity for mature and intimate relationships, and growth in confidence and sexual identity. Hood's results indicated that

participation in various types of co-curricular activities correlated to growth in certain psychosocial areas of development, such as tolerance and confidence.

In a four-year follow-up study of underachieving college freshmen, the changes in the self-concept of those students still in college were compared to those who dropped out. The results showed a significant difference between the two populations. College seniors reported a higher level of self-awareness and self-esteem than those individuals who left college (Valine, 1976).

From these studies we can see that there is measurable and evident cognitive and psychosocial growth as students progress from the freshman year to the senior year. The college experience has a positive impact on the cognitive and interpersonal skill development of students on many levels. Additionally, there is strong consensus that students learn what they study.

That is, overall academic development is proportional to the amount of time that students devote to studying, while growth in a particular area of knowledge or skill is proportional to the number of courses taken that focus on the same areas of knowledge (Astin, 1993, p. 395).

Astin's (1993) research on student development stressed the impact of the role of student involvement on "enhancing most aspects of the undergraduate's cognitive and affective development" (p. 394). Astin (1984) defined involvement as "the amount of physical or psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience" (p. 297). Through his research, Astin (1993) determined that "learning, academic performance, and retention are positively associated with academics, involvement with faculty, and involvement with student peer groups" (p. 394). Also, student behavior that isolates or removes them (commuting, off-campus work, no involvement in campus

activities or the social aspect of college life) from the “college experience” can negatively affect cognitive and affective developmental outcomes (Astin, 1984).

To determine if commuting isolates students from the college experience and subsequently has a negative effect on students, Nosow (1975) gathered data, through a structured questionnaire randomly distributed to graduating seniors, in an attempt to show the differences between residential college students and their commuting counterparts. The study explored the attitudes of students with respect to their education and social experiences during the four years they were enrolled. Nosow specifically asked students to describe the impact that residing on campus had on their personal adjustment to college, their intellectual growth while in college, and their college experience.

Nosow’s findings indicate, in general, that resident students believed residing on campus had a positive impact on their personal adjustment, well-being and intellectual growth. Commuting students indicated that they felt commuting did not have a positive or negative affect on any of these areas of development. While they indicated that they missed out on some aspects of “college life,” commuting students felt that being distanced from the negative aspects of living on campus was more beneficial than what they perceived as the positive attributes of living on campus.

Nosow also found resident students less likely than commuting students to identify their experiences in the “university-at-large” as having been socially rewarding for them personally. In relation to their total educational experience, both resident and commuter students indicated that commuting or residing on campus did not affect their personal satisfaction with their college experience.

Astin (1993) sharply disagrees with Nosow's findings. In his research, commuting students report less satisfaction with their college experience. His research also indicated that commuting students were less likely to complete a bachelor's degree or enroll in graduate or professional schools after graduation. Furthermore, commuters rated themselves lower in the areas of leadership abilities and interpersonal skill development.

Astin's data on college seniors who resided on campus indicated self-reported growth in the areas of cultural awareness, leadership skills, interpersonal skills and job skills. Resident students were more likely to complete their degree, indicated higher satisfaction with faculty and were less likely to transfer to another college. These outcomes may be related to the fact that living on campus provides students greater opportunities to be involved and to have student-to-student and student-to-faculty interactions. Astin does concede that proximity to activities alone does not guarantee student growth; the resident student must make the effort and want to be involved.

Bauer (1995) examined the relationship between the effort students exerted to be involved and their growth. Bauer's used a survey to examine differences in the quality of effort and the self-reported gains students made in academic and personal/social development between their freshmen and senior years. In his research "students reported putting forth greater effort in academic and personal/social activities as seniors than as freshmen" (p. 133). Specifically, students make a significantly greater level of effort to be involved with faculty, clubs and organizations, and peer-to-peer dialogues during the senior year than the freshman year. Conversely, Bauer's (1995) findings showed that students devoted more time and effort to their writing and science (applications and procedures) as freshmen than as seniors. Bauer's researcher makes the case that greater

effort to be involved in the college environment contributes to increases in academic and personal/social development.

Erwin (1986) also studied the relationship between the effort made by the student to be involved and the impact of any involvement. However, in his research he used a different factor in his assessment. Erwin looked at student growth and development in relation to the student's financial contribution to his or her education. He described a relationship between financial contribution to college costs and the self-perceived intellectual development between the freshman and senior years. The results indicated that students contributing over 75% of their costs were less dualistic, more committed to life goals, more stable, and better at expressing their values and thoughts. Based on these findings, Erwin asserts that having fiscal responsibility for one's education motivates a student to be more involved and to take advantage of the skill-enhancing opportunities that are offered.

Bowen (1977) found that if a student is motivated to be involved and has been positively impacted by the college experience on a cognitive level, then the college experience has a "residue" effect on the individual. This "residue" is apparent in the fact that college graduates tend to be open to learning new information and sharing ideas. They also have the ability to deal with a wide variety of people, and demonstrate a practical sense of competence and confidence that allows them to successfully cope with different situations and problems (Bowen, 1977).

The research presented on the impact of the college experience, student involvement, and the level of effort made by students to be actively involved in their education supports the premise that student involvement can enhance undergraduates'



cognitive and affective development. The research also supports the position that attending college can, outside normal maturation, increase a student's skill level. It also demonstrates the importance of student motivation in the cognitive development and enhancement of the social skills of an undergraduate.

### Summary

This chapter provided the reader with an initial understanding of the college undergraduate class of 2000 by presenting demographic information about this cohort of students, the world events that may have influenced their lives, and the impact the undergraduate experience may have had on them. Review of the CIRP data offers general demographics of the class of 2000 as freshmen, as well as some insight into their beliefs, values and attitudes about political and social issues. In comparing the class of 2000 with previous cohorts of students, we observe changes in the demographics of *who* attended college. As evidenced in the research, there also were differences in the student population based on age, sex, and to a smaller degree, race, as compared to their counterparts less than a decade ago, and substantial differences from their counterparts three decades ago.

The class of 2000's values, beliefs and attitudes on social issues were based on specific issues and not influenced by a particular political ideology. They viewed attending college as a means to an end — specifically, to get a better job or to make more money. They looked at college in practical terms and did not see the altruistic benefits of the college experience as significant.

Growing up in the twentieth century was also a dramatically different experience for the class of 2000 than was their parents' experience growing up in the same century. A different set of world events influenced the lives of the class of 2000. They did not experience technology as a new innovation, but as a part of their everyday world. They had to face the challenge of being labeled Generation X, and an externally generated perception of them as lazy, less intelligent and unmotivated. They indicated they were not overly idealistic and did not believe that one person could change the world, but hoped to make changes in their smaller communities. They revealed a degree of fear about certain aspects of the future, but clung to an equal sense of hope about the future's "possibilities." As one "practically-optimistic" student stated, "Our generation will be able to fix the problem" (Levine & Cureton, 1998, p. 20).

Research on the impact of the college experience confirms that attending college assists in preparing the student to face the challenges of the world after graduation. The research also indicates that the college experience helps students redefine their identity — their values, beliefs and attitudes on political and social issues may either change or become more concretized based on their college experience. Comparative and longitudinal studies with students from their freshmen and senior year demonstrated that there is a "crystallization" of these various aspects of their personality toward a unified "sense of identity." This unification of their identity and the exploration of self are the most significant and important aspects of the college experience (Chickering, 1969; Bowen, 1977; Feldman & Newcomb, 1969; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991).

The research has also shown that cognitive and interpersonal skills increase based on the students' level of involvement in the college experience and the level of effort they

put into their own skill development. It is not just living on campus, involvement with faculty, and the student's effort to be involved, but rather the sum total of the student's experiences that appears to have the greatest impact on the development and enhancement of the students' cognitive and interpersonal skill development.

In moving toward a deeper understanding of what the senior year is like as a transition for an undergraduate, the next chapter explores the process of a life transition. It will provide the reader with current literature about life transitions, explain the theoretical concept of liminality, and explore some of the challenges students face in their senior year.

## CHAPTER II

### SCHLOSSBERG'S THEORY OF ADULT TRANSITION, THE TRANSITION PROCESS AND THE CHALLENGES OF THE SENIOR YEAR

This chapter discusses the various characteristics of a life transition, the transition process, and the challenges college seniors face, all of which will help illuminate our understanding of the undergraduate's senior year. Using Schlossberg's (1981) theory of adult transition as a foundation, the first section of the chapter defines a transition, classifies the three different types of transitions, and reviews other factors that contribute to the impact of a life transition on an individual.

Following an overview of Schlossberg's theory, the chapter's second section identifies and describes the three unique stages of the transition experience. The third section of the chapter discusses the choices and challenges undergraduate face in the senior year.

#### Schlossberg's Theory of Adult Transition

To explain the phenomena of a life transition, Schlossberg developed a theoretical model "that assists in our understanding of adults in transition and provides suggestions on how to cope with the ordinary and extraordinary process of living" (Evans, Forney & DiBrito, 1998, p. 108). The use of Schlossberg's theory as a primary source for a discussion of the transition experiences of college seniors is appropriate here for two reasons. First, several research studies have evidenced that this theory is applicable in a

number of different settings, including higher education (Forney & Gringrich, 1983; Champagne & Petitpas, 1989; Pearson & Petitpas, 1990; Chickering & Schlossberg, 1995).

The second reason that Schlossberg's theory on adult transitions is appropriate for this discussion is that it is "highly integrative of other theoretical contributions, conceptually and operationally sound, . . . and can provide a solid foundation for practice that is responsive to both commonalities and idiosyncrasies" (Evans, Forney & Guido-DiBrito, 1998, p. 122). Schlossberg's theory achieves these hallmarks because it defines a transition, describes the various types of life transitions, reviews other factors that can contribute to the emotional impact of life transitions, and provides coping strategies that can be used to manage them.

### Defining a Transition

Schlossberg (1981) defines a transition as "an event or nonevent, which results in a change in assumptions about one's self and the world and thus requires a corresponding change in one's behavior and relationships" (p. 5).

During a transition an individual

appraises the significance of an event [or nonevent] for its possible impact on his or her well being, determines the personal and social resources [that] are available for dealing with the event [or nonevent] and what the consequences are likely to be, and reassess both the situation and his or her responses after action has been taken. (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984 as cited in Schlossberg, Waters & Goodman, 1995, p. 19)

As someone makes a cognitive appraisal of the ensuing transition, he or she "experiences a personal discontinuity in his or her life" and may struggle to "develop new assumptions or behavior responses because the situation [he or she is entering] is new and/or the

behavioral adjustments [needed] are novel” (Brammer & Abrego, 1981, p. 19).

Additionally, “people in the midst of one transition [often] experience other transitions [simultaneously], which makes coping especially difficult” (Schlossberg, Waters & Goodman, 1995, p. 35). The ways in which an individual handles a transition, seeks new adaptive behaviors and is emotionally impacted by a transition are all related to the type of transition and the perceived level of impact the transition will have on the individual’s life (Schlossberg, 1981).

### Types of Transitions and Impact

Schlossberg, Waters and Goodman (1995) identify three types of transitions a person could experience: anticipated, unanticipated and the nonevent. Events that are predictable or scheduled to occur are classified as anticipated. This includes events like getting married, graduating from college, or starting a new job. For some individuals, anticipated transitions cause only minor personal discomfort, and they find it easy to develop new behaviors or different assumptions that help them adapt to the new environment or situation. Other individuals have a great deal of trouble making these adjustments. An anticipated transition, because it is scheduled or predictable, gives an individual more time to appraise the transition and to consider various options for managing it. This sharply contrasts with the unanticipated transition — one that catches the individual off guard.

An unanticipated transition, such as the sudden death of a family member or an unexpected loss of employment, can cause a significant amount of personal discomfort, distress and confusion (Schlossberg, 1981). Individuals faced with an unanticipated

transition have no forewarning of a change occurring in their worlds. So, when an unexpected shift in life circumstances occurs, individuals must “scramble” to find adaptive behaviors and develop new assumptions about their worlds without an opportunity for preparation or reflection.

Most people associate unanticipated transitions with negative experiences, but they can also be prompted by positive events, like an unexpected job promotion (Bridges, 1980). While such an event may be externally perceived as a positive transition, it may cause negative stress and anxiety by triggering anxieties about one’s ability to handle greater responsibility, supervise peers or even handle the new role. Clearly, emotional response is linked to the individual’s perception of the transition and ability to adapt to the new situation.

The third type of transition, the nonevent, is characterized by unfulfilled expectations or unmet aspirations. Nonevent transitions “are the ones an individual had expected but which did not occur, thereby altering one’s life — the marriage that never occurred, the promotion that never materialized, the child who was never born, the cancer that did not metastasize” (Schlossberg, Waters & Goodman, 1995, p. 29). A nonevent transition is characterized by the “probability” that a transition might occur rather than the “possibility.” It is “only when an event is likely to occur but fails to occur does it qualify as a nonevent” (Evans, Forney & DiBrito, 1998, p. 112). The effect of a nonevent transition can be the same as that of an anticipated or unanticipated event: Individuals will have to change the way they perceive themselves, and may have to change the way they act. This can include a redefining of personal aspirations or a self-evaluation of abilities in relation to previous perceptions of the future.

Determining how a transition will impact someone's life is based, in part, on that person's cognitive appraisal of the transition. "Whether internally or externally triggered, sudden or gradual," (Schlossberg, Waters & Goodman, 1995, p. 84) a "trigger" event sets in motion an individual's initial cognitive appraisal of a transition, and forces a personal assessment of one's abilities to cope with or manage it, laying the foundation for the transition process (Brammer & Abrego, 1981; Schlossberg, 1981; Bridges, 1980; Schlossberg, Waters & Goodman, 1995).

Appraisal is a central component of an individual's self-regulating system. Appraisal consists of a continuously changing set of judgments about the significance of events to personal well-being. Appraisal involves perceiving distinctions between potentially harmful, promising, and irrelevant aspects of the environment. A person may then appraise the personal and social demands of a situation and judge how to act, based on his or her perceived power to master the environment's demands. (Lazarus, 1974, as cited in Brammer & Abrego, 1981, p. 24)

The primary "function of appraisal is to explore potential avenues of solution or mastery" (Brammer & Abrego, 1981, p. 24) in relation to the transitional event.

There are two types of appraisal that occur at that onset of a transition, a primary appraisal and a secondary appraisal (Evans, Forney & DiBrito 1998). "Primary appraisal has to do with one's view of the transition itself," whether it is "positive, negative, or irrelevant" to one's life, (p. 113) and whether it "involves the initial judgment that a situation's outcome will either be harmful, beneficial, or irrelevant" (Brammer & Abrego, 1981, p. 24). During the primary appraisal of a transitional event, individuals may ask themselves, "What does it mean to me? How will it affect my future? What implications does it have for survival, self-esteem, interpersonal relations, and meeting task requirements?" (Brammer & Abrego, 1981, p. 24). In some cases, an



appraisal of an event as irrelevant means that the person does not consider it as having any threatening or beneficial implications for personal well being in its present form. When a situation is appraised as beneficial or benign, it is considered a positive state of affairs, requiring no coping efforts. This state is accompanied by relaxation and pleasant feelings. However, it may be combined with a mild threat over the possibility of loss. Stressful appraisals may relate to harm or loss that has already occurred, anticipated harm or loss (threat), or to challenge. Challenge is similar to threat but emphasizes potential mastery or gain in a difficult situation. (Brammer & Abrego, 1981, p. 24)

During the secondary appraisal the individual reacts to the transitional event through a “self-assessment of one’s resources for coping with the transition” (Evans, Forney & DiBrito, 1998, p. 113). Secondary appraisal involves the evaluation of the range of one’s available coping resources and alternatives. As individuals consider various options for dealing with threat or loss, their coping responses are shaped. This secondary appraisal process also may alter an initial appraisal of a situation (Brammer & Abrego, 1981).

As individuals appraise the type of transition they are experiencing, “it is not the transition itself that determines its meaning [or level of impact] for the individual; rather it is whether the transition is expected, unexpected, or never occurring” (p. 31).

Transitions that are

imposed, unexpected, and negative events, as well as those that involve a high degree of change, will be more stressful and more likely to lead to negative outcomes than those that are chosen, expected, positive, and involve little behavioral disruption. (George & Siegler, 1981, p. 29 as cited in Schlossberg, Waters & Goodman, 1995, p. 30)

The same transitional event (getting married, graduating from college or losing a job) can trigger a wide variety of emotional and behavioral responses among individuals. These variations in responses to a transition are based on the individual’s personal appraisal of the transition, the type (anticipated, unanticipated or nonevent), and how

much the transition alters the individual's life. One's perception of how greatly a transition will disrupt relationships, daily routine, personal assumptions, and one's world in general, is one of the determining factors in understanding the intensity and importance of a transition.

Context, or "one's relationship to the transition (one's own or someone else's) and to the setting in which the transition takes place (work, personal relationships, and so forth)" (Evans, Forney, & DiBrito, 1998, p. 112), is the second factor in determining the impact of a transition. In analysis of the impact of a life transition, questions emerge as the context of the transition is defined. Defining the context will directly influence the impact of the transition.

Does the primary event start with the individual (his or her illness) or with some other person (his or her boss's illness)? Is the transition personal (the individual has lost his or her job) or interpersonal (the individual has had a disagreement with his or her employer)? Or is the transition involved with the public or the community (does the individual feel disgraced by having to go on unemployment)?

Often if something is happening to an individual, he/she can mobilize resources and affect the transition process positively. But if something is happening to someone else – doom impending for an adult/child – the individual often can only sit by, suffer, and offer support. (Schlossberg, Waters & Goodman, 1995, p. 32)

As we have seen, both positively and negatively perceived transitions produce some level of stress, and "the impact of such stress is dependent on the ratio of the individual's assets and liabilities at the time" to cope with or manage the transition (Evans, Forney & DiBrito, 1998, p. 112). An individual's "assets" are the coping skills used to manage a transition based on personal perception of the situation, previous experience with life transitions, support network and personal strategies for handling a transition.

What you bring to any transitional situation is a 'style' that you have developed for dealing with endings. The product of both early experiences and later influences, this style is your own way of dealing with external circumstances and with the inner distress that they stir up. (Bridges, 1980, p. 15)

"Liabilities" refer to the individual's inability to emotionally manage or behaviorally adapt to the new situation. Liabilities tend to surface when someone has little or no experience managing a life transition, or has no support network. Additionally, if one's perception of the transition is purely negative, the impact of the transition will also be negative. Optimally, a person would begin a transition with a "style" that is an even balance of assets and liabilities.

The third factor in determining the impact of a transition is the perceived level of control the individual has over it. "An individual's perceived control or mastery, in a situation in particular or environment in general, affects the degree to which events are perceived as threatening" (Brammer & Abrego, 1981, p. 23) or non-threatening. If individuals in a transition have a sense of control and can navigate the transition to the best of their abilities, then the impact on their environments is minimal. When the transition is perceived as out of their control, the impact can seriously disrupt their everyday worlds. "Many transitions have an internal genesis, and therefore an internal locus of control" (Schlossberg, Waters & Goodman, 1995, p. 90) which will guide an individual through the transition process differently from those who view the transition as beyond their control.

A transition's impact and the success with which the individual progress through it are determined by the type of transition, the individual's appraisal of it, its context, and the sense of control felt by the person experiencing it. Chapters Four, Five and Six will describe how all of these various elements relate to this study.

## The Transition Process

This section discusses the transition process: the methods and manners employed by individuals to emotionally manage a transitional event, and the ways they use adaptive behaviors to assimilate into their new social context. The transition process is presented in three separate stages: detachment (in which individuals consciously recognize that there has been or will be a separation from current experiences, surroundings or other persons), liminality (in which individuals evaluate the positive and negative aspects of the transition and search for the means to adapt to a new situation), and new beginnings (in which individuals enter a new environment but may still have feelings of loss or uncertainty about themselves, and may truly be unaware of who they have become or how they have transitioned to this new place or stage in life).

Before exploring these three stages, it is necessary to understand the relationship between a transition and the transition process. As previously defined, a transition, in and of itself, is “a particular type of change involving personal awareness and the need for new assumptions or behaviors by the individual” (Brammer & Abrego, 1981, p. 19). As a process, “the transition experience unfolds typically in a somewhat orderly set of stages in which decisions, situational factors and circumstances, and chance events at one stage influence decisions, events, and outcomes at subsequent stages” (Bradley-Sagen, Lundak & Peterson, 1990, p. 19). In the transition process “the individual moves from a preoccupation with the transition [event or nonevent] to an integration of the transition [into his or her life]. The time needed to achieve successful integration will vary with the person and the transition” (Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 1998, p. 112). Movement through the transition process can be assessed based on the emotional and behavioral

responses exhibited by the individual. Descriptions of these emotional and behavioral responses, as well as a review of the characteristics of each of the three stages of the transition process (detachment, liminality and new beginnings) follow.

### Stage One: Detachment

To understand and chronicle the transition process, a starting point separate from the trigger transitional event must be identified. The starting point of the transition process begins with a physical or psychological “separation...a time of detachment and detaching from an earlier period, place or state in the cultural or social context” (Carson, 1997, p. 3). It also begins when individuals cognitively understand, subsequent to their initial appraisal of the trigger transitional event, they are separating from a previous state and detaching from an old position. In essence, they are “moving out” of a current social context and into the first stage of the transition process (Schlossberg, Waters & Goodman, 1995). By moving out, the individual “exits the role” previously held (Ebaugh, 1988). This exit “is a process of disengagement from a role that is central to one’s self-identity” (p. 23). In some cases, individuals may see the “writing on the wall” and become acutely aware of the need to re-establish a new role for themselves. As they begin this process they examine both the positive and negative aspects of their current identities, and evaluate what aspects may be transferable to their new roles in their new social contexts.

Van Gennep’s (1960) ethnographical studies of African rituals associated with initiating an adolescent boy into manhood is the clearest example of a transition that

begins with the physical detachment and separation of an individual from his social context. Van Gennep describes how

the boys are taken from their villages and families to a comparatively remote 'ritual site' where they are subjected to various ordeals or humiliations and trained by older men. The men may appear masked, impersonating the tribal gods or ancestors, or the rituals may take place in a darkened hut or cave. Such initiations may take a few days to a few months, occasionally years. (Trubshaw, n.d., <http://www.indigogroup.co.uk/edge/htm>, retrieved on 8/10/1999, p. 2)

While this is a rather dramatic example of the first stage of the transition process, it does point out that a transition begins with an event that Van Gennep refers to as a ritual or rite of passage. This example depicts how removing individuals from their social context (or otherwise changing it) requires the individual to seek new adaptive behaviors, even during the initial turmoil of the separation from their primary surrounding.

Another ritual that leads to a physical separation from a current environment is graduation from high school or college. Commencement (which ironically means "beginning") is a public ritual that states, "You have completed your time with us and now you must leave." This ceremony marks an ending of one's time at an institution, and forces one to exit roles that have been long held, and which are often central to one's identity. The result is that the individual must now seek new environments, alternative roles and different ways to establish an identity within the new social context of alumni (Ebaugh, 1988).

A high school or college graduation can be labeled as an anticipated transitional event<sup>6</sup> to which the transition process is applicable (Chickering & Schlossberg, 1998).

During the time (months, weeks, days or hours) before the actual commencement

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<sup>6</sup> A graduation can also be a nonevent transition as a student may anticipate that he or she will graduate, but for various reasons the student may not be able to finish the requirements needed to receive his or her degree. In this case, the transition process would unfold very differently for the individual and would require a different set of adaptive behaviors as well as result in a very different set of emotional responses.

ceremony, students may experience a variety of emotional reactions as they prepare for the end of this experience. Prior to this anticipated transitional event, individuals may experience feelings of dis-identification and disenchantment from their current surroundings, leading to disorientation over where they belong and with whom they are connected (Bridges, 1980).

Dis-identification occurs when there is a removal of an old identity, often by external forces. As an individual detaches from a current social context and begins “breaking the old connections to his or her world, the person loses ways of self-definition” (Bridges, 1980, p. 96). During the first stage of the transition process, a person feels a sense of “loss of a role that proscribed their behavior” (Bridges, 1980, p. 96). The loss of their identity leads “most people in transition to have the experience of not being quite sure who they are anymore” (Bridges, 1980, p. 96). This experience “is often particularly distressing in vocational transitions, or in cases where the old roles and titles were an important part of the person’s identity” (Bridges, 1980, p. 96).

Beyond dis-identification, individuals in the detachment stage may feel unhappy with their current social context (Schlossberg, Waters & Goodman, 1995). Bridges (1980) refers to this feeling as disenchantment. Many life transitions “not only involve disenchantment, they begin with it. But like the other aspects of the termination process, it may be only slowly that the person can begin to see the disenchantment experience as meaningful” (Bridges, 1980, p. 97).

Whether a life transition has been triggered by a sense of disenchantment or is a product of a transitional event, it is unpleasant and disheartening for the person experiencing it because it “goes against the grain of our culture, which tends to view

growth as an additive process” (Bridges, 1980, p. 100). In fact, “the whole termination process violates our too-seldom examined idea that development means gain and has nothing to do with loss” (Bridges, 1980, p. 100). The main argument

is that disenchantment, whether it is a minor disappointment or a major shock, is the signal that things are moving into a transition. At such times we need to consider whether the old view or belief may not have been an enchantment cast on us in the past to keep us from seeing deeper into ourselves and others than we were then ready to. For the whole idea of disenchantment is that reality has many layers, each appropriate to a phase of intellectual and spiritual development. The disenchantment experience is a signal that the time has come to look below the surface of what has been thought to be so. (Bridges, 1980, p. 101)

Disenchantment causes individuals to question their perception of reality. These questions can lead to a feeling of disorientation, because people often believe that “if a system is working, it is very hard for any member of it to imagine an alternative way of life and an alternative identity” (Bridges, 1980, p. 96). When an anticipated or unanticipated change occurs, a person becomes disengaged or disenchanted and, “in a practical sense, it threatens the essential arrangements of [his or her] life” (Bridges, 1980, p. 102). The result is disorientation to “the ‘reality’ that is left behind” (Bridges, 1980, p. 102).

A strong argument can be made that “one of the first and most serious casualties of disorientation is our sense of and plans for the future” (Bridges, 1980, p. 102) as “transitions often shake spiritual sureties as well” (Schlossberg, Waters & Goodman, 1995, p. 95). In some cases, disorientation can result in immobilization: individuals become so frightened by the impending ambiguity of a transition that they lose all internal drive or motivation to move forward. According to Bridges (1980), “disorientation is meaningful, but it isn’t enjoyable” (p. 103). Disorientation can be meaningful if it provides an opportunity for the individual to try something new and to



possibly challenge the mundane world of the “status quo.” It can be unpleasant if it brings with it confusion and a loss of control over one’s world.

“People who feel in control of their lives tend to describe their lives as happier” (Schlossberg, Waters & Goodman, 1995, p. 93). Disorientation is the antithesis of feeling in control over one’s environment. Feelings of loss of control and loss of self-identity

often happens in transition, and some of our resistance to going into transition comes from fear of this emptiness. The problem is not that we don’t want to give up a job or a relationship, or that we can’t let go of our identity or reality; the problem is that before we can find a new something, we must deal with a time of nothing. (Bridges, 1980, p. 104)

Lack of control over one’s environment or the transition process not only creates a certain level of fear, but can influence one’s view of what might be next, once detachment from the current social context is complete. What most people do not realize is that “we do find ourselves periodically being disengaged, either willingly or unwillingly, from the activities, the relationships, the settings, or the roles that have been important to us” (Bridges, 1980, p. 93). In fact, “the university experience for undergraduate students is one of transition, a process of continual engagement and disengagement as they negotiate new academic and personal challenges” (Rickinson, 1998, p. 95).

There are no specific markers or a set duration of time to determine when the detachment stage has been completed and the individual is moving on to liminality. In many ways, the detachment stage is a prelude to liminality. In the liminal stage, the individual’s disengagement, disenchantment and disorientation all intensify, and the individual develops a powerful sense of emptiness, living between the beginning and the end of the transition process.

## Stage Two: Liminality

In other times and places the person in transition left the village and went out into an unfamiliar stretch of forest or desert. There the person would remain for a time, removed from the old connections, bereft of the old identities, and stripped of the old reality. This was a time 'between dreams' in which the old chaos from the beginnings welled up and obliterated all forms. It was a place without a name — an empty space in the world and the lifetime — within which a new sense of self could gestate. (Bridges, 1980, p. 112)

The first stage in the transition process can be identified by "separation [and] comprises symbolic behavior signifying the detachment of the individual either from an earlier fixed point in the social structure, from a set of cultural conditions, or from both" (Anfara, 1998, <http://www.nationalforum.com/ANFARAte8e3.html>, retrieved 8/12/99, p. 3). Movement into the second stage begins when individuals confront "such [new] issues as how to balance their activities with other parts of their lives and how to feel supported and challenged during this new journey" (Schlossberg, Waters & Goodman, 1995, p. 45). The second stage differs from the first in that it is generally characterized as "ambiguous and the subject passes through a cultural realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or the coming state. He or she exists outside of the structure roles, statuses, and positions within society" (Anfara, 1998, <http://www.nationalforum.com/ANFARAte8e3.html>, retrieved 8/12/99, p. 3). Movement into stage two gives rise to new challenges and questions: "Did I do the right things? Why am I bored? Can I commit to this transition?" (Schlossberg, Waters & Goodman, 1995, p. 45). Individuals in stage two might also ask, "Do I have the ability to cope with change? Why do I feel like I am not connected to anything?"

Those who study life transitions use different terms to label the second stage of the transition process. Schlossberg, Waters and Goodman (1995) refer to stage two as

“moving through” a transition. During this “moving through” process, individuals experience feelings of ambiguity about who they truly are and “grope” for new roles, relationships, assumptions and routines. As a result, coping with the emotional impact the transition has on one’s life, seeking new behaviors and reestablishing one’s sense of self are all key elements that must be resolved during stage two (Schlossberg, Waters & Goodman, 1995).

Bridges (1980) labels stage two as the “neutral zone” where individuals experience “genuine puzzlement” as they carry on the basic activities of their everyday lives. “For many people the experience of the neutral zone is essentially one of emptiness in which the old reality looks transparent and nothing feels solid anymore” (Bridges, 1980, p. 117). As a result, individuals experience “solitude, alienation from social existence, and withdrawal from the present social structure” (Noble & Walker, 1997, p. 31). Overcoming one’s fears of the perceived “emptiness” of the neutral zone and seeking ways to experience this as a time of self-renewal allows the individual to explore the possibilities of “what if,” rather than experiencing the sense of loss about “what was” (Bridges, 1980).

Van Gennep (1960), an anthropologist, studied the transition process in relation to rituals and rites of passage of young boys into “manhood” within the context of African tribes. Based on his research “Van Gennep defines the structure of the Rites of Passage in terms of the ‘preliminal,’ which includes separation from a previous world, a transitional period, and the ‘post-liminal,’ distinguished by ceremonies of incorporation into the new world” (Carson, 1997, p. 2). According to Van Gennep (1960), “beneath the multiplicity of forms, either consciously expressed or merely implied, a typical pattern always recurs”

(p. 21). This transitional pattern leads to a transformation of the individual into a new role, relationship, or physical or psychological state. As such,

the life of an individual in any society is a series of passages from one age to another and from one occupation to another...For every one of these events there are ceremonies whose essential purpose is to enable the individual to pass from one defined position to another. (Van Gennep, 1960, pp. 2-3)

The uniqueness of Van Gennep's model of the transition process is the detailed description of theoretical concept that occurs between the separation of an individual from a current social context and the stability one experiences once "aggregated" to the new world. Van Gennep (1960) refers to this in-between period as the liminal stage. The liminal stage occurs during "the life cycle as a rite of passage or transitional period that accompanies a change of social position, status, or age in society" (Turner, 1969, p. 94).

The word liminal or liminality is derived from the

Latin root *limin*, meaning the centerline of the doorway. Liminality is the moment of crossing over. It describes the transitional phase of personal change, wherein one is neither in an old state of being nor a new, and not quite aware of the implications of the event. (Braun, n.d., p. 1, <http://coe.ilstu.edu/jabraun/braun/professional/rememb.html>, retrieved on 8/12/1999)

In explaining his theoretical concept of the liminal stage, Van Gennep uses the metaphor of spatial movement from one physical location to another. Van Gennep compares the liminal stage to the movement of an individual from one room in a house, through a doorway, and into another room. In this physical metaphor, the liminal stage occurs when the individual is standing in the doorway that separates the two rooms. While standing there, the individual is experiencing neither the previous room nor the room that is about to be entered. In essence, the individual is between two social contexts. Symbolically,

in this metaphor, a doorway separates the departure from an old state and entry into a new one. On one side of the door separation rituals are conducted. On the other, rituals of aggregation take place. Transitions take place in the doorway itself, in a boundary or threshold state. (Noble & Walker, 1997, p. 31)

With an understanding of Van Gennep's metaphor and theoretical concept of liminality

the concept of the 'betwixt and between' liminal state then becomes easy to recognize in contemporary culture – think, for instance, of the wedding ceremony where the 'threshold' ceremony is followed by a 'liminal' honeymoon. Think, too, of funeral ceremonies where the period from death to inhumation (or cremation) is equally 'liminal'. (Trubshaw, n.d., <http://www.indigogroup.co.uk/edge/htm>, retrieved on 8/10/1999, p. 2)

Another illustration of a liminal state is a major change in school status: "the move from high school to college, in particular, is a significant life transition, often including physical, psychological, and symbolic elements" (Nobel & Walker, 1997, p. 36). Upon graduation, the high school student is in the first stage of the transition process — emotionally, and often physically, detaching from prior relationships and roles and not yet possessing the attributes of a new status. The period of time between the student's detachment from the current world and the reestablishment of a new status is a liminal phase. Therefore, "the restructuring of the individual's social environment" (Reischl & Hirsch, 1989, p. 56) will be required. Like other transitional events (changing schools, marriage, divorce), "entering college presents a number of interrelated coping tasks including redefining social role identities, restructuring social networks, and reorganizing daily activities" (Nobel & Walker, 1997, p. 36)<sup>7</sup>. As is explained later in this chapter, the transition from high school to college can cause tremendous anxiety for individuals as they cope with and manage the ambiguities of the liminal stage.

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<sup>7</sup> High school graduates who choose not to attend college will still experience a liminal phase as they seek out their new post high school role or identity.

Whether it is a transition from high school to college, or from college to life after college, or some other life transition, moving through the liminal stage is difficult because the individual in transition perceives it as moving into a place that is empty and chaotic, as it is without boundaries or structure (Schlossberg, Waters & Goodman, 1995). These perceptions and feelings are the result of individuals stripping away their old identities — or having those identities stripped from them. The movement into the liminal stage is frightening in that “the individual is naked of self — neither fully in one category or another” (Goethe, n.d., <http://www.uiowa.edu/~social/lessons/rituals.html>, retrieved on 8/12/99, p. 1).

Being naked of one’s self has “the potential to cause profound and disruptive effects on our innermost self-perceptions” (Nobel & Walker, 1997, p. 32) and generates high levels of stress and anxiety for the individual (Dohrenwend & Dohrenwend, 1974; Lazarus & Cohen, 1977). The fear associated with losing one’s identity, being naked of self, and moving into a realm of “emptiness” can keep individuals from seeing themselves moving beyond this stage (Bridges, 1980). While the duration of this liminal stage may fluctuate among individuals, a prolonged liminal state can have negative emotional consequences on an individual’s ability to adapt to the new social context (Murphy, 1987; Shorter, 1987).

The liminal stage should not be perceived as a purely negative experience. In fact, a key element in coping with the liminal stage involves changing the individual’s perception of this in-between time to an opportunity for “renewal of self” rather than a period of emptiness and chaos (Bridges, 1980). Bridges (1980) argues that the liminal stage is an occasion for the individual to seek and test new adaptive behaviors that may or

may not fit the social context of the “new beginning” the individual will be entering at the conclusion of the transition process. From this perspective, the liminal stage is a

primal state of pure energy to which the person returns [to, prior to] every true new beginning. It is only from the perspective of the old form that [the emptiness and] chaos looks fearful – from any other perspective, it looks like life itself, as yet unshaped by purpose and identification. In fact it is only by returning, for a time, to the formlessness of the primal energy that renewal can take place. (Bridges, 1980, pp. 119-120)

The value of the liminal stage is that it gives individuals the chance to look at their previous social context from a dramatically different point of view. Viewed from the liminal stage,

the realities of the everyday world look transparent and insubstantial, and we can see what is meant by the statement that everything is ‘illusion.’ Few of us can live in the harsh light of this knowledge for long, but even when we return to the engagements and identifications of ordinary ‘reality,’ we carry with us an appreciation of the unknowable ground beyond every image. The neutral zone provides access to an angle of vision on life that one gets nowhere else. And it is a succession of such views over a lifetime that produces wisdom. (Bridges, 1980, pp. 120-121)

As a result of cognitive reframing of the essence of the liminal stage from something negative to a realm of possibilities, one’s perception of the liminal stage changes from a time of ambiguity and chaos to “pure potency, where anything can happen” (Turner, 1969, p. 577). This will assist the individual, psychologically, in the reduction of “the discrepancy between one’s internal self-view and the external role state” with the overall goal of an “improved state of psychological well being” (Nobel & Walker, 1997, p. 32).

Another positive effect that can result from the liminal stage is the development of connections with other individuals who may also be experiencing the liminal stage (Van Gennep, 1960; Turner, 1969; Carson 1997). As individuals either physically or

psychologically detach from previous social contexts, they can also detach from the associated people in their lives. Grimes (1982) refers to this relational detachment as a state of "social limbo" (p. 149). In "social limbo," the individual evaluates current relationships and determines if they will be supportive or unsupportive during the transition (Schlossberg, Waters & Goodman, 1995).

During this relationship evaluation process, the individual in transition may link with others who are experiencing a similar liminal experience.

A special camaraderie develops among those sharing the liminal passage. Turner has called this special bond between liminal persons 'communitas.' This is a bond, which transcends any socially established differentiations. Those who share the liminal passage develop a community of the in-between. This creates a community of anti-structure whose bond continues even after the liminal period is concluded. A significant sharing of the liminal passage creates strong egalitarian ties, which level out differences in status and station, which have been established by structure. (Carson, 1997, p. 5)

The emotional connection that first-year students make with other first-year students is an example of this phenomenon. Feldman and Newcomb (1969) note that "peer groups help freshmen achieve independence from home and family, support or impede educational goals, provide emotional support, help develop interpersonal skills, change or reinforce values, and influence career decisions" (as cited in Upcraft & Gardner, 1989, p. 10). Also,

peer groups exercise this influence by establishing norms and providing behavior guidelines that are reinforced by direct rewards such as emotional support, acceptance and inclusion, and by direct punishment, such as rejections, scapegoating and exclusion. In effect, freshmen transfer some controls over themselves to the peer group and become subject to its influence. (Upcraft & Gardner, 1989, p. 10)

In a sense, the peer group provides the support and structure necessary to help fill the sense of emptiness and clarify the ambiguity and chaos that characterize the liminal



stage. What is clear is that first-year students “band together” as they jointly learn the ways of their new social context, in spite of their individual differences or styles (Astin, 1984). Through this experience of “communitas” students “develop [new] identities other than those connected to high school roles” (Schlossberg, Waters & Goodman, 1995, pp. 43-44) as well as new relationships with other students also experiencing the liminal stage. Interactions with others experiencing the stage can provide insights into styles or approaches that can be used to resolve a student’s own anxieties during the liminal stage.

The development of “communitas” is one way in which an individual may cope with or manage the liminal stage. In fact, Schlossberg, Waters and Goodman (1995) note that the entire process of “moving through” the liminal stage is an experience of seeking coping strategies to alleviate the emptiness, ambiguity and chaos of it. Coping or managing transitions, as defined by Lazarus (1974), are the “problem-solving efforts made by an individual when the demands he or she faces are highly relevant to his or her welfare (that is, a situation of considerable jeopardy or promise) and when these demands tax his or her adaptive resources” (p. 250).

Brammer and Abrego (1981) view the process of coping with a transition differently. Unlike Lazarus’ problem-solving approach to coping with liminality, Brammer and Abrego (1981) characterize coping with a transition as

an emotional, rather than a purely cognitive process. An individual makes a series of judgments concerning the potential effects an event has on his or her emotional well-being. Secondly, coping may refer to positive stress, related to promise, as well as to distress resulting from threat or loss. Promise may involve a challenging [emotional] opportunity to overcome hardship and experience growth or fulfillment. (p. 19)

The individual must manage the interplay of emotions and cognitive appraisals of the liminal stage in relation to the actual change in social context. To balance these

different facets of the stage, individuals typically draw on prior experiences to develop a coping style that is a combination of behavioral, cognitive and emotional responses. By using an effective coping style, individuals can develop

1) responses that change the situation out of which a stressful experience arises; 2) responses that control the meaning of the stressful experience; and, 3) responses that function primarily for the control of emotional distress. The highly adaptive individual is able to choose those coping responses likely to be most effective in a given situation. (Pearlin & Schooler, 1978 as cited in Brammer & Abrego, 1981, p. 25)

To cope with the detachment stage, individuals must make an assessment of their assets and liabilities with respect to the situation, self, support and possible strategies. It is the same for coping with the liminal stage, as it is one's perception of the ratio of personal assets to perceived liabilities that will dramatically — positively or negatively — influence one's experience of the liminal stage (Evans, Forney & DiBrito, 1998).

The assessment of the ratio of assets to liabilities is another time when individuals question their own capabilities by asking, "What will my role or identity be during this stage? How long will this stage last? What level of control do I have over this situation?" They also question their sense of self: "Do I have a commitment to myself to go through this? Will my values have to change? If I have to change, can I be true to myself?" In essence, the questioning of self is a "period of scrutinization of the central values" (Turner, 1969, p. 167).

The assessment of one's support and possible strategies to cope with this in-between time in the transition process also influences the individual during the liminal stage. The categories of support are their "type (intimate, family, friends, institutional)" and their "function (affect, affirmation, aid, honest feedback)" (Evan, Forney & DiBrito, 1999, p. 115) in helping individuals manage their current worlds. Schlossberg, Waters

and Goodman (1995) also note “some adults who experience a major life transition worry about putting too much burden on their friends, while others are disappointed in the lack of support from their friends” (p. 123). In some cases, individuals moving from detachment to liminality may precipitate a distancing of themselves from friends. The result is that “as people look at the balance between resources and deficits, friends may move from one column to another as they become harder to access” (Schlossberg, Waters & Goodman, 1995, p. 124).

Finally, in coping with the liminal stage, individuals assess the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of past strategies used to cope with this stage, and decide what resources, methods or behaviors might fit their current experience (Schlossberg, Waters & Goodman, 1995). Based on this reflection and the assessment of the other three factors (situation, self and support) that influence one’s approach to coping with the liminal stage, individuals may try to modify their situations, seek more information about why the transition has occurred, take control over it or be inhibited to take action (Evans, Forney & DiBrito, 1998).

Clearly, there is no single way in which one can enter or bring closure to the liminal stage. Movement through it is a personal and reflective self-journey based upon one’s past experience with life transitions. As with movement from the detachment stage to liminality, there is no singular transitional marker or specific time frame that signifies the move from the liminal stage to the third stage of the transition process, new beginnings. In fact, in some situations

one is likely to be well into the new beginning before waking up to the fact that it is all strange and unreal. We say then that we ‘aren’t used to the new situation yet,’ and it is true that things will seem less strange when the setting and the cues

are more familiar. But it is also true that the strangeness comes from a belated encounter with the neutral zone [or liminal stage]. (Bridges, 1980, p. 130)

Movement out of the liminal stage and into new beginnings comes from within the individual. If an individual is ready to begin anew, there appears to be a shift from the original questions that are hallmarks of liminality to definitive answers: "I did the right thing. I am committed to this life change. I am ready to be challenged. I can handle this, and I am ready to feel connected to something or someone again."

This shift represents a change from the realm of inner thoughts and reflection to a course of action. An individual's experiences, positive or negative, with assimilation and adaptation to his or her new social context are the foundation of stage three, new beginnings.

### Stage Three: New Beginnings

Bridges (1980) states, "Until you are really ready, you probably won't make a real [new] beginning" (p. 145). In other words, movement into the third stage of the transition process requires more than perseverance. It requires new priorities and an understanding of the internal and external signs that point out the roads to the future (Bridges, 1980). Individuals also must "let go" of the old ways of their worlds and begin to accept, assimilate and adapt to the new.

The new beginnings stage is defined as "a return to a stable position; but different from the former phase — transformed [and] altered" (Carson, 1997, pp. 3-4). Individuals in this stage will gradually return to normal functioning, "but with the changes that have [occurred] incorporated into it" (Cahill, 1999, p. 1). The result is that they become re-incorporated

back into society as a new creature with a new identity. For example, high school graduates entering college are not sure of their identities. This final phase of the transition occurs when they develop identities other than those connected to the high school roles and relationships they previously held. (Schlossberg, Waters and Goodman, 1995, pp. 43-44)

Lipman-Blumen (1976) describes the new beginnings stage as “boundness,” where the life change is contained and integrated into the self. This occurs as a result of an individual’s awareness and acceptance that the transition is done. “This means that it has become part of one’s history. It will have an influence over future directions, but not imprisoning one in the past” (Hopson, 1981, p. 38). In fact, in

the early stages, a person is totally conscious of being a new graduate, a new widower, a new mother. However, in this last stage, the person is aware [and accepts] having graduated, having been widowed, having become a mother — but this awareness had become only one dimension of living. (Schlossberg, Waters & Goodman, 1995, p. 36)

One characteristic that distinguishes the new beginnings stage from the detachment and liminal stages is this full recognition that something in one’s life has ended — a relationship, a job, the undergraduate college years — and that a new identity is needed for the individual to feel whole again. The acceptance that this life transition is real, and that a return to the old is unattainable, prompts a desire for a return to normalcy in one’s life. “Genuine [new] beginnings depend upon this kind of inner realignment rather than on external shifts, for when we are aligned with [our] deep longings to begin again, we become powerfully motivated” (Bridges, 1980, p. 138).

A second characteristic of new beginnings is action. In this stage, there is a need for high internal motivation to adapt and assimilate to the new social contexts (Bridges, 1980; Bridges, 1988; Schlossberg, Waters & Goodman, 1995). Unlike the detachment and liminal stages, which are based more on inner contemplation of what the life

transition means, the new beginnings stage is based on actions that help individuals begin again and regain control of their lives. Individuals must apply the strategies and coping skills that they reflected on in the liminal stage to their new social contexts. This requires taking behavioral and emotional risks that may — or may not — result in positive outcomes. To do this successfully, individuals need the internal motivation to make the behavioral or perceptual adjustments required to deal with any discontinuity between what they believed their new social contexts would be like and what they really are.

This experience of discontinuity between expectations and reality is the primary reason why individuals have difficulty adjusting to a new beginning. It can lead to fear of the new social context and an inability to let go of old ways (Bridges, 1980; Bridges, 1988; Schlossberg, Waters & Goodman, 1995).

New beginnings are accessible to everyone, and everyone has trouble with them. Much as we may wish to make a new beginning, some part of us resists doing so as though we were making the first step toward disaster. Everyone has a slightly different version of these anxieties and confusions, but in one way or another they all arise from the fear that real change destroys the old ways in which we established our security. (Bridges, 1980, p. 141)

In some ways, individuals undermine their own new beginnings because of doubt that their plan to adapt to this new social context will work. This fear and doubt in one's self, "helps explain why so many individuals hold on endlessly to bad relationships or stultifying jobs" (Schlossberg, Waters & Goodman, 1995, p. 40).

When college seniors were asked how they felt about nearing the end of their undergraduate education and leaving college, "excitement, happiness and anxiety were ranked top as the most common feelings. When asked, 'How do you feel about entering the world of work?' excitement, anxiety, happiness and fear were top ranked" (Feitler-Karchin & Wallace Schutzman, 1982). Louis (1980) found that most college seniors fear

having to become familiar with the rules, regulations, norms and expectations of a new work environment. And, in the work world

many employers fail to provide a true orientation to new jobs. Partly as a result of this failure, as many as 50% -60% of all new hires leave their jobs within the first seven months (Leibowitz, Schlossberg, and Shore, 1991). The transition to a new job requires the worker to understand the expectations of peers, subordinates, and supervisors, and also to learn the company's formal and informal norms. It often requires learning new skills and almost always requires learning new ways of using old skills. It can also result in feeling marginal — the feeling that they are at the edge, on the fringe. Thus we aren't what we were, nor are we clear about who we should be and what's expected. All of this comes at a time when both individuals themselves and families expect them to experience unadulterated joy at having a new position. (Schlossberg, Waters & Goodman, 1995, p. 157)

Another reason individuals have difficulty adjusting to a new social context is related to the fact that transitions involve losses as well as new opportunities. In a life transition, there always exists the potential to lose relationships, territory, structure, future and control of one's world (Bridges, 1988).

People feel grief in many situations of loss other than those most commonly recognized as bereavement. When leaving the familiar surroundings and people or ways of functioning and interacting to which one has become accustomed, one experiences disequilibrium. Changing jobs, moving, returning to school, are all transitions in which adults mourn the loss of former goals, friends and structure" (Schlossberg, Waters & Goodman, 1995, p. 45).

Schlossberg, Lynch and Chickering (1989) found that for college students, graduation could be experienced as a time of loss, "as seniors may be faced with leaving a secure lifestyle and well-developed support group" (Feitler-Karchin & Wallace-Schutzman, 1982, p. 59). Additionally, graduation forces them to let go of the previously held goal — obtaining a college degree — that has given them an identity and a sense of purpose. In establishing a new beginning and finally reaching a life goal "there is an inevitable letdown. For once again a sense of purpose must be reconstructed" (Schlossberg, Waters & Goodman, 1995, p. 40).

Individuals develop methods to cope with loss and fears of adapting and assimilating to a new social context. In some cases, "identifying their inner resistance [to the new beginnings] and understanding the symptoms of its activity may be enough" (Bridges, 1980, p. 143) to resolve the fears and sense of loss. Once that inner resistance is identified, individuals can assess what internal resources they have with which to cope. "These resources [can] include the degree to which they are optimistic or pessimistic in outlook, able to tolerate ambiguity, or inclined to act autonomously" (Schlossberg, Waters & Goodman, 1995, p. 131). For some, a strategy of simply letting go of the need to control everything in the new social context can lessen the stress of the situation (Ebaugh, 1988).

Throughout the course of the adaptation and assimilation, individuals must apply the skills they possess and identify what will work in their new social contexts.

Transferable skills are usually described as being those skills that one carries from one job to another, such as organizational or communication abilities, or [even] the ability to read a technical manual. The new task need not be identical to the old. The trick is to recognize [what is known already] and be able to apply it to the new situation. (Schlossberg, Waters & Goodman, 1995, p. 144)

Identifying the transferable skills that will be effective does not happen instantaneously. In fact, in most cases, the skills develop "over time and [are] progressively modified" (White, 1976, p. 29) through trial and error. With each successful application of a transferable skill, self-doubt and fear diminish. On the other hand, a failed application of skills or abilities, or a mismatch between personal value system and new social context, can heighten peoples insecurities and raise questions about whether or not this context fits with their life goals.

As one student put it 'I discovered [through a life transition] that my value system had been challenged and that there was more to life than chasing a career at IBM.



Family and community became more important and another change seemed inevitable.' (Schlossberg, Waters & Goodman, 1995, p. 147-148)

Family, friends and other support networks also serve a significant role in the establishment of a new beginning (Brammer and Abrego, 1981). They are "important to us throughout our lives, and are often the people who help us keep our lives in balance and our sense of perspective in place" (Schlossberg, Waters & Goodman, 1995, p. 124). In establishing a new beginning, family and friends can provide the social support system needed as individuals attempt to adapt to a new social context.

Each time someone enters the new beginning stage, there is a risk of feeling of not belonging to this new social context. A new beginning can place individuals "in an unclear situation between belonging and marginality or, stated differently, between being central or peripheral to a particular group" (Schlossberg, Waters & Goodman, 1995, p. 124). Family and friends, whether inside or outside the new social context, can provide the support individuals experiencing a transition need to feel like they matter (Brammer & Abrego, 1981). Feeling that you belong to something or that you matter "[i.e.,] to be appreciated, noticed, and acknowledged) are concerns of people at all stages of life and can strongly influence behavior" (Schlossberg, Waters & Goodman, 1995, p. 129). In the absence of feeling appreciated, noticed, or acknowledged in a new social context, family and friends can, at least temporarily, provide the support individuals need to begin again.

A successful resolution of the new beginning stage is marked by a return to homeostasis, a sense of balance in an individual's world (Brammer & Abrego, 1981). In achieving this new and different sense of balance, individuals fully accept that their lives are somehow different from what they once were, and complete the adaptation and

assimilation into their new social context. The transition or life change has become integrated into their new identities and into their lives.

“The time it takes for the new self to be accepted and integrated varies widely from individual to individual” (Schlossberg, Waters & Goodman, 1995, p. 89). As we have seen, the types of transitions, the social contexts in which they occur, and personal appraisals of internal resources are pivotal in how people manage the first two stages of the transition process. The same can be said of the new beginning stage: These same factors influence the behavioral and emotional responses as individuals adapt to their new identities and look for a renewed sense of normalcy within themselves and in their new social contexts.

When the transition process is complete and there has been some distance from the experience, individuals look back at how they managed and coped with this life change. With time and reflection, “the way a person feels at the beginning of a transition may not necessarily be reversed, but over time, reactions to the transition will certainly change” (Schlossberg, Lynch & Chickering, 1989, p. 17). From this new perspective, individuals assess what worked for them in this particular transition and incorporate into their lives those techniques that proved effective. This process repeats with every new transition, helping individuals develop techniques that assist them to cope successfully with their next experience, especially when it is similar to past transitions.

While it may in some ways parallel the move from high school to college, the transition from college to the world of work is different, with its own set of choices and challenges. Next is a discussion of the challenges that need to be addressed in the senior year of college.

## Challenges in the Senior Year

A great myth is “that all seniors are ready for graduation and their impending transitions into careers or graduate education” (Smith & Gast, 1998, p. 191). In reality, seniors fall into one of three different stages of preparedness for leaving college to work or to attend graduate school: decided, undecided and indecisive (Sampson, Peterson, Lenz, Reardon & Saunders, 1998).

College seniors who can be identified as “decided” often

made career decisions early in their college years, tend to be clear about their educational goals; are active, self-directed learners; and have made an emotional commitment to the realization of their career goals (Winston & Miller, 1987). They also tend to have an awareness of the world of work that has enabled them to translate self-knowledge and occupational knowledge into a career choice. Finally, as students, they are able to monitor and control their behavior in order to attain personal goals. (Long, Sowa, & Niles, 1995, p. 51)

These students know what they want, and during their senior year they remain focused on achieving their goals. While they may experience stress and anxiety about other aspects of the transition, the challenge of finding employment or securing graduate school admission appears less overwhelming to them.

Students who are “undecided” enter the senior year with a moderate degree of trepidation and anxiety about post-college employment or graduate school admission. They spend their senior year contemplating and discussing the pros and cons of various post-college possibilities as they attempt to sort out their priorities, interests and values (Sampson, Peterson, Lenz, Reardon & Saunders, 1998). Undecided students are ready to explore the possibilities and are not completely overwhelmed by the process. Their readiness is reflected in the manner in which they examine post-college opportunities.

Typically,

[they] are willing to honestly explore their knowledge of self (e.g., values, interests, and skills) to attain a clear sense of identity. Second, [they] are motivated to learn about the world of work to enhance the development of occupational knowledge. Third, [they] are willing to learn about and engage in career problem solving and decision-making. (Sampson, Peterson, Reardon & Lenz, 2000, p. 157)

This exploration is a challenge for undecided students, and it creates some degree of stress and anxiety. Nevertheless, “the senior who is committed to an [exploration of] post-graduate endeavors has, in a sense, come face-to-face with transition” (Karr & Mahrer, 1972, p. 288) and will fare better in the search for a purposeful and meaningful post-college experience than the “indecisive” senior.

The “indecisive” seniors typically experience extreme levels of stress and anxiety, as they have no plan in place and often have some “personal issues that block their ability to make decisions” (Sampson, Peterson, Lenz, Reardon & Saunders, 1998, p. 163). They also feel that they must make career choices by the end of their senior year, and that these choices will be irreversible. These students “perceive major life choices as permanent, thereby locking them into a secure employment pattern without addressing their desire to explore and experiment with career dreams” (Feitler-Karchin & Wallace-Schutzman, 1982, p. 59). This indecisiveness about their future career can lead to high levels of anxiety (Appel, Haak & Whitzke, 1970). In extreme cases, Zucker (1999) found that, as a result of not being able to decide what to do after college, “seniors may begin to exhibit symptoms of stress such as disrupted sleep patterns, gain or loss weight, difficulty meeting academic or extracurricular obligations, and increased use of tobacco, alcohol, and other drugs” (p. 17). Indecisive students with “diffuse plans may be delaying recognition of transition by putting off this important decision. Such delay would serve the purpose of avoiding conflict with specific role changes and coping behaviors” (Karr

& Mahrer, 1972, p. 288) and, in essence, denying their imminent graduation from college.

A second challenge for college seniors is establishing where they will live after graduation. In some cases, employment will dictate residency, as a job may require relocation. College seniors, particularly those who lived in college housing throughout their undergraduate years, may fear living independently, as meeting the financial responsibilities of "living on your own" can be initially overwhelming (McCoy & Barnard, 1994). For others, moving to a "place of their own" brings a high level of excitement, as it is perceived as a true sign of independence.

If, for economic reasons or other reasons, young adults are unable to be independent and therefore need to return to the home of their parents, then their developmental progress toward increased independence may be arrested or reversed. Living in a parents' house may involve being dependent at a time when the young adult is ready to be, or perhaps has already been, on his or her own, and [a return to this type of] dependency may be quite difficult (Angella, 1984; Halpern, 1976 cited in Farrell Pats, 1987, p. 246)

The college years are viewed as a time when undergraduates make gains in autonomy, competence, and identity development, and develop a certain level of independence from their families (Chickering, 1969; Arnstein, 1980). Farrell Pats (1987) found that the majority of college seniors who lived away from home during their college years saw moving back home as a last resort, as it goes against their need to prove themselves as truly independent adults. In fact, the majority of college seniors view moving home as a personal weakness, a failure to finally "grow up" and manage their own lives (Kenny, 1990).

Kenny (1990) found that moving home does not have to be viewed as a failure or "perceived as synonymous with dependency or as the antithesis of independence" (p. 43).

Rather, it can be viewed as a return to a secure base from which a student can cope with unsettled feelings about the future. Moving home, temporarily, can provide stability for the recent graduate and still promote autonomy and competence (Kenny, 1990).

The final challenge students face in their senior year is coping with their own perceptions of what leaving college represents: being independent and beginning again in a new environment. Most college seniors, particularly those who were freshmen resident students, have experienced the transition into a different living environment and have faced the challenges of developing new social networks and support systems (Johnston & Statton, 1990; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). The major difference between leaving high school for college and leaving college for work is that "for many, [college] graduation is the first exit from an educational institution, with its reasonably well-organized life for participants, to full employment where most of the responsibilities for work and non-work life fall to the individual" (Bradley-Sagen, Lundak & Peterson, 1990, p.30).

It appears that for resident students in particular, the

key to unraveling transitional concerns lies in a specific problem area. College attendance can be conceived as one of extended dependency, as students are often financially dependent upon parents. The imminence of independence may represent a foremost concern during this period, as students must now consider themselves adults with the responsibility of seeking gainful employment and independent living arrangements. (Karr & Mahrer, 1972, p. 287)

Also, graduation represents the end of the college lifestyle and "will shortly end many relationships with teachers, friends, college social activities, and a familiar setting" (Karr & Mahrer, 1972, pp. 287-288). Detaching from the college lifestyle and dependence on relationships that have provided a certain level of support during the undergraduate years "represents a significant life change, and may cause excessive worry and stress as graduation approaches" (Karr & Mahrer, 1972, p. 288).

Seniors must also cope with their perceptions of what the world of work will require of them. According to Bradley-Sagen, Lundak and Peterson (1990), moving into the world of work will require seniors to cope with new responsibilities, to accept an increased level of accountability, to develop relationships with co-workers, and to learn the formal and informal behaviors and rules of the organization. In anticipating the move to the world of work, seniors expressed fears about feeling like a beginner and adjusting to a new schedule, and are not sure how they will handle office politics and translating theory into practice (Martinez, Sedlacek, & Bruchhuber, 1987). Eckel (1994) also found that college seniors want to be accepted as team members, communicate effectively, and quickly adapt to their new work environment, but see these tasks as daunting.

The senior year is a time when students experience distressing feelings about their futures (Medalie, 1981). Often these feelings are related to the fact that they are struggling with issues of adapting to anticipated changes while they are concurrently detaching from the college environment (Maurer, 1982). Students can also assume that, subsequent to graduation, they will need to establish new types of relationships and social supports as well as a sense of comfort and familiarity in their new environments (Brammer & Abrego, 1981; Bradley-Sagen, Lundak & Peterson, 1990, Vickio, 1990). Clearly, the challenges of the senior year and the life choices that need to be made can have a positive or negative impact on what the senior year is like for undergraduates, and on how they cope with this life transition.

This chapter has defined a transition, described the stages of the transition process and presented some of the major challenges undergraduates face during their senior year. In moving ahead toward a deeper and richer understanding of the experiences of college

seniors requires the use of a research methodology that will allow for the exploration into what the senior year is like from those individuals living the experiences and how they make meaning of this life transition from their points of views. To achieve this deeper immersion into the essence of the senior year experience, this study uses an in-depth phenomenological interviewing methodology. Using this methodology to explore the senior year of college contributes significantly to our understanding and appreciation of this life transition as the data that is collect is from the real life experiences of four undergraduate college seniors who are midst of their senior year. The next chapter describes the methodology and how the analysis of the participants' reflections and insights will help illuminate for the reader what the senior year is like for the participants in this study.



## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

When a story gets told, when the person begins to understand the basic emotion behind the basic question being asked, then the writing makes a good deal more sense. (Schuman, 1982, p. 6)

#### Methodological Perspective

To gain insight into the essence of the undergraduate's senior year, a qualitative research approach, i.e., an in-depth, phenomenological interviewing methodology, is used in this study (Schuman, 1982; Seidman, 1991). There are several reasons why this methodology is appropriate for this study. The first reason is that the "real life" examples and actual narratives from the participants provide a deeper and richer understanding of the emotional experiences of the undergraduate in his or her senior year. Second, the in-depth interviewing allows for reciprocity between the participant and the researcher in investigating the focused topic. Third, this methodology also allows for the inclusion of the "voices" of the undergraduate during his or her senior year, which are not evident in other studies on college seniors.

A research topic is appropriate for qualitative interviewing if the researcher wants to learn the how, what or why of a participant's experiences (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). One of the goals of this study is to move away from "learning" about the undergraduate senior based on his or her responses to a prepared survey, and move toward "understanding" these students by listening to their experiences and how they make meaning of these experiences. Using in-depth interviewing provides the researcher with the opportunity to

be descriptive and interpretive. It offers a deeper immersion into the complexities of a focused topic and the experiences of the participants as they perceive and articulate them to the researcher. The results, therefore, are not statistical facts but rather a richer understanding of the experiences of the participants' senior year from their own points of view.

Furthermore, in its application, the purpose of the phenomenological interviewing is "not [to] get answers to questions, nor to test hypotheses" but rather to provide the researcher with a way toward "understanding the experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience" (Seidman, 1991, p. 3). In order to achieve a deeper level of awareness of another's experience and its related meaning are to have "in-depth understanding" which "is best communicated through detailed examples and rich narratives" (Rubin & Rubin, 1995, p. 51). The in-depth interviewing approach supports the researcher's goal of listening to the participants share their life stories and experiences without seeking a finite solution to a research question.

It is also through the presentation of examples and narratives of participants' life stories that there can be an understanding of "how present situations [may have] resulted from past decisions or incidents" (Rubin & Rubin, 1995, p. 51). This is achieved by means of reflective listening and careful interpretation of the participants' life stories. In applying the in-depth interview process there exists the mutual unraveling of complicated issues that provide a learning opportunity for the researcher and for the participant. Additionally, learning, understanding, or making meaning from one's past experiences is also the source of possible solutions to a current issue or a way to label a current feeling or perception.

For the undergraduate senior, as we saw in Chapter Two, there exists a range of feelings and emotional issues surrounding his or her transition from college to “the real world.” For this study, the application of a qualitative interviewing methodology provides an opportunity, through the analysis of the narratives, to examine with the participant previous transition experiences and extrapolate from the narratives the possible similarities or dissimilarities of emotions and behaviors that are present in their current transition from college.

In using this methodology, the researcher is permitted to explore below the surface of a current feeling or emotional state. This leads to a richer understanding by examining the experiential context, past and present, of the undergraduate senior. Qualitative interviewing also allows movement from a singular focused topic, the senior year, to a broader, more collective discovery of how the participants manage life transitions (Seidman, 1991). Ultimately, this approach may provide insights to why the participants are acting or feeling the way they are as they experience their final year as an undergraduate.

A second reason the phenomenological methodology is appropriate for this study is that the in-depth interviewing process provides an opportunity for reciprocal, conversational, and sometimes deeply emotional engagement between the researcher and the participant (Rossman & Rallis, 1997). This deeper level of engagement provides an illumination into the social context of the participant’s world. As such, this research approach also assists with another goal of this study, which is to present the social context of the participants, i.e., their worlds, their real feelings, emotions and personal points of views.

“Context gives a story meaning” (Schuman, 1982, p. 39). The meanings in stories are its human element. They detail the participants’ points of views as they describe their own realities. Qualitative interviewing, based on the skills of the researcher and interview format selected, can elicit from the participant, and present to its readers, the multi-dimensional aspects of the participant’s life. This approach, therefore, presents a richer essence of “who” the undergraduate senior is and what his or her perceptions of the world are.

To discover and explore the essence of “who” the participant is works best when the researcher exhibits “empathy, sensitivity, humor and sincerity” (Rubin & Rubin, 1995, p. 12) in the interviewing process. “The researcher is asking for a lot of openness from the interviewee; he or she is unlikely to get that openness by being closed and impersonal” (Rubin & Rubin, 1995, p. 12). The skills of being “flexible, objective, empathic, persuasive, a good listener” (Fontana & Frey, 1998, p. 55) contribute to the establishment of trust between the researcher and the participant. To reach a deeper level of understanding of the participant’s experiences, the researcher must exhibit a genuine interest in the interviewee’s life stories. Equally critical is that the researcher must seek the balance of being an empathic listener and an objective partner in the interview. “The goal is to achieve some empathy, but not so much involvement that you cannot see the negative things, or if you see them, feel that you cannot report them” (Rubin & Rubin, 1995, p. 13).

Furthermore, “the very nature of qualitative research links it to a human being who is the researcher” (Meloy, 1994, p. 58), meaning that both the researcher and the

participant bring to the interview a set of previously established assumptions, values and experiences.

Because qualitative research requires personal rather than detached engagement in the context, it requires multiple, simultaneous actions and reactions from the human being who is the research instrument. Personal style mingles with methodological implications: for example, how is 'ownership' different from bias or subjectivity? Is there a difference? Decisions about writing, such as voice and tense, become entangled with other decisions, such as where or when does the researcher's voice come in? How much of it is appropriate? Should it be there at all? (Meloy, 1994, p. 68)

In using a qualitative interviewing methodology there will be personal biases in the analysis of the data. By its very nature, "the depth of understanding required to do qualitative interviewing makes it difficult for the qualitative researcher to remain value-free or neutral toward the issues raised" (Rubin & Rubin, 1995, p. 11). The researcher interacts with the participants as well as selects what is described, analyzed and how it is interpreted. However, in choosing this methodology the researcher also makes the commitment to the participants to be respectful and to be faithful in presenting their experiences from their points of view.

Therefore, the researchers role is to carefully establish "the territory to be explored while allowing the participant to take any direction he or she want[s]" (Seidman, 1991, p. 63). There is a need to obtain some basic information from the participants, such as age, major, hometown, etc. The participants direct the remaining information about their lives. The boundaries of the interviews are flexible and based on the phenomenological perspective, which provides the umbrella for the central premise of each of the three, 90-minute interviews. The use of in-depth, open-ended questions provides the flexibility to listen, reflect and interpret the deeper meaning of the students' experiences as graduating seniors, and allows them to explore and articulate this

experience without the constraints of forced-choice responses (Schuman, 1982; Seidman, 1991). Establishing fewer boundaries in the interviews and using open-ended questions in the conversations with the participants also encourages conversational tangents that may produce a fuller understanding of their life stories.

The final reason for selecting qualitative interviewing for this study is to provide a venue for the undergraduate seniors to share, in their own voices, what the senior year is like. It is noted that “the method of in-depth, phenomenological interviewing applied to a sample of participants who all experience similar structural and social conditions gives enormous power to the stories of a relatively few participants” (Seidman, 1991, p. 45). Most research on this population of students has been quantitative, attempting to prove that college has been a beneficial experience in their lives. This has been accomplished through “outcome studies” based on a *value-added* assessment model utilizing nationally normed tests comparing the students’ academic performance at the beginnings and at the ends of their college careers. The findings are “quantitative data, and the analyses focus on increases in scores as [a means of] demonstrating the *value* that the college experience” (Schilling & Schilling, 1998, p. 248) can provide. The emphasis is on demonstrating the effectiveness and value of college rather than discovering an understanding of the college experience. These statistical surveys and “tests fail to invite senior students into the kind of reflective experience that might be most useful as they make the transition from college to work” (Schilling & Schilling, 1988, p. 249).

What is found in research studies on undergraduate seniors is typically a brief “quote” from a graduating senior as a prelude to an article. These epigraphs are used to establish a tone or feeling about the senior year experience and the contents of the

research article. Unlike an overture in a musical, which gives the audience a brief glimpse of what will be presented in its entirety over the course of the production, the quote, generally, is kept isolated and not integrated into the article. The result is an illusion that the students' actual voices will appear in the data. Upon review of the methodology used in these studies, these student quotes are usually lifted from a comment section of a prepared survey.

Surveys, even those that strive to be "qualitative," lack the detail, depth and richness that can be found by using an in-depth qualitative interviewing approach. Surveys do not offer the opportunity to ask the participants to "elaborate, provide incidents and clarifications, and discuss events at length" (Rubin & Rubin, 1995, p. 8). The thick descriptions "rooted in the interviewee's firsthand experience [that] forms the material that researchers gather up, synthesize, and analyze as part of hearing the meaning of the data" are lost (Rubin & Rubin, 1995, p. 8). What is asked for in a survey is important to the researcher. In qualitative interviewing, what is shared in the interviews is important to the participant.

The use of qualitative interviewing in this study allows seniors to share the essence of the senior year, and through a combination of narratives and life stories, share what is important about this time in their lives. Additionally, they can provide insights to what the senior year is like for them. How are they experiencing this transition and how do they understand it? Is this transition experience different from previous educational transitions? Is it easier or more difficult? Do they feel more connected to their current environment or to the world after college? How does this transition experience fit into the context of their lives? Is the senior year a liminal period in these students' lives?

It is these kinds of questions that can be answered by listening to the undergraduate senior as they share their social contexts and their points of views on the senior year. And, while it is evident that this approach will not find “principles that are true all the time and in all conditions” (Rubin & Rubin, 1995, p.38), it does provide an understanding of what is being experienced by this study’s participants during their senior year. Therefore, this study’s focus is on the participants and their perceptions and realities as they move through their final year as undergraduates.

### Participants

This section focuses on the participants for this study, who they are and how they were selected. It includes some brief demographic information about the participants and the criteria for their inclusion in the study, a description of their colleges, and how referrals for participation were obtained and initial contact was made.

#### Demographics and Criteria for Inclusion

Four undergraduate college seniors were interviewed for this study. The participants were selected based on the principle of “purposefully sampling” (Patton, 1989 as cited in Seidman, 1991, p. 42); that is, the participants fit the criteria required in this study. During the interview process each participant was enrolled as a full-time day student with the expectation of completing his or her Bachelor’s degree in May 2000. Two participants (one male and one female) were attending a small private college in Massachusetts. The other two participants (again, one male and one female) were attending a larger public college, also in Massachusetts. Three of the participants were 21



years of age and the fourth had just turned 22 years old. All four participants had been at the same college for their full academic tenure and had resided in college housing during all four years.

Also, there was convenient access to the participants to conduct the interviews. Voluntary Consent Forms (Appendix A) were given to and signed by each participant at the first interview and each participant selected his or her own pseudonym for the study.

### Descriptions of the Participants' Colleges

A decision to choose two different institutions, one public, the other private, was based on the assumption that the experiences of the participants might provide some dissimilarity in their perceptions about the senior year. The contrasts of the two institutions are evident in their academic mission, size, male-female student ratio, and location<sup>8</sup>. The first institution, which is called Private College throughout this study, is a small, four-year, private, business college. Private College's core academic mission is to provide "the best practically-oriented business education in New England" but it also provides "comprehensive programs in teacher education and the liberal arts." Over 85% percent of Private College's student population is attending in order to receive a degree in a business field, i.e., accounting, marketing, economics, management or sport management. The remaining student population receives degrees in English, psychology, history, or math, with or without Educator Certification. Private College has an evening division and offers an MBA program. Additionally, Private College provides students the opportunity to participate in 14 varsity sports at the NCAA Division III level.

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<sup>8</sup> The information presented in this section was collected via each institution's respective websites. To provide anonymity to the participants I will not cite this information in the reference section of this paper. This data is from the 1999-2000 academic year.

The second institution, referred to as Public College, is a four-year liberal arts college. Public College's mission is to respond "to the diverse intellectual and career needs of the citizens of central Massachusetts." This is achieved using the "philosophy that the principles of liberal learning are the foundation for all advanced programs of study." Formerly a teachers college, Public College now offers 33 different undergraduate majors leading to a Bachelor of Arts, Bachelor of Science or Bachelor of Education degree. An evening division and six graduate degree programs supplement these offerings. Public College also has an NCAA Division III athletic program and is a long-standing rival of Private College.

A second difference between Public College and Private College is their enrollment size<sup>9</sup>. Private College has a student enrollment of 651 full-time undergraduate day students, ten part-time undergraduate day students and over 400 part-time students in its evening division and MBA programs. Eighty-three percent of the undergraduate day students reside on campus; 2% secure private housing in the local area and the remaining 15% live with their parents and commute. Private College does not provide housing for evening or graduate students. With 26 full-time and 24 adjunct faculty members, Private College has an in-the-classroom faculty-to-student ratio of one-to-eighteen.

Public College has an undergraduate day student enrollment of 2,654 full-time and 74 part-time undergraduate day students. In the evening division there are 1,737 part-time students and 747 graduate students enrolled in six different disciplines. Less than 26% of the full-time undergraduate day student population resides on campus. Public College does not provide evening or graduate student housing. Having 173 full-time and

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<sup>9</sup> These figures are based on the 1999-2000 institutional profiles as presented on their respective websites.

90 part-time faculty members, Public College has an in-the-classroom faculty-to-student ratio of one-to-fifteen.

While both institutions have over 92% of their full-time undergraduates at the traditional age (18-22 years old), the ratio of male undergraduate day students to female undergraduate day students is another area in which Private College and Public College differ. Public College's ratio of female students to male students is 66% (female) to 34% (male). At Private College it is the opposite. Seventy-two percent of Private College's full-time undergraduate day students are male and 28% are female<sup>10</sup>.

Private College and Public College also differ in their location. Private College is located in a small, very rural town with a population just over 10,000. Formerly a farm community, the town still has a few farms but is primarily a bedroom community to a city approximately 20 miles away. There is no access to public transportation and students must drive to the city for shopping and entertainment. This is in contrast to Public College, which is located in a small city with a population of 163,000. While Public College is located in the city, a residential community of single-family homes and some small businesses primarily surround the campus. However, it has a very urban feel. Public College students have easy access to public transportation, shopping and entertainment.

### Participant Referrals and Initial Contact

To obtain possible participants for this study, student affairs colleagues were contacted at both Private College and Public College. They provided the names and

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<sup>10</sup> I assume that this difference is based on the fact that Private College has fewer academic programs that appeal to female students, but I do not have any evidence to support this assumption.

telephone numbers of three possible participants from each institution. Each of the possible participants was contacted by telephone and provided an explanation of the study and the level of commitment needed for participation, i.e., three 90-minute interviews occurring in October, December and March. One possible participant from Public College did not fit the residential requirement as he commuted to Public College his first year; and a possible participant from Private College was eliminated from consideration because she was actually a "fifth-year" senior.

The remaining four possible participants did fit the study criteria for selection and agreed to be interviewed. During the first phone conversation with each of the participants a time and date was established for the first interview. The student affairs colleagues who recommended the participants also provided space on their campuses to meet and interview the participants. A follow-up call one week prior to each of the interviews was made to each participant to confirm time, date and location.

#### Data Collection

Applying the in-depth phenomenological interview format of Schuman (1982) and Seidman (1991), three 90-minute interviews were conducted with each of the participants. Each of these three semi-structured interviews focused on a specific purpose. An assumption was made that "each interview provides a foundation of detail that helps illuminate the next" (Seidman, 1991, p. 13). Through the use of open-ended questions, the exploration of what the senior year was like for the participants as they understood it, experienced it and made meaning of it in the context of their entire life unfolded.

As recommended by Schuman (1982) and Seidman (1991), the first interview was for fact-finding, developing a relationship, and making a connection with the participant. The first interview with each of the participants in this study occurred in the last week of October after the participants had settled into their fall class, sport and/or work schedules. At the onset of the interviews each participant was given a Voluntary Consent Form for review and signature. The participants were given the opportunity to select their own pseudonym to be used in the presentation of the data.

The interviews began with some structured questions regarding the participant's age, major, hometown and family (Appendix B). These questions were asked for demographic reasons. I often reciprocated in the conversation by sharing my own personal history to aid in building a rapport with the participants. While many of the questions were direct, with the possibility of one- or two-word responses, if a participant chose to elaborate he or she was not stopped. This portion of the interview was to provide an initial understanding of the context of the participant's life.

As the interviews progressed, conversations evolved from closed, structured questions to open-ended ones that gave the participants the opportunity to share their "basic biography, from genealogy to present circumstances" (Schuman, 1982, p. 209). This occurred through questions about the participant's childhood, elementary and high school and college experiences, and proudest or saddest life moments. Additionally, as the goal of this study focused on the process of transition, participants were asked to share previous experiences with transitional periods in their lives.

To facilitate a focused discussion on transitional periods in the context of an educational setting, open-ended questions were again used. Participants were asked about

their first day in kindergarten, first grade or high school, and what it was like to leave elementary school for high school or high school for college. These questions gave the participants the opportunity to describe their educational life stories and some of the transitional events that had meaning for them.

As a foundation, the first interview provided the context of the participants' worlds as well as insights for the exploration of the current world of the participants during the second interview. The second interviews with the participants occurred in mid-December after their last final exam of the fall semester. In this interview, open-ended questions were asked as a way of exploring the participants' current experiences, the "present world" of the undergraduate senior. This interview was an opportunity to see what "kinds of connections the individual has had with the world" (Schuman, 1982, p. 209). This is achieved by asking participants to reconstruct a day in their lives, including every detail (Seidman, 1991). For this study the social contexts would be the participants' lives as undergraduate seniors and their interactions with their college community and world outside of the college. The emphasis was on details and thickly descriptive narratives that described their world as they had experienced it.

For such an interview, Seidman (1991) and Schuman (1982) provide two cautionary notes for the researcher. First, the researcher should "not ask for opinions but rather the details of their experiences, upon which their opinions may be built" (Seidman, 1991, p. 11). In order to obtain the richer detail of the participants' social contexts and not their opinions of their experiences, open-ended questions were again asked. Participant were asked to describe a typical day (from waking up through going to bed for the evening); to share their interactions with other students, faculty, staff, family

members, sport teammates or co-workers; and to describe what they did when they had free time. These questions sought more detailed responses that provided a richer understanding of the essence of the participants and their world, their social contexts from their points of views.

The second cautionary note had to do with the data that was shared. Schuman (1982) warned that the detailed data collected might, on the surface, appear to be “vague talk,” but in actuality it is a foundation and an immersion for the researcher into the essence of the social contexts of the participants. The combination of a deeper level of details and thick descriptions from the participants’ pasts through their present descriptions of their everyday worlds provided initial insights into the essence of the senior year to be reflected upon in the third interview.

The third and final interviews with the participants were held in mid-March, just after their colleges’ spring breaks. During the third set of interviews the participants were asked to reflect upon the meanings of their experiences as undergraduate seniors in relation to their entire lives. As Seidman (1991) states, “the question of ‘meaning’ is not one of satisfaction or reward, although such issues may play a part in the participants’ thinking. Rather, it addresses the intellectual and emotional connections between the participants’ work and life” (p. 12). The goal was to hear from the participants, who were living the phenomenon of the undergraduate senior year, and have them share the deep meaning of this experience from their points of views.

In order to hear what the senior year meant for participants, they were asked to describe it in relation to what they had already said about other transitions in their lives before they became seniors, as well as in relation to what they had said about their

current status as a senior. They were asked to describe what their current transition was like, how it differed from or was similar to other life transitions, and how connected they felt to their current environments. Questions that emphasized the future were also used (Seidman, 1991). Participants were asked where they saw themselves after college, and how they felt they would manage this life transition. The purpose of these types of questions was to have the participants explore how their past experiences with life transitions might be factors in how they were experiencing their current transitions as graduating seniors.

#### Data Management and Analysis

To manage the data shared by the participants, each interview was tape-recorded. The tapes were then transcribed and reviewed for accuracy. Any significant non-verbal behaviors or gestures by the participants that occurred during the interviews were added to the transcripts. If in the transcription there were segments of the tapes that were inaudible, in the subsequent interview the participant was asked to clarify his or her statement(s) or to fill in missing pieces. All tapes and transcribed materials remained in the researcher's custody. The anonymity of the participants was provided through the use of pseudonyms.

“Data analysis is the final stage of listening to hear the meaning of what is said” (Rubin & Rubin, 1995, p. 226). The interpretation and analysis of the interviews began with an initial review for accuracy of the data. This review not only corrected any errors in the transcription of the material from tape to paper, but also provided initial insights of possible open-ended questions for the next interview.



Following the completion of all the interviews and several re-readings of the transcripts, a finer and more detailed analysis of what was said by the participants was conducted. Common or similar themes, and concepts and patterns from the transcripts, were identified and coded. Specific data depicting the meaning of the phenomenon (transition or liminal states) for the participants were extrapolated from the transcript and are included in the subsequent chapters of this dissertation. The re-reading of the data was also performed in an attempt to seek alternate explanations or themes that may have existed.

### Limitations

The primary limitation of this study is that the findings cannot be applied to all undergraduate seniors. This limitation is the result, in part, of the study's small sampling. Four participants cannot represent the experiences of over a million undergraduate seniors at 3,000 different higher education institutions in the United States. The diversity of institutional cultures, economics, individuals' personal values and, most significantly, the participants' previous experiences with the process of transition, may affect how they perceive and/or manage this current transition.

A second limitation is "the interviewer can strive to have the meaning being made in the interview as much a function of the participant's reconstruction and reflection as possible, [however] the interviewer must nevertheless recognize that meaning, to some degree, [is] a function of the participant's interaction with the interviewer" (Seidman, 1991, p. 16). In this study the researcher and the interviewer are one and the same,

therefore, there does exist a certain level of subjectivity in the solicitation and interpretation of the data collected.

A third limitation is that this study does not propose a model for what colleges should be doing to help seniors during this transitional phase. Instead, it presents insights into the lives of four undergraduates who have had some similar experiences and were struggling with similar emotional issues regarding their transitions out of college. It does offer, for consideration, four students' experiences as a way of opening the discussion and encouraging further research on what might or could be done to help other undergraduate seniors.

### Summary

Qualitative interviewing, hearing the meaning of what participants are sharing and understanding their perceptions of their worlds, is not as easy as turning on a tape recorder and jotting down some notes. It is also foolish to think you can truly understand the essence of the senior year for students, without hearing what is meaningful to them. To understand this meaning you need to hear the phenomenon of the undergraduate experience in the context of their whole life. Through hearing a person's life story you "begin to see *who*, not *what* a person is" and how they interpret their world and their "web of human relationships" (Schuman, 1982, p. 74).

To use in-depth qualitative interviewing there has to be a purpose and a focus, which can evolve as a researcher begins to conduct the interviews. The same can be said of the complex nature of the analysis of the data.

It is only at the point of closure to a qualitative research experience (and even then there is most likely no singular billboard or flashing sign) that the complex,

layered experience in which we engage begins to take shape as a sensible whole that can be – and indeed has been – organized, interpreted, and perhaps, understood. Themes do not emerge all at once; if the thesis is qualitative, chances are it will not arrive headfirst. Understanding follows doing. (Meloy, 1994, p. 12)

So, even with a focused research topic in mind, when a researcher selects a qualitative method of inquiry he or she must be open to the wider world of the participants. “Although qualitative interviews are more focused, deeper, and even more detailed than normal discussions, they follow many of the rules of ordinary conversation” (Rubin & Rubin, 1995, p. 122) and may drift far from the original topic. In this study, conversational tangents also produced beneficial data. The application of in-depth phenomenological interviewing did assist in maintaining focus on the set of topics of inquiry (i.e., transition, liminality and the senior year), leading to significant patterns, themes and categories for analysis to be presented in future chapters.

Chapter Four introduces the four undergraduate seniors who participated in this study: Jackie, Tim, Jennifer and Lou. The reconstructing and retelling of their life stories from earliest memories to the end of their junior year in college, is done to provide some insight into their worlds and the life experiences that have influenced who they are and how they have reached this point in their lives. Wherever and whenever possible the unedited excerpts from the interviews are included as means for the reader to see the uniqueness of the participants and begin to paint a portrait of the participants. The presentation of their actual “voices” is the purest way for the reader to begin to understand the social contexts of the participants, their experiences of other life transitions and their everyday worlds as undergraduate seniors.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE LIVES OF FOUR SENIOR YEAR COLLEGE UNDERGRADUATES

This chapter introduces the four senior year college undergraduates interviewed for this study. Jackie and Tim attended Private College, a small, private, four-year business college. Jennifer and Lou attended Public College, a medium-size four-year public institution. This chapter focuses on each participant's personal background, family, education and experiences with life transitions from childhood up to their undergraduate senior year. The stories they shared provide insight into who they are as college students, both individually and collectively. This chapter identifies and explores the themes that emerged and characterizes the way each of the participants coped with their life transitions.

The interviews are presented in the order in which they occurred. In addition to the participants' personal histories, emphasis is placed on their perceptions and experiences with transition as they moved from one educational environment to the next. Whenever possible, the participants' words are presented in the text.

#### The Participants and Their Life Stories

The first interviews were held in late October 1999, about eight weeks into the fall semester. All four participants began college in autumn of 1996, were on track to graduate in May of 2000, and lived on campus for their four undergraduate years.

## Jackie

Jackie arrived at my office shortly after her 8:00am senior accounting class. She is about five feet ten inches tall, Caucasian, with medium length, light brown hair (which on this day, was buried underneath a baseball cap). She dressed in sweats, with no make-up, and she looked like she had just rolled out of bed.

Jackie was 21 years old, an accounting major and co-captain of the field hockey team. She had been involved with student government during her first two years at college, played field hockey and softball for all four years, and worked as a student athletic trainer for the men's basketball team during the winter sports season.

Jackie talked fast, with great fluctuations in the tone and volume of her speech, and jumped from story to story. Her hands moved as fast as her mouth, and she was never at a loss for words. She appeared tired, and sat with her knees pulled close to her chest and her feet resting on the edge of the chair.

I began the interview by offering Jackie the chance to choose her own pseudonym. She wanted to be called Jackie, and said she always felt that she looked more like a Jackie than her birth name. Jackie was from Massachusetts, where she had lived all her life with both of her parents. She had one 26-year-old brother, who would be getting married soon. He graduated from a public state college the previous December, on the "eight year" plan and worked at a large construction firm in a nearby city. He was the assistant project manager at the same company as their father. Jackie's relationship with her brother had changed over time and they "decided liking each other about two years ago." Before that they "hated each other. [They] started getting close in [her] freshman year and now [they] like each other."

Jackie's father has been in construction all his life. "He has worked in construction since he was 13 years old. My dad went to trade school. He wanted to go to trade school, and that's all he did. He didn't go to college." Jackie's mother attended secretarial school and had worked at a hospital for several years, but could no longer work due to a chronic illness.

Jackie's mother was diagnosed with a severe case of rheumatoid arthritis while Jackie was in junior high school. Her mother's illness had an impact on Jackie's life, as she became the primary caretaker of her mother and of their home. She assumed the responsibility for many domestic chores and ran errands for the family. She never thought twice about sharing this responsibility with her brother or father. As primary caretaker of her mother and the home, she felt she needed to "grow up" and start "thinking about just 'me' less."

Kindergarten was Jackie's first formal transition into an educational environment. She attended half-days at a kindergarten-through-fourth-grade facility in her town, and she loved kindergarten because "they let you play and color." But she also recalled that, "I was kind of a fat kid. I mean I wasn't like big fat... I look at pictures now and I was fat then... I remember being teased. I remember when I was a kid I was a good little girl... I never picked on anyone." Jackie's older brother was in the same school (fourth grade) and this provided Jackie some comfort, as "he would say hi, then he would come and see me all the time. I'd see him in the cafeteria at lunchtime...when he left I was scared."

While she could not remember all the specific events of her first day in elementary school, Jackie did recall that "in general [she] was scared." Fortunately,

The teacher was wonderful. She was young. She was pregnant. We all wanted to touch the baby. We didn't really get into the whole learning process right away.

She just tried to make us comfortable and help us get to know each other, kind of like icebreakers that we play now... but they were little kid ice-breakers, role modeling good stuff like being nice and sharing, but just during story time.

Jackie enjoyed elementary school but loved summer breaks even more. During her last year in elementary school, her fourth grade class visited the middle school they would attend the following year. The goal was to help the fourth graders with the transition to middle school. Unlike her experience of entering kindergarten where her brother was in the same building, Jackie would be entering a new school alone.

It was tough, because I went to North {Town} Elementary and there's a South {Town} Elementary. So I went to a middle school in March to see it before starting September and that was scary, that was really scary. There were so many people I didn't know. There were people I knew from sports but there were two different cliques. The North {Town} crowd hated the South {Town} crowd. I remember the first day, you should have seen the first day, in the parking lot, before class. You should have seen the boundary between the two schools. It was amazing. The only people who were talking were the sixth and seventh graders over in the corner, but the new kids didn't know anybody. They were starting to get to each other. But, like going there before and seeing it before I went, that, like helped a lot.

It was really tough, you know, I lost a couple of friends because they got to know different people and they would get mad at me because I would start to make friends with a new person and so like they would go off... it was really tough, a lot of heavy stuff. Like 'Oh, I don't like her because her hair's funny,' but then when I go, 'She's my friend,' they go 'I don't like that shirt she's wearing,' stupid stuff. It was good though, cause I got to see other girls that I hadn't seen since kindergarten, we keep in touch and everything.

Jackie's middle school years (grades five through eight) were fun and filled with good times with friends and "learning stuff." On her last day in the eighth grade she found out that her best friend was moving away. "I cried, everyone cried. The teachers, they were all supportive. She was, like, my best friend. We never stayed in touch, which is sad."

Except for losing her friend, leaving the eighth grade was “like, no big deal” for Jackie. In fact, she was excited and much less apprehensive about entering high school. In comparison to her previous transition from elementary to middle school, she was entering high school with a support network already in place.

Actually, high school was really... my freshman year at high school was good. My neighborhood buddies, two of them were seniors so... I walked in the first day as a freshman with seniors. They made it real comfortable. I was walking in with the softball captain, I knew people and everything... so, they made me feel comfortable. I made friends with the girls... the senior guys would flirt with me... you know... make me feel comfortable... introduce me to all their friends. I ended up dating a senior guy. My freshman friends would go, ‘Your dating a senior?’... I’d say ‘Yeah’... it was all right for a couple of years.

After her freshman year, Jackie’s high school years were very hectic and not as “fun” as her first year. She juggled school, took care of her mother and the house, and was heavily involved in sports. She dated a few different people and always hung out with older students. In looking back at high school, Jackie noted that somewhere along the way, the experience lost the luster and excitement that it held for her as a freshman.

When I look back at high school, I hated high school. I hated the people I hung around with, I hated what they did... I didn’t want to go. Right now I look at pictures of them now it makes me sick. Then, I always kept to myself. I wasn’t one of the fake ones. I was a cheerleader and I wasn’t into the whole stereotype and they always picked the stereotype ones. They made me think I was a show off. I look back and how could you associate with those people then... I see them now... I talk to people more that I wasn’t close with... we have a lot more to talk about than in all those years.

Jackie entered her senior year already decided on a college. Private College, which she had visited during her junior year, had her choice of major (accounting) and was close to home. Jackie’s family was only “a half an hour away. [Her] mom and dad were so happy that [she] was only a half an hour away.” And, Jackie “wanted to play sports. [She] thought [her] career was over after high school. [She] had the opportunity to



play two sports” at Private College, which she admitted was her top priority in selecting Private College.

Reflecting on her final days in high school, Jackie was surprised at how sad she felt about leaving, given that she didn’t enjoy it all that much. She was also disenchanted with her peers, especially those she felt close to, as they did not appreciate and take advantage of connecting with one another in those final days of high school.

I remember senior week, I cried, partied every day senior week. We had our class trip but I like stayed by myself. It bothered me a lot to see some of my friends, they’re so immature, so annoying... not understanding why... I was kinda holding back a little bit. They didn’t get it, that senior week was, like, a time we are supposed to get close, but people were still petty.

Jackie was so sad and angry about the way her friends acted that she isolated herself and returned home from the senior class trip a day earlier than the rest of the class. She did not attend any other senior events, including graduation rehearsals. On her graduation day, instead of attending rehearsal, she slept all day. She was supposed to be at the high school by 5:45 PM. At 5:55 PM she was awakened by a phone call from her mom. “I had been sleeping all day... it was five of six and I looked at my clock and oh, God, I jumped in the shower, walked in with my hair soaking wet.”

When Jackie finally arrived at the school, she was surprised and hurt by her friends’ reactions.

When I walked in I’m like... ‘I’m here!’ Everybody’s like... ‘Oh.’ None of my friends cared... they didn’t care at all. Nobody said anything. I didn’t call so they were waiting. I felt like lonely and hurt walking into the gym.

‘Cause I didn’t go to rehearsal, it was so embarrassing. I didn’t know where to walk... I walked the wrong way. I kept getting called up to the stage and getting stuff. I didn’t know where to walk. I got seventeen scholarships and went the wrong way to get them.

It was good, you know, to get the recognition. It made me appreciate how hard I had worked... get recognition for what I had done. It was good, like I made my dad proud.

Jackie spent the summer before college working and getting in shape for field hockey. She made no effort to stay in touch with her high school friends and did not return their phone calls. Instead, she began building a relationship with a young woman she had met at an open house at Private College, and again at her summer orientation. They got along so well that they agreed to live together in the fall, and ended up roommates throughout their four years at Private College.

Private College had recruited Jackie to play field hockey in the fall and softball in the spring. Pre-season training required her to arrive at school before classes started, and before the rest of the class of 2000 arrived. When Jackie arrived for pre-season she "was a little nervous...but the field hockey captains were here... they made a point to be here for the freshman arrival and that helped. The field hockey team and being part of a team helped me a lot."

While Jackie's transition to Private College was smooth, she was concerned about how moving away impacted her parents, especially because her brother moved out of the house at the same time. It was then that her father realized how much Jackie was doing to keep the home running and how much he would have to do to make up for her absence. Jackie saw that her move had put a strain on her parents, who had to learn to live differently as their household changed from four people to two.

It was hard for the first couple of months, leaving my family, go off to school. Another thing was like, my dad is a great guy, my parents have always like got along until I left for my freshman year in college... and my brother moved out. They think that it's, like, when it hit them or he's finally realized that she's [mother] got a handicap... she needs help a lot... she retiring and he's in construction work close to home so he will be close to home. She can walk; it's

her hands that are like bad. She's got a lot of mobility and stuff... her ankles don't bend as much and she has driven the car with her legs swelled up. And her feet swell up, her feet are pretty messed up too. But she can walk. I don't think they realized what it would be like, 'cause I was so busy and couldn't go home all the time. I think it was rough on them. It was rough on me not being there for them, you know?

Jackie's freshman year was busy. In addition to acclimating to academic life at Private College, she juggled field hockey, a work study job in athletics and was elected vice-president of the freshmen class. She "partied hard" when she could and occasionally "hooked up" with a guy on a weekend night. Jackie returned home as often as she could to help her family, but felt that Private College was now her new home.

Sophomore year was "pretty much the same stuff, except there was like, more homework." She was again elected vice-president of her class and was heavily involved in athletics. By the end of her sophomore year, Jackie was tired of being involved in student government and decided not to run for a junior class officer position. She wanted more time for herself, sports and friends.

In her junior year, Jackie began a romantic relationship with Dave, which continued throughout her senior year. Dave was a year older and a senior at Private College. They shared the same major and interest in sports. Because of this relationship, Jackie felt her junior year was her best and most favorite. She dreaded facing the end of her junior year, as Dave would graduate and she would return in the fall without him.

In looking back on her first three years of college, Jackie said that her experiences were positive and filled with tremendous intellectual and personal growth.

It was fun. Really fun. And, I don't know. I learned a lot. I learned a lot, you know, academically and you know, personally I have learned a lot. Emotionally, I have learned a lot. I've learned a lot, how to respect people for who they are, like, I've always respected people, you know, but like I've learned that people have so

much to offer that you need to let yourself experience what people have to offer. You know.

As Jackie described her life, two major aspects of her world became obvious: her commitment and strong connection to her family, and her love of sports.

Her mother's illness changed Jackie's life and her perception of what was important to her. She wanted to be there for her family when she was needed, and she had readily assumed additional responsibilities for managing the family home. She also described, with heartfelt exuberance, those times in her life when she had made her dad proud as very important milestones. She fully recognized that her family was the bedrock on which she could build her life, and she felt she could do almost anything with their support.

Being part of a sports team provided a support network for her and melded well with her competitive nature. "Winning was not, like, the most important thing... and losing does, like sucks. But I liked being part of a team and, like... trying hard to beat the other team and do, like your best has been always important to me." Jackie also viewed sports as her outlet for the stress and frustrations she experienced in other aspects in life. But more importantly, sports gave her a sense of community and connection to her peers, and in some cases assisted her in her transitions from one social context to another.

Jackie's descriptions of her experiences with transitions from one educational setting to another were consistent with the transition process. As she entered each new educational setting (kindergarten, elementary school, etc.) she experienced fear and anxiety about the new beginnings. And, as she left a familiar educational setting, she experienced disillusionment and disenchantment (particularly in leaving high school) as she detached from these social contexts.

While the experiences Jackie shared primarily reflected her emotional reactions to the stresses of the detachment and new beginning stages, her behaviors before a life transition reflected the liminal stage of the transition process. What emerged from her stories was a common theme, or “style,” of utilizing the liminal stage to prepare for her adaptation and assimilation to the new social context in order to make a smooth transition. As Bridges (1988) noted, individuals who are about to experience a life transition will make a cognitive appraisal of how they think this transition will affect their lives and compare it to previous life transition experiences. Based on this appraisal, individuals will look for coping strategies that had proven effective in their previous experiences, and apply them to the current situation.

Jackie’s style of coping with new beginnings was to use the liminal stage of the transition process as time to prepare for the transition. She did this by either visiting the new social context before entering it or developing a support network in the new social context prior to the transition. Beginning with her transition from elementary school to middle school (when she visited the middle school prior to attending), we see how Jackie, though initially frightened by the transition, was glad she had visited the school, because it helped her with the transition. And when Jackie transitioned from middle school to high school, she had developed relationships, through sports, with current older high school students, thereby easing the transition into high school.

For the transition to college, Jackie used both of these strategies. She visited Private College in her junior year to see if it fit her needs. And, she built a support network by selecting and communicating often with her roommate before arriving at

Public College. Her decision to use these strategies proved effective; she characterized her transition to college as “smooth.”

Another theme that emerged from Jackie’s experiences with transitions was the style she used to detach herself from one social context before entering a new one. When Jackie transitioned from elementary school to middle school, she became detached from her elementary school friends because of the way they treated other students. She quickly became disenchanted with them and elected to move on to another peer group. Likewise, as Jackie detached herself from high school, she experienced intense periods of disillusionment and disenchantment with her peer group during senior week and graduation day. Jackie, again, moved away from her peers and aligned herself more with the new social context she would be entering. In both examples, the anger she had at the behavior of others prompted her to exit her current role and moved her into her next new beginning.

Clearly, Jackie’s transition style was to prepare for her transitions by using the liminal stage in the transition process as an opportunity to investigate her next social context, or to put in place the key elements she needed to ensure a smooth adaptation to her new environment. What is also evident is that once Jackie becomes disenchanted or disillusioned from a peer group or social context, she severs all ties with the people she once saw as friends. It seems that Jackie would rather move on to the new social context or peer group than cope with her feelings of disconnection or isolation from others. It is evident that Jackie used this particular strategy in coping with the stress of a life transition because it minimizes the impact the transition will have on her world.

## Tim

Tim arrived in the early afternoon of the same day as my first interview with Jackie. At six feet three inches, Tim had a medium to large build. His very short, razor cut, brown hair was coifed with a heavy layer of styling gel. Dressed in jeans, sneakers and a Private College sweatshirt, he looked like he had been lifted off the cover of the college's viewbook. With a smile on his face stretching from ear to ear, this Caucasian, Irish, freckle-faced senior sat down in a reclined position in a straight back chair. From the moment he sat down, his legs began bouncing up and down on toes, and they continued to bounce through the entire interview.

When asked to select a pseudonym for the study, he suggested Tim. I asked if there was a significant reason why he selected this name. He said no; it just felt like a good name for him.

Tim was a 21-year-old Massachusetts native. He had lived in the same house his entire life. He had two older brothers. His oldest brother was working in sales, and was a senior at Private College when Tim arrived as a freshman. This brother was currently finishing his MBA at Private College during the evenings. Tim's second oldest brother was married and a manager in a retail store. He received his undergraduate degree from a public college.

Tim also has a fraternal twin brother, Tom, who joined him at Private College and was majoring in business management. About being a twin, Tim stated,

What is it like to be a twin? Fun. Always someone there, um, we are really close. He's my best friend, um, always someone to play with a lot. We are not identical twins. Couldn't pass off as the other. My mother tried to dress us the same, but you could always tell we looked different. You could tell we are brothers, but that is it.

Tim was majoring in marketing and hoped to work in sports marketing or advertising after graduation. He had been a resident assistant for three years, served as the manager/trainer for the college's ice hockey team and had a work study job as a dispatcher in the public safety office.

His parents had been together for 35 years. His mother was an elementary school teacher in their local public school system. His father was an engineer and had received his engineering degree much later in life. Tim indicated that his family was very close. He also stated that his parents strongly believed that their children should receive a college education.

Tim began his formal education by attending kindergarten at an elementary school in his town. His mother worked at this school and would bring Tim and Tom to work with her each day. He and Tom were in the same classroom and "played and mostly goofed off" until his mother would come pick them up and drive them home. For Tim, kindergarten "was like being home, but with more kids to play with."

The following year, Tim and Tom entered first grade. Their mother drove them to school and each day they would "just hang out" and wait for her to come by to pick them up. Tim was not "traumatized or nothing like that" by the transition into first grade. The new "classroom was big. The building was overpowering," but he already had been to kindergarten in the same facility and he easily adjusted to the first grade.

Tim's transition from kindergarten to first grade differed in one significant way: Tim and Tom were placed in different classrooms. This was the first time that they had been separated from each other for an extended period of time. Tim was not bothered, upset or anxious by the separation. In fact, he developed new friendships, separate from



those that he and his brother had shared. Tim enjoyed his elementary school years, but was far from a stellar student.

The next transition was Tim's move from elementary to middle school. Tim was a little nervous about moving into middle school "cause I had to take the bus, but my older brother was there. I also was with my twin brother. They put us in class alphabetically. Um, it didn't freak me out to go there. It was fine." After his initial adaptation, middle school was an "okay" time in Tim's life. He struggled with his schoolwork and spent most of his free time involved in formalized sports activities. He credited his involvement in sports as being the major reason why his transition from middle to high school was not a difficult experience for him. But at the same time he did not want to be classified as a "jock" in high school.

The transition to high school was easy. I always had sports. The same kids I played sports with when I was younger were always there. I was mostly a jock, but I felt I got along with everyone. It was a big school, had three or four like cafes and stuff and I was determined I wasn't going to hang out with just the jocks and such. The first floor cafe was the shop kids and I sometimes ate there.

Sports, work, friends and "doing what he had to do" academically filled Tim's high school years. He was busy much of the time, and he learned that being friends with his teachers and a "nice kid" helped him coast through high school academically. Academics, which he had always struggled with, were simply not a priority in his life. As Tim stated, "I was never a big one into academics or nothing, always working or chilling in study hall. Get [school work] out of the way so I could do what I want to do."

Tim's senior year in high school was his favorite and he planned to make it his best, socially. Being with his friends was, again, his top priority.

I had a great time it was a fun. I was with, um, a group of kids I always hung out with from second grade. I even knew some since pre-school, it was, we had all

gone to school together, all grew up together and did everything together. My best friend was leaving to go into the Air Force once out of high school. So we had to make it the best time we could. We just had a good time.

During his senior year, Tim had difficulty with one particular teacher. For the first time, Tim was being held accountable for his academic performance and couldn't just get by on "being a nice kid." This was a new experience for Tim and he didn't know how to handle it and "it was kinda of stressful." But, Tim did barely pass the course and continued to enjoy his high school social life much more than the academics.

In the weeks before graduation, the high school had a series of events for seniors, in celebration of their impending graduation. This was the highlight of Tim's entire high school experience. "Senior week in high school, the prom, after graduation all-night party, dinners, senior breakfast," being mentioned in his friend's graduation speech and sitting "alphabetically together with friends" at graduation were all notable events that helped him bring some closure to his high school experience.

With all the great event of the months before graduation, Tim did not look forward to leaving high school, leaving behind his friends and moving on to college. In the months before graduation, Tim's parents started pushing him and his twin brother to start looking at the colleges they might want to attend. Tim did not view academics or attending college as a priority in his life.

Never been a school person. It's not for everyone. So never thought of college until my senior year. I didn't really want to go. I kinda had the pressure too. Cause my dad didn't go, 'cause, what he did was, he dropped out and then went back later and always tells us it was 'The biggest mistake in his life' and, could have been where he is now, so, like, years ago and, of course my mom is in education. So she wanted me to go. My brothers are pretty smart, so I decided to go and give it a shot. Had a good time at open house and it's very close to home. My older brother was there and my twin was going there.

Tim and Tom were accepted to Private College. Tim spent the summer before college working and hanging out with his high school friends. He and Tom attended summer orientation and agreed that they would not live together at college. They both “felt it was important to live with someone else, to try something new. My roommate and I hit it off. I wasn’t too nervous, just excited.”

For Tim “leaving high school was hard, but moving to campus was interesting and [his residence hall] floor was all freshmen.” Tim was surprised at how excited he was about being at Private College and how easy it was to make new friends with the people on his residence hall floor. From Tim’s perspective, his move into Private College “was great and [he] couldn’t have asked for a better floor. [They] got into a lot of trouble, but [they] had a good time too.”

During Tim’s years at Private College, having a social life and making friends were never a problem. Tim quickly got involved in many co-curricular aspects of the college. He became a resident assistant, worked for athletics as a linesman for football in the fall, manager of the ice hockey team in the winter and manager for women’s softball in the spring. He played intramural basketball and volleyball, attended socials and “partied” whenever he was not on duty as a resident assistant. His transition to Private College’s social life was easy and Tim enjoyed every aspect of it. On the other hand, his experiences with the academic requirements of Private College presented a serious challenge for him.

Freshmen year I did awful. Lucky I stayed in here, um, but I did awful. Doing everything I wasn’t... It was challenging. Um, I thought I saw myself wishing I had did the work in high school ‘cause it would have made the first two years so much easier here, but I didn’t so it was so much playing catch-up. So I did the work, but it was, I ended up anyways, I was doing the work. Doing the homework and doing other stuff and improving slowly for two years.

In elementary school, Tim was identified as having a learning disability<sup>11</sup>. To what level Tim's learning disability contributed to his academic difficulties remained unclear, as Tim did not want to speak about it other than to say that

I have a learning disability, it is documented, but I don't never really use it. I don't talk about it much. I have a problem taking a test; taking a written test you know. I can't get out what I want to say, it doesn't come out right, but if I did it orally I could convey the message, I have problem with attention, but I manage and work with a counselor.

Tim had fond memories of his freshman through junior years at Private College. He loved how small the school was and how he was able to be involved in so many of the college's social opportunities. The classroom always presented a challenge for him, but he "did what he had to do" to get through, including attending "study hall<sup>12</sup>" in the evening to avoid falling behind. Given that he never really considered himself "college-material," he was surprised that he enjoyed his college experience and that he was somewhat successful, thus far, in his academics. Reflecting on his three years at Private College, Tim simply stated, "You know, I am glad I got through it."

When Tim shared his experiences with transitions from one educational setting to the next, it appeared that his world was minimally impacted by these transitions. Lieberman (1975) noted that when individuals exit a social context very similar to the one that they are entering, there is often minimal disruption in their worlds. Tim often referred to his educational transitions as "easy" or "smooth," as he moved through these transitions with the same friends he had made during kindergarten and with his twin

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<sup>11</sup> Tim shared the fact that he has a learning disability only at the very end of his first interview. He appeared reluctant to disclose this information and never mentioned it again.

<sup>12</sup> The athletic department at Private College requires athletes with low grade point averages to attend study sessions (three nights a week for three hours each night) that are proctored by the coaching staff. Although Tim did not play a varsity sport, he did work for athletics and would join in on these study sessions.

brother. Even on the two occasions when they somewhat separated (separate classrooms in first grade and separate roommates in college), they remained within easy access of one another. So in spite of changes in the physical environment, Tim had never faced the detachment, liminal or new beginnings stages of the transition process alone.

His style of coping with all three stages of the transition process could be characterized as “going with the flow.” This style represents, in general, his approach to life. His transitions showed a laid-back approach to coping, which resulted in minimal disruptions to his life. When Tim was pushed by his parents to attend college, something Tim really did not see himself doing, he decided to attend the same college as two of his brothers, rather than to venture out on his own. Though Tim noted that the transition from high school to college was initially hard, the fact that he selected the same college as his brothers may have been a conscious decision to continue to go with the flow, rather than to face a life transition alone. What is unclear is how effective Tim’s style would be if he were to face a life transition alone.

### Jennifer

I met Jennifer through a colleague at Public College. After connecting via phone, Jennifer and I arranged to meet at her campus in the early evening during the last week of October. Having never seen what Jennifer looked like, I kept introducing myself to whoever walked by until I finally introduced myself to the right person.

Jennifer was a petite, attractive, about five feet three inches tall with blond, bob-style hair. Dressed in jeans, a hooded sweatshirt, sneakers, and a dark blue Pea coat, Jennifer looked like the typical, Caucasian, preppy, traditional-age college student.

After getting settled, I asked her if she would like to select a pseudonym for the study. She said she liked the name Jennifer, indicating that her real name is not a common name, and people seem to hear it and think of someone exotic, and she felt she was definitely not exotic. She would have preferred a plain name.

Jennifer was 21 years old and born and raised in a rural town in Massachusetts. The eldest of four children, she had an 18-year-old sister who was in a “rebellious stage,” and who didn’t want to go to college. This had been a source of conflict between the sisters, as Jennifer now deeply believed in the importance of a college education. But that was not always the case.

I actually was not going to come to college because of family problems, needed at home to help with them. But, my mother’s persistence, I, ah, I applied to Public College (laugh) which is the only college I applied to and got in, (laugh) accepted. So I decided to come here.

Along with her 18-year-old sister, Jennifer shared her home with her parents, a 12-year-old brother, a 10-year-old sister, a great-grandmother, a grandmother, a cat, a bird and a dog.

Jennifer was a first-generation college student. Her mother did not attend college and worked as an assistant manager at a yogurt shop in a local mall. And, Jennifer’s father remained a 60s hippie throughout his life. He worked for an agency that trains the mentally retarded vocational skills and then helps them find work. He did finish high school but could not attend college as his father had become ill and he needed to work to help support his family. She described him as very loving and supportive, but “he can be strange sometimes. A little bit too earthy for me, you know.”

In addition to her academics, Jennifer was also working at a nursing home with head injury patients, a job she said she loved and had been doing since her sophomore

year. Jennifer was majoring in psychology and urban studies at Public College. She had started with a different major, but as she was exposed to other courses, her interests — and her major — changed several times.

Started out with a major in nursing, didn't think that was right for me (nervous laugh). So I've changed my major so many times. Um, changed to early childhood ed, went to psych, and then changed it back to early childhood ed and now I am back at psych and (laugh) urban studies, which I think is good for me. I think that's actually what I have decided on and be happy with and if it's not, (laugh) I can always come back to school.

Um, there is, I have so many interests, like, it's amazing. Like it's, I love art. I have taken so many art courses, but I want to do something that, not to sound materialistic, but I can be able to buy a house with and, you know? And, you know, support myself before I have a family and everything. So I think I am going to go into the research and maybe the industrial side of Psychology. So, um, hopefully that works out. If not, psych has so many different options in it. Um, a lot of them, not a lot of money in it, but I figured if I find something in the psychology or urban studies then I can go to night school and get my masters at night. Achieve that security. I am still exploring my options. I really like (laugh), if you ask my mother she says that I have no clue. But I do have a tiny bit of a clue (laugh).

Jennifer began her education in pre-school at a pre-school through fourth grade facility in her town. She did not recall any specific memories of her first day of pre-school or recollections of any of the feelings she had about transitioning into this new environment other than she had a wonderful experience in elementary school. And, while elementary school was a positive experience for Jennifer, middle school was not. The transition into the new facility frightened her. But that was only one slice of the experience that led to negative memories of middle school. Academics were not the root cause of her dissatisfaction; it was the social interaction between students that made middle school so awful for Jennifer.

Middle school was kinda; you know, hard time for me. It was sad, scary, definitely scary. 'Cause I was going to a whole new school and it seemed humungous to me. I was like, oh my God, the eighth graders and you know, very

intimidating and all, but what made it even worse is that, children can be so cruel and I had a lot of, um, animosity towards me for some odd reason. Um, from the eighth graders toward me. I guess I was talking to a, um, a little boy that someone in the eighth grade liked and he was in the seventh grade, you know, something silly like that, and so my sixth grade year was like a living hell, you know.

Jennifer survived the pettiness of her middle school peers and looked forward to having a better high school experience. While she was somewhat apprehensive about moving into yet another new facility, she felt it would be a good chance to start anew. Her hopes for an easy transition into high school were quickly dashed as a result of the death of her grandfather, whom the family had been caring for in their home. Following his death, Jennifer was unable to focus on her academics and felt that the faculty did not understand the depth of her grief and how much she felt she needed to be at home.

Jennifer's entire freshman year of high school was a miserable experience. What made it even more disheartening were Jennifer's interactions with the high school's guidance counselor. As she was wrapping up algebra and planning to take algebra II in the fall of her sophomore year, her guidance counselor told her "don't even bother taking algebra II, because I wasn't going to college (laugh)." Whether his comments ignited a fire under her or just motivated her to prove him wrong, Jennifer stood her ground and got into algebra II.

My guidance counselor, who I don't like, he told me in the summer before my sophomore year. He told me 'I wasn't college material.' Um, basically telling me, you know that I am stupid (laugh)... and not to even try, you know, not to have any challenges in my life, just take the basic maths through my four years. I fought it and got into the class. I did fine, a B. Now I am in college and made the Dean's list once. I will go back at some point and you know, say what I wanted to say then (laugh).

Jennifer's high school years went much better after her freshman year. She had a rebellious stage where she argued with her parents about everything. She had many



friends and took road trips to such places as Riverside Amusement Park. She worked for Masspirg, at the yogurt stand with her mother, and at Great Woods parking cars and then watched the concerts. She had a full social life, was doing better in school and dated often, though never steady.

Her final weeks in high school were also very busy and fun. Toward the end of her senior year she made the decision that she would attend college the following fall. After applying to only Public College, and being accepted, she felt like she knew where she was going and could enjoy (“It was fun; it was great, so we did all kind of stuff”) the last days of high school with her friends.

Emotionally, Jennifer was nervous about leaving high school. The move to Public College meant leaving friends and family for an extended period of time, something she had never done before. Since she had made the decision to attend college so late in her senior year of high school, when she finally realized that she would be heading out to a new place on her own she became sad and scared of leaving.

The summer before attending Public College, Jennifer worked and saved money. She had chosen Public College primarily because of the cost, as she could not afford any other school and her parents could not help financially. Public College had given her a good financial aid package, and it seemed like a “good place” when she visited.

Jennifer stayed at Public College for an overnight orientation program in July. Not knowing what to expect, she was very nervous in the days before and felt sick to her stomach during the ride to the school. She was pleasantly surprised at how nice people were, but her anxieties and the heat overwhelmed her.

I was so nervous (laugh), so I felt sick (laugh), so I didn't eat and it was hot and I ended up passing out while in line (laugh). I woke up and there were all these

people around me going ‘Oh my god.’ I was so embarrassed (laugh). What a way to, like, make myself known (laugh)... oh well (laugh).

Jennifer survived the remainder of orientation and spent the rest of the summer preparing for her departure to Public College. Then, on a very hot day in late August (“It was like 90 degrees”), Jennifer headed off to Public College. She shared the range of emotions she felt as she left her family and headed to this new beginning.

It was sad. My great grandmother was crying, so that broke my heart. I was bawling the whole way here. It was so sad, um and I then I was nervous as hell, I was so nervous it wasn’t even funny. And of course I am coming up with my parents in a huge station wagon and I felt like such a dork, you know (laugh). So, but it turned out, it was all right after I got over the hump of being so nervous and embarrassed you know and not even thinking that everyone else is going through this too (laugh). So, it was all right (laugh).

Jennifer’s anxieties started to ease as she settled in, but she had to adjust to living with someone she had never physically met before. She had talked on the phone with her roommate only once, and based on that conversation, she had some apprehension about her. Jennifer also saw herself as rather shy, and worried about making friends. Jennifer and her roommate “spent the first two nights like sitting in our room, not even talking to each other (laugh). It was horrible (laugh).”

As the days passed, Jennifer became more comfortable with her roommate. She developed a network of friends and enjoyed the social aspects of college life. She took full advantage of her newfound freedom and placed her social life ahead of her academics.

It was pretty much your basic freshmen year. I wanted a social life (laugh). So, um, I basically just hung out with my friends. Did my own thing and um, I really wasn’t committed to my studies freshmen year. I was, like, ‘It’s freshmen year’ (laugh). ‘I’m away, I will just have fun.’ Ah, I didn’t do too, too bad. I didn’t do as good as I should have. Ah, so it really, nothing significant happened. Just your basic freshmen year (laugh).

Jennifer's freshman year "turned out to be a great year." She "did a lot of drinking" and sometimes went to fraternity parties at a neighboring college, but found them to be a "meat market." So instead, she typically stayed on campus, drank with friends and "just did our own thing and were safe about it. We never would go driving or anything, but then again none of us had cars either (laugh)."

Early in the fall of her sophomore year a friend from home was killed in a drunk driving car accident. Following the death of her friend, Jennifer "went home for a while. [She] went home for like two weeks and just like hung out and, you know, grieved." Upon her return she "was so behind and to make matters worse [she] had this English teacher, who would not give in. And so [she] had to take that course over." This was the second time in her life that she had lost someone close to her (the first was her grandfather) and "it was just, it was really hard." She was again surprised and saddened by the lack of sensitivity people had toward her as she was grieving. "They just don't seem to, like get it, you know." Additionally, Jennifer's attitude toward her own drinking had changed dramatically, and she began a personal crusade to stop others from making the same mistake her friend had made.

During the interview, Jennifer shared two other facts about her years at Public College. The first was that she had lived on campus every summer since her sophomore year. Rather than going home for the summer break she took classes and worked at an on-campus job during the day and an off-campus job during the evenings. Jennifer loved living on campus during the summer breaks as the campus felt like it was all hers.

The second fact was that Jennifer had financed 100% of her education at Public College. Her parents could not help her with any of her college expenses. They would

send her ten or twenty dollars, occasionally, but it was Jennifer who had to figure out how to meet her financial obligations. She humorously commented on how she had become a permanent “red flag” at the business office and had spent a lot of time at the beginning of each new semester working with them to figure out if she could afford to stay. So each semester she took out more loans and applied for any grant she could. Having to work became a cornerstone of her undergraduate experience.

Jennifer’s stories, much like Jackie’s, reflected her strong bond with her parents and siblings. But unlike Jackie and Tim, Jennifer did not speak at length about a deeper connection with friends. She did make references to “having friends” or how she would have a “hard time leaving her friends” as she moved through her educational transitions, but her reflections did not focus heavily, positively or negatively, on this aspect of her life. A second distinction in Jennifer’s life story, as compared to Jackie and Tim’s, was that Jennifer worked instead of being involved in sports. She often spoke of juggling two or more jobs at any given time in her life and how she felt that the necessity for her to “have to work” in some ways made her different from her peers. Jennifer thought she valued her education more than her peers who were being financially supported by their parents. And, when she did not apply herself in the classroom there were greater consequences for her than simply getting a bad grade. For each time (twice in college) she failed a course, she would have to work additional hours to pay for her failure.

Jennifer’s experiences with anticipated life transitions (move from one academic environment to the next) were consistent with transitional theory. She experienced the nervousness and anxiety of entering a new social context and the sadness of detaching from the old. What did not emerge from her reflections of these particular transitional

experiences where insights into the liminal stage of the transition process. But rather, the style that Jennifer used during the liminal stage surfaced when she experienced unanticipated life transitions.

Unanticipated transitions, such as the sudden death of a family member or a friend, can cause a significant amount of personal discomfort, distress and confusion (Schlossberg, 1981). From her stories, we learned that the unexpected deaths of her grandfather and later a friend from her hometown, resulted in Jennifer using a style of “withdrawal” from her current social context to “take time to grieve” and reflect. Her style in coping with each of these unanticipated transitions was the same and she used the liminal stage of the transition process as an opportunity to reflect and evaluate her experiences. This style of using the liminal stage as a means of reflection led to a change in her perception about the tragic events she experienced and, subsequently, led to a change in behavior or attitude about certain aspects of her life. The death of grandfather made her see how important her family was to her. And, the alcohol-related death of her friend from home in her sophomore year changed her perceptions on drinking and driving. In both instances when Jennifer used this style during the liminal stage, she would, upon her return to high school or college, be faced with what she perceived were insensitive teachers and in the end, failed a course.

Through all of her life transitions (anticipated or unanticipated), Jennifer expressed how she tried to maintain a level of optimism that things happen for a reason and in the end it will all work out. In looking ahead to her life after college, Jennifer was optimistic about her future, but did not have a definitive career plan in place. Much like her last-minute decision in selecting a college, she would wait and see what happens over

the course of her senior year. She did not anticipate any “like, traumas” occurring in her life and if they did, “Oh well...well I will just, like, have to deal with them (laugh).”

### Lou

The same colleague who introduced me to Jennifer referred me to Lou. He chose Lou as his pseudonym because when he was very young, a friend had once called him “Lou” and it seemed to stick as a nickname until he came to college.

The first time I met Lou he was dressed in a blue shirt, a red patterned tie, dark khaki pants, white socks and brown shoes. He told me that after our interview, he was heading to work at a car rental agency. He worked there 30 hours a week as both an internship and a way to make money to pay for his “fun.”

At the time of our interview, Lou was 22 years old and was completing a dual degree in marketing and management information systems. He dreamed of finding post-college employment in Manhattan, but was not clear about what that post-college job might be. He said that had he not gone to college, he probably would have been a mechanic, but his parents wanted him to get a degree so that he could “work with my head, instead of my hands.”

Lou stood about five feet ten inches tall. He was Caucasian, of average build and looks. He had short, dark brown hair, parted on the left. He had a habit of using his right hand to push his hair into place almost every time he spoke. This became a constant body gesture for Lou throughout the interview.

When the tape recorder was turned on, Lou leaned back, crossed his right leg over his left, used his left hand to hold the leg in place and began telling me about his family. His right hand, when not pushing his hair, was in constant motion.

I am an only child. They wanted to have another kid, but it actually didn't work out. My dad thought the financial responsibility of two was too much. He wanted to make sure that I went to school and didn't have to worry about having any loans or anything like that. And that I had the things I needed. He was, like, poor growing up and had to work for everything and he wanted more for his kid. My mom is still sorry that she didn't have another. I certainly would have liked to have had a brother or sister, too.

I guess I am spoiled. Certain people say I am spoiled, but at the same time it was boring sometimes. Everything is your fault. Can't blame it on anybody else. Nobody else to talk to other than your parents about stuff. Nobody to discuss stuff with and I wish I had someone else there sometimes. I don't know if it is better or worse. Some of my friends have great brother and sister relationships. And some of my friends, like my ex-girlfriend, don't even talk with their brothers or sisters.

Lou was born in a small New Jersey town. He lived there until he was eight, when his father had a job change and the family relocated to Washington, DC. They lived there for 14 months, and then his father chose a relocation opportunity that brought the family back to New Jersey.

Lou's mother attended college and worked as an elementary school teacher up until his sophomore year in college. At that point, she accepted the position as head librarian in the same school system. His father did not attend college, but worked his way up the corporate ladder to a position as an assistant vice-president of a large bank. Lou saw his father's career as proof that a person can be very successful without a college degree.

Lou started kindergarten when he was five. While his memories of it had generally faded, he did recall the fear he felt at starting kindergarten. He was scared about fitting in and about making new friends. "All of my friends that I had hung out with

since, it seemed they drew other first grade classes, so I didn't know anybody." Even with what Lou described as his "lifelong overprotective parents" watching out for him, he was still anxious about starting this new experience.

And, um, I remember being scared and I remember them trying to protect me. It got really, you know, hard on me even to this day. I made friendships with kids, but it was hardest then. I really didn't mind, my first day was fine. I was really worried but I made friends.

Lou's years from kindergarten through the middle of the third grade progressed without incident. He developed many friendships, usually with older kids, and liked living in New Jersey.

The first family move occurred when Lou was in the middle of the third grade. The small bank his father was working for merged with a very large bank that required him to move to Washington, DC. The transition to a new town and school was very difficult for Lou and the timing of the move did not help matters. He started at the new school a week before Christmas break, and his new classmates did not help to make the transition any easier.

Moving the first time was hard. I was with the same kids since whenever you could go outside. It was pretty bad. I got made fun of pretty bad. You know how kids just want to tease the new kid.

During the break, Lou met some neighborhood kids and began to make friends and feel better about the move. The day after he had convinced his mother that it was safe for him to go sledding with his new friends, he suffered a serious accident that has contributed to a series of medical issues throughout his life. As Lou was sledding down a hill behind his house he hit a tree, which resulted in a broken ankle and damage to his back. Lou spent two weeks in the hospital, and returned to his new school after everyone else. Unlike the initial reception from his new classmates, "when [he] came back, then



[he] was all right 'cause [he] had friends then. So, that ended up being good and, um, [he] didn't want to leave. [He] didn't want to leave there at all."

After 14 months in DC, Lou's father had the opportunity to move back to New Jersey. The family moved to a small, rural town with only one school building that served all of the students, from kindergarten through high school. This was another tough transition for Lou, because his family had moved into the first house in a new development and there were no other kids for him to hang out with. He "had a hard time for a while, no friends. [He] always made friends with older kids. It took a while, but then it was okay."

Since the new town had only the one school, Lou did not experience transitioning from an elementary school to a high school. Lou viewed high school as "sort of a joke." He put little time into his academics and would do his homework by "getting it off the smart kid" in homeroom. Lou regrets not applying himself and learning basic study skills, as it probably contributed to his poor academic performance as a freshman at Public College.

During his junior year, he began dating a young woman who was a senior at the same school. Lou continued this relationship through his first semester at Public College. When he was a senior, his girlfriend was a freshman at college in another state. Due to Lou's ongoing medical problems, he had an "excused absences" note on file with his high school. Every other Friday afternoon, he would tell the school he was in pain and, without his parents' knowledge or consent, would travel to his girlfriend's college.

As Lou reflected on what he missed by choosing to spend weekends with his girlfriend versus his high school friends, he had few regrets. He viewed most of his

classmates as “idiots” who got into too much trouble with the police, and he had disassociated himself from them. In fact, “some of them are just in jail or in trouble with the cops and are just going nowhere. Like a majority of [his] class [was] like that.” Lou “did miss some things in high school though. Like hanging out with some of the kids from high school and stuff.” And, he was also “sorry that [he] missed [his] prom, but a lot of friends didn’t go either.”

Lou never dwelled on whether or not he would have done things differently, or if he missed out on some significant experiences that would have made his senior year in high school more enjoyable. In fact, he felt that spending weekends with his girlfriend had a positive effect on his future. He had not planned to go to college, but spending time at his girlfriend’s college changed his perception of it and, ultimately, changed his future.

Based on his weekend visits to his girlfriend’s college, Lou decided he would attend college, but he did not want to attend the same college as his girlfriend, and wanted to live away from his parents. He had visited a friend who was attending Public College in Massachusetts, and really liked the campus. Lou’s high school grades were not very good, and he did not know if he would get accepted at any college. He took a chance, applied to Public College and was accepted. He knew it would be hard to move far from his family, but he was also felt it would be good for him to be on his own.

Once Lou received his acceptance letter and knew what he would be doing after high school, he finished his senior year with weekends at his girlfriend’s college or just hanging out with older friends who had already graduated from high school. He did not work after school or get involved with school-related activities. He viewed his senior year as the same as his prior years, “nothing significant...just got through it.”

Lou did participate in his high school senior week. Even though he had detached himself from many of the people in his class, there were some fellow students he considered friends who he wanted to “hang out” with for this last time. He was disappointed by the events offered, but still attended. And a tragic event made his graduation day a bittersweet experience.

The day before graduation there was this kid, I was friends with, he actually bought, like, my huge stereo to put in his brand new vehicle. And, ah, the night before graduation, he was just out with his friends and two kids put this girl from a party into a car, shit-faced. Told her to go home. She was so drunk that she rammed into the back of him and pushed him in front of a bus. And, we didn't find out about that he had died until three hours before we were to come back to school for graduation. So, graduation was a little, I mean you enjoyed it, but at the same time, you had to look forward to the kid's funeral and stuff like that.

When Lou reflected upon his high school experience, he was surprised that he had mixed feelings about leaving it, given that he had distanced himself from many aspects of it. He was excited about going to college and had very high expectations that it would be a positive experience. But he also had some close friends and it was sad to move on. They promised to never lose touch with one another, but it was very hard to stay connected once they all went their separate ways. This was something Lou did not foresee.

Lou spent the summer before his freshman year in college working, “hanging out” and preparing himself for college. He did not attend his summer orientation at Public College because of a family commitment. Three weeks prior to his anticipated arrival at Public College, Lou injured his back, severely twisting it while water skiing. He brushed it off and did not see a doctor. The next day, while playing basketball, he felt something tear in his back. His parents immediately brought him to the doctor, who, in turn, ordered a series of tests, including a CAT scan and MRI.

The tests were all negative. The doctors decided to do a spinal tap. The procedure was scheduled four days before Lou was to leave for Public College. He had the spinal tap and experienced some post-operative complications that caused him a great deal of pain. But Lou was still determined to get to college. The physicians attempted to alleviate the pain with a “blood patch” procedure that gave him some relief, and an hour after this procedure he and his parents left New Jersey and headed north to Public College with Lou feeling somewhat better, but still he was still experiencing significant pain. By the second day at Public College, the pain was so overwhelming that Lou had to be taken to the hospital.

Orientation leaders thought I was just trying to be lazy, copping out. And, ah, they had a pizza night, with, ah Jeopardy questions and I couldn't do it. Had to go back and lay down. Mom said try again, the second day. Couldn't do it. I went to a breakfast thing for an hour. Just couldn't do it. I just had such severe pain. Played Nintendo the rest of the day. As long as I was laying down, I could do anything. It just was when I was standing up that little bit of fluid drained down, I was dying.

And, um, I called my mom, and said, ah, I want to go home. She said, ‘Is it because you don't like it up there?’ I said ‘I can't even find out if I can like it 'cause I am in so much pain.’ And I don't know who she called about school and if I could come back in a couple of weeks or whatever. I didn't care. I was just, like, ‘take me home and I promise you, get me the surgery and I promise to come back, even here, I will come back. Just get me home and get me to feel better.’

I was at the hospital when I called my mom and some kids came with me and visited with me. I was there for like ten hours, and, um, they said ‘Do you want another blood patch?’ I said ‘No; I will do it in New Jersey.’

Lou's parents drove to Massachusetts and brought him back to a New Jersey hospital. He received a second blood patch and felt much better. His college roommate and a couple of other students drove down to New Jersey to visit him a few days after he had the blood patch. Lou was amazed that these students, who he had only known for two days, came to visit him. His mother had spoken with the academic dean at Public College

and was assured that Lou could return. Two weeks later, he moved into the residence hall and began "catching up" with his course work and started making new friends.

During his first semester of college Lou ended his relationship with the young woman he had been seeing since high school. Distance was the main reason, and he preferred to stay on his own campus on weekends rather than traveling to hers. Lou had also "hooked up" with other women while still in his relationship with his girlfriend. He felt "slimy" about what he had done and thought it was better to end the relationship instead of being a "dirt-bag."

Socially, Lou's freshmen year was his favorite year. He drank and partied often and loved the sense of community he observed at Public College. "Everyone just seemed to, like, get along." Life outside the classroom for his first two years "was great" and he felt at home at Public College. But Lou's life inside the classroom for his first two years had gone in another direction.

I screwed up (laughs). My freshmen and sophomore year here. Everywhere. I just screwed up. I didn't care. Everything was a joke. Fine, I was at school but it didn't matter. Close to 2.0 or 2.1, got in trouble, discipline, you know. Then I changed my junior year, don't know why, but I did. Probably it was Linda. Don't know. I just did so much better. A little late to affect my GPA, but, ah, it was such a difference.

In Lou's junior year he started dating Linda, also a junior at Public College. She was serious about her academics, had strong career goals, and was not into the party scene. Lou believed that his relationship with Linda played a significant role in his changed attitude about his future. Immediately after beginning his relationship with Linda, he partied less and decided to complete a second major. Additionally, Lou felt from the start of their relationship that Linda "was the one" he would spend the rest of his life with.

Being an only child and having dealt with being uprooted twice in his life differentiates Lou from the other participants in the study. Schlossberg, Waters and Goodman (1995) found that “people who move from one part of the country to another, or from one neighborhood to another, may experience feelings of marginality” (p. 220) as they seek ways to adapt and assimilate to their new surroundings. Similar to other participants, Lou experienced anxiety and fears as he moved into new surroundings. In his reflections on being the “new kid,” he described his struggles with “fitting in” to his new environment and how he felt like he belonged once he had established a network of friends.

Similar to Tim’s “go with the flow” approach to life transitions, Lou described some of his life transitions as “no big deal.” But others were much more difficult. And, unlike Jennifer’s reactions to traumatic events (withdrawal) and the negative consequences she experienced (twice failing an academic course), Lou experienced positive consequences as a result of his personal traumatic events (the back injury when sledding and the problems with his spinal tap). In fact, the upshot of each of these unanticipated events was that Lou developed a small network of friends that helped him in his transition to his new social context (new school following the family move and again, in his transition into college).

Lou’s style also had aspects of Jackie’s “planning and severing relationships” approach to coping with a transition. He had not planned on college, but once he experienced the college environment he change his mind and decided to go. And, as he transitioned out of high school, Lou also severed most ties to his high school friends in his senior year, as he viewed them as “not going any where with their lives.”

The inconsistent manner in which Lou coped with his life transitions makes it difficult to identify a single pattern of behavior. But what did emerge from his stories was that during the liminal stage, Lou would focus his energies on establishing or finding friends to help him cope with a life transition<sup>13</sup>. His style, therefore, can be best identified as “need to find a friend.” This is evident in each of his life transitions and in his own words: “Once I made friends then, like, everything else was good.”

### Summary

This chapter introduced the four senior year college undergraduates, Jackie, Tim, Jennifer and Lou, who were interviewed for this study. The information focused on each participant’s personal background, family, education and experiences with life transitions from childhood through to their undergraduate senior year. The stories they shared provided insight into who they were as college students, both individually and collectively. From their life stories and reflections on each anticipated or unanticipated life transition, we saw glimpses of how these participants managed the transition process and how each had developed a “style” of coping with changes in their worlds emerged.

In addition to learning about the participants’ demographic commonalities and differences, three of the participants (Jackie, Lou and Jennifer) expressed feelings of detachment, disillusionment and disorientation in most of their transitions from one academic setting to another, and they shared varying degrees of stress and anxiety as they faced the challenges of new social contexts. What did not emerge in their stories were

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<sup>13</sup> Schlossberg, Waters and Goodman (1995) found that 'emotional support' from “intimate relationships, family units, networks of friends, and institutions and communities”, can, “affect, affirm, aid, and [provide] honest feedback” to the person in transition (p. 114).

reflections on the liminal periods in their lives. Rather, elements of the liminal stage emerged in the styles the participants used to cope with their life transitions.

Jackie's reflections on her own transitional experiences illustrated a style of coping with the in-between period of the liminal stage that can be identified as "planning and severing all previous relationship," which resulted in less stress and anxiety as she adapted and assimilated to a new social context. Tim's style, on the other hand, was to "go with the flow" during the liminal stage. This approach resulted in minimal stress or anxiety as he experienced changes in his world.

Jennifer's reflections of her anticipated transitional experiences (movement from one academic environment to the next) did not provide insights into how she managed the liminal stage of the transition process. But rather, her stories on how she coped with unanticipated life transitions did illustrate her style of "withdrawal and reflection" during liminal stage. And, while Lou's style of coping with liminal stage varied, the theme that emerged was Lou's "need to find a friend." In his reflections, he shared that each time he had a life change, his adaptation and assimilation to a new social context moved ahead without difficulty once he had developed a relationship with someone else.

The participants' stories and their reflections on how they coped with life transitions demonstrate that, despite their many demographic similarities and similar progression through the educational system, their styles or patterns of coping with change were unique. An understanding of the styles they used in previous life transitions provides some insights into their perceptions and experiences in the senior year of college.



The next chapter focuses on the participants' senior year of college and the challenges they encountered during the year. The students expressed a range of feelings about the difficulty of detaching from college, ambiguity about being connected to the college community or to something else (liminality), and their fears about how they will adapt and assimilate to new social contexts. Individually and collectively, their experiences vividly describe the challenges of the senior year, provide insights into what the senior year is like and clearly identify the senior year as an anticipated life transition.

## CHAPTER V

### THE PARTICIPANTS' EXPERIENCES IN THEIR SENIOR YEAR

In the previous chapter, Jackie and Tim at Private College and Jennifer and Lou at Public College shared their life stories and their experiences with life transitions, from kindergarten up to the end of their junior year in college. The most common themes in their stories were about family and friends, and while their stories focused primarily on the challenges of transitioning from one education environment to next, other themes did surface. Three of the participants expressed feelings of detachment, disillusionment and disorientation as they went from one academic setting to another and they all shared their fears of facing the challenges of beginning again in a new social context. What did not emerge in their stories were reflections on the liminal period between the feeling of detachment and the adaptation and assimilation to a new beginning. Rather, elements of the liminal stage emerged in the “styles” the participants used to cope with their life transitions.

This chapter focuses on the participants' senior year of college. Their stories are told collectively and sequentially, beginning with their initial return to campus, and then based on interview dates (October, December and March). This format helps the reader to understand the breadth of the senior year experience and the way the participants moved through the transition process. Individually and collectively, their experiences vividly describe the challenges of the senior year, clearly identify the senior year as an anticipated life transition consisting of the first two stages of the transition process

(detachment and liminal) and illustrate the “styles” that these students utilized to cope with this life transition.

### The Return to Campus

In late August of 1999, all four participants prepared for their upcoming and final year at college. Jackie spent the summer working at a local accounting firm and trying to stay in shape. Tim worked for a parks and recreations program in his hometown and connected with his high school friends on the weekends. Jennifer lived and worked at Public College and worked evenings and weekends at a local nursing home. Lou also spent the summer living at Public College, took an evening class, served as a summer orientation leader and worked for a car rental company in the city during the day and on most weekends.

Jackie returned to Private College two weeks prior to the beginning of classes for field hockey preseason training. She was co-captain of the team. Tim also returned two weeks early, to participate in his third resident assistant training. Jennifer finished her employment two weeks before the beginning of classes at Public College to attend her first resident assistant training. Lou spent the final week of his summer break in New Jersey with his parents.

The participants characterized their return to campus as uneventful and similar in many ways to what they had experienced each year prior. Both Jackie and Lou moved into senior housing areas, while Tim and Jennifer, both resident assistants, were assigned to freshmen residence halls. Each participant quickly adapted to the routine of balancing classes, sports, work and social time. Jackie, Jennifer, Lou and Tim’s schedules were

very regimented. For Jackie, everyday life as a senior at Private College from September to the end of October was tightly scheduled. When she did have free time to hang out with friends, the last place she wanted to be was on campus.

I pretty much did not have a social life. I didn't have one at all during field hockey, at all. I would go out once every two weeks, if that. Um, we had, you know, team rules and stuff, you know, no drinking 48 hours before a game, which is pretty much the whole season because we play Tuesday, Thursday, Saturday. So, if I did go out, I would go out Saturday night, you know. We went to the bars in [the city] and stuff. We rarely ever stay here.

Likewise, Lou's schedule was busy. Lou had kept his job from the summer at the car rental agency, with a modified schedule. He scheduled his classes at Public College so they all fell on Tuesdays and Thursdays, but he had to take six classes<sup>14</sup> in the fall instead of a normal class load of five. With the course overload and his work schedule, weekends were Lou's only down time and, unlike Jackie, Lou did occasionally stay on campus to hang out with his college friends.

Tim's schedule at Private College kept him equally busy. He made a greater effort in the fall semester of his senior year to attend all his classes, a change in behavior from prior years. Early in the semester, Tim began working as a dispatcher in the Public Safety Office. He thought this was very boring, but it allowed him to do homework during the day. To wind down from his days, Tim spent his evenings hanging out with people or watching TV.

Jennifer had the busiest "work" schedule of the participants. She financed her entire education at Public College, and fitting work into her schedule was a top priority. She juggled two jobs, plus her resident assistant position and, of course, her academics.

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<sup>14</sup> During Lou's junior year, he had decided to pursue a dual degree in marketing and management information systems. To accomplish this, he had to manage an overload schedule for both semesters in his senior year.

Of the four participants, two were in monogamous relationships. Both Jackie and Lou had been dating their significant others for over a year. Jackie and her boyfriend, Dave<sup>15</sup>, talked daily by phone, and though she missed seeing him every day, she felt that the physical separation had a positive effect on their relationship.

It's better, things are better now than when we were together 'cause we don't see each other everyday and fight over petty things... We had a lot of issues last year with people trying to steal my man... when you have boyfriends that are here, people are always trying to take advantage of that. Things are good; we've never gotten along better. He is just stressed out right now. He thinks he might be coming back here to coach football and get his MBA.

Lou's involvement with Linda continued into their senior year. Because of their schedules, Lou did not get to spend much time with Linda other than on the weekends. They made it a priority to spend every Friday night together and headed off campus to dinner, a movie or both. On Saturdays they spent time with their mutual friends at Public College. Lou hoped to find a job close to wherever she found work, "no more than two hours away," and that after each had earned a master's degree, they would marry. Lou believed that he and Linda could handle a long distance relationship if the right job came along for either of them.

Jennifer did not date much while at Public College. Work, school and everything else in her life had taken precedence over having a boyfriend. Plus, according to Jennifer, "if you ask me, the men around here (laugh) aren't (laugh) men. College "boys."

Tim began his senior year single. In fact,

Dating was not so good for me here or in high school wasn't too good. I have dated four people in my life that lasted 6 months or longer. I am shy, not really, but, um, when it comes to girls and I don't know why. I am everybody's friend. It don't bother me. Okay, it does.

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<sup>15</sup> Dave was a senior at Private College when the relationship began, and had since graduated and was working for a local accounting firm

In chapter two, life events that are predictable or scheduled to occur, like graduation from college<sup>16</sup>, were classified as anticipated transitions (Schlossberg, Waters and Goodman, 1995). For some individuals, anticipated transitions cause only minor personal discomfort, and they find it easy to plan and develop new behaviors or different assumptions about themselves as they anticipate their adaptation and assimilation to a new social context. For others, the transition process can be overwhelming, even though an anticipated transition allows more time to appraise the situation and to consider various options.

On the surface, the participants' lives during the early part of the fall semester seemed to be going smoothly and were in many ways similar to their experiences in the three prior years. But this year was different, because it was their senior year. This was their last year as undergraduates, and along the way they would face the reality of leaving what they perceived as a stable environment and making plans for their lives after college. As the participants continue to share their experiences and reflections, we will see how they managed this transition, faced the challenges of seeking post-college employment, and decided where to live after college. We will gain a greater understanding of their struggles, hopes and fears, and we'll see how they perceived this anticipated transition in their lives.

### The Participant's Lives in Late October

In late October, life for each of the participants was very busy and they continued to juggle all aspects of their worlds. As they anticipated graduating and leaving college,

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<sup>16</sup> Graduation from college can also be classified as a nonevent. In some cases the individual may think that they will graduate, but in reality they may not.

Jackie, Jennifer, Tim and Lou each had expectations for their senior year. For Jackie and Lou this year meant making plans for life after college; for Tim and Jennifer it meant making the most of these last days with friends.

Of the four participants, Jackie, an accounting major, had the most pressure to quickly make a career decision. As is typical for accounting majors at Private College, the search for post-college employment occurred in the fall, and the pressure to secure a position before the end of the first semester could end in humiliation for accounting majors who did not meet that deadline. Jackie had the added pressure of finding a job close to home, as she and her parents assumed that she would live at home upon graduation.

The stress and pressure of securing employment was just one slice of Jackie's life that was upsetting to her. As Schlossberg, Waters and Goodman (1985) noted, some individuals who are in the midst of an anticipated transitions may also "experience other transitions [simultaneously], which makes coping especially difficult" (p. 35). This was happening to Jackie. On the day before her first interview, she had played her last field hockey game of her undergraduate career. She was emotional and teary as she shared the experience.

Yesterday was tough. We had to travel, too, so it was hard and they were a national league team...you know...and really good. When we got there, there were tons of like sports people running around and scouting people. I knew we weren't going to win, I knew it...but I kept thinking that this is my last game ever and don't start crying till after the game. It was hard...coach came up to me and stuff and I started crying. It was hard, and seeing the girls crying with me...it was tough. Then afterwards, they had given us a little folder and each girl had written a personal letter. Oh my gosh, we were dying. We all cried. I think Shauna cried the most of all of us. It was sad. I just kept thinking that this is it...it's so sad. Sorry, I don't know why I keep crying about this. Oh, here I go again, sorry. I know I am going to miss it so much, but I didn't like realize it would feel this

shitty. Oh, I am sorry I didn't mean to swear. I just loved the coaches and the girls and playing, you know.

In late October, Lou also was thinking ahead to life after Public College. He had completed his resume at the end of his junior year and spent the early part of the fall semester updating it and reviewing it with several people. He was very optimistic about his future and felt that securing post-college employment would not be a problem. The only difficulty he foresaw was fitting his parents into his long-range plans.

They're basically, they just want me to pick a spot so they can move, not next door, but they want to be close to me. And plus they figure I will eventually get married to Linda. They want to be near their grandchild. Not right now, but in the long run. [My mom] wants to be close enough, I guess because her family is so far away and her parents have been dead for a while.

Jennifer and Tim were on the other end of the career-planning spectrum. By late October, neither had completed their resumes or had any plan in place for life after college. Tim knew he wanted to find something that would involve his love of sports, possibly some sort of marketing position. He planned to return home to live with his parents, but hoped that would be just a temporary situation. Jennifer was still undecided. She enjoyed many different things and didn't feel ready to commit to one career path. She didn't feel that she needed any definite plans regarding her post-college residence, but thought she might have to move home. Both Jennifer and Tim simply wanted to enjoy being with their friends and doing what they had to do for their classes. They felt that they would have plenty of time during the spring semester to decide what they would do after graduation.



Jennifer's hopes for a fun-filled, stress-free fall semester were dashed when her mother was diagnosed in early October with fibromyalgia<sup>17</sup>. This news made it difficult for Jennifer to concentrate on her studies. She also felt guilty if she had fun when she knew her mother was in pain, and she worried about the effect of her mother's illness on her family.

I take things to heart, really, I shouldn't the way I do, but I like take the world on to my shoulders and if there is a problem, like, I can't just push it away when I am trying to study or when I am going to work and stuff like that.

Unlike Jennifer's, Tim's semester at Private College was unfolding just as he had hoped. He had attended almost all of his classes and was doing well, academically. He went out with friends often and did not feel pressured to figure out what he would do after graduation. He met a freshman female student and "hung out with her for like three weeks until I figured out she was a bit of a psycho. So ended that. But, other than that... the semester is good." He hoped that the remainder of the semester would go as smoothly and wanted "to hang out with his friends more."

Jennifer, Jackie and Lou also expressed Tim's sentiment of wanting to spend more time with friends, but the challenges and pressures that these three students experienced sometimes took precedence over what they wanted. The desire to spend more time with close friends before they graduated was repeated often by each of the participants, and was the strongest common theme throughout all the interviews. As it turned out, when the participants reflected on their senior year, they all cited failing to spend time with friends as a major regret.

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<sup>17</sup> "Fibrositis, Fibromyalgia or Myofascial Pain syndrome is a painful muscle condition that was first identified in the early 1900's. Very little attention has been given this disorder. In fact, until recently, Fibrositis was dismissed by many health care practitioners as minor rheumatism. However, the pain and stiffness of Fibrositis affects millions of Americans, and to date there is no known cause or cure" ([www.w2.com/fibro2.html](http://www.w2.com/fibro2.html) retrieved 1/12/02).

Based on their experiences in the fall semester, all the participants shared another common theme: detachment. Bridges (1980) characterized this first stage of the transition process as occurring when individuals begin to experience a sense of disillusionment, disidentification and disenchantment with their current social context. All four participants reported a desire to be detached from what they perceived was a change in the social life on campus, and each expressed disillusionment with the behavior of the underclassmen.

Of the four participants, Jackie had the strongest emotional response to what she witnessed at her college. She expressed unbridled disdain for the “gossip mill” that existed on campus. This contributed to her feelings of “just wanting to be done with” Private College.

I can't wait to get out of here. I love not knowing any of them, but I know what they do. I love them not knowing me, but I hate the fact that they still don't know me, and they still get involved in my business. You know. I don't have any, you know, business here. My business is my friends and my boyfriend who is not even here. You know. And it's the same girls that hit on him [Dave – her boyfriend] when he is here, when I'm right there. You know. I hate them. I can't stand them. I like the girls that are good girls, and the good guys. You know, the ones that don't stay out of trouble, that do stay out of trouble. Sorry [apologetically].

Jackie was also appalled by the use of drugs among students. She shared how horrified she was by what she observed when she attended what she thought was a “seniors only” event at Private College.

I wish that, like, all the drug issues and everything and all the drinking issues, I wish that didn't happen. Well, 'cause all the years in the past it was our senior night. You know, it was just sort of seniors and those who are of age. And, when I walked in there and I saw all these slut girls. I can't stand any of those girls. I think they are all trash. That's what I call them, is trash. 'Cause they are. And when I saw all of them there with their little highlighters and stuff. And then when it's a night that was made for us to go and enjoy ourselves with our friends, and we have to be faced with all this stuff, it got to me. I was so mad. You know, it just pissed me off. I just don't like the way that they carry themselves. They have no class.

Tim also shared his disenchantment with campus life at Private College. Though not as dramatic as Jackie's view on the situation, Tim was tired of the "stupid stuff they do." As a resident assistant he spent many nights on duty<sup>18</sup>, dealing with student behavior that just made him mad. He acknowledged that he was "no angel" as a freshman, but he could not understand why people had to break things and use drugs to have a good time.

We... my buddies and me. We drank a lot as freshmen, but we didn't break stuff. We would do stuff to each other's rooms, but nothing like these kids. Umm...and, the drugs, "Ecstasy"<sup>19</sup> and cocaine and stuff...they are wicked different than we were as freshmen. It's stupid... They just make me, like hate it here. Stupid people.

At Public College, both Lou and Jennifer shared similar comments regarding the behavior of the underclassmen. Lou could not understand why students used drugs. As a freshman, he drank and had a good time. But drug use made no sense to him and he felt it was a horrible situation that he wanted no part of.

Too much drugs. They went from drinking to drugs, and I just... I don't like that, so... I... I don't know why. I think because they don't have to worry about getting in trouble for it. You know. Either they go off campus somewhere, you know.... and technically they can't get in trouble for driving under the influence, because you can't tell. From what I heard, you can carry it around in a water bottle or something... and you can't smell it or taste it, I guess. I don't know. So... I don't like that either, because technically somebody could really get you screwed up if they wanted to, without you knowing about it. I really think it's just

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<sup>18</sup> A resident assistant at Private College has to enforce college policy within the residence halls. When on-duty, a resident assistant, along with a professional staff member, walks the hallways of all the residential facilities and confronts students violating college policies, i.e., underage drinking, damage to property, violations of the College's drug policy. The resident assistant documents the incident and refers the student for disciplinary action by the college.

<sup>19</sup> Ecstasy or "MDMA is a synthetic, psychoactive drug with both stimulant (amphetamine-like) and hallucinogenic (LSD-like) properties. Street names for MDMA include Ecstasy, Adam, XTC, hug, beans, and love drug. Its chemical structure (3-4 methylenedioxymethamphetamine, 'MDMA') is similar to methamphetamine, methylenedioxyamphetamine (MDA), and mescaline - other synthetic drugs known to cause brain damage. MDMA also is neurotoxic. In addition, in high doses it can cause a sharp increase in body temperature (malignant hyperthermia) leading to muscle breakdown and kidney and cardiovascular system failure" ([www.nida.nih.gov/infobox/ecstasy.html](http://www.nida.nih.gov/infobox/ecstasy.html), retrieved 1/13/02).

because they don't want to get caught. You know? Why not drink and have a good time with everybody and not get caught, or... I mean, that's the way I see it, because I don't know what else to do. I mean, it's horrible. I think it's horrible. I don't know how [Public College] can stop it. I just hate it and I hate being around them.

Jennifer, like Tim, was a resident assistant and had to enforce college policy in the residence halls. She was shocked at the behaviors she had to address. She was unsure if this new group of students was different, or if she had simply been unaware that so much was happening, especially the amount of recreational drug use. She tried to rationalize some of the behavior as “a lot of people whose parents are so strict during high school, this is their time to break free and find themselves, and all that stuff.” But she was still overwhelmed and disenchanted by this new social life.

In addition to her concerns about the amount of drug use on her campus, she was shocked at how promiscuous the freshmen women were and how bold they were in pursuing men. Jennifer could not understand how these women could approach men and bluntly ask for sex — especially when it came to approaching men that were already in committed relationships.

Um, what I have seen is a lot of them is their, how do I (laugh) phrase this... they don't really respect their bodies that much. They are all over the campus, sleeping with different people and actually my good friend who is my supervisor... two freshmen girls approached her boyfriend and offered themselves. It was just, I don't know, funny (laugh). But kind of sad too.

I would never have gone up to a guy and done that, um, and none of my friends would. It could have been, you know, I just hung out with a different crowd, but even like, there are always the people who, what would you call it... promiscuous? Yes, (laugh) that's a good word for it, and uh, you know, you knew about it, but you know, that's their business, but when someone, you know, invades a relationship like that without even knowing anyone just on the fact they think that a guy is attractive, that is just sickening, (giggle) it really is.

Jackie, Tim, Lou and Jennifer spoke of how much they loved their colleges and how what they saw happening had, in some ways, tainted their feelings about them. But in spite of their detachment from the social aspects of their colleges, in late October, as they reflected on whether they felt more or less connected to their college communities or to something else, all four participants still felt that they were connected. On-campus social life was just one part of their lives, and their involvement in sports, classes and social times with roommates and close friends helped them feel attached to their colleges while balancing their disillusionment with the perceived changes in student culture. Jennifer at Private College simply wanted the behaviors to “just stop” so she could enjoy her senior year. The three other participants echoed this thought. Additionally, all four expressed optimism that things had to get better. As Lou from Public College said, “I don’t see how they could get any worse.”

#### December – The End of the Fall Semester

By the fall semester’s end, Jackie, Tim, Jennifer and Lou were weary of the underclassmen’s behavior and very tired of juggling the various aspects of their worlds. They all looked forward to the upcoming semester break. During the December interviews, which occurred after their last finals but prior to their return home, three of the participants expressed increased degrees of detachment from their colleges as a result of conflicts with friends and roommates. And, for the same three participants, the intense feelings of detachment had progressed to a stronger sense of connection to the world after college resulting in a movement into the liminal stage of the transition process. Additionally, as the participants reflected on their fall semester experiences, a common

theme of regret emerged - not achieving a better balance between their commitments and their social lives. In spite of the regret, the participants spoke optimistically of managing their lives differently in the spring semester, so that they could fully enjoy their final semester as undergraduates.

Jackie's post-field hockey life at Private College was not as hectic or structured as her "in season" life. Once the season ended, Jackie had more time to "just hang out" and catch up with people. She sometimes found herself spending two or more hours in the afternoon at the library, e-mailing friends and surfing the Web for fun. In the evenings she began working as the trainer for the men's basketball team and faithfully attended their practices and games. From the end of October through the end of December, more than anything else, Jackie "just relaxed."

In spite of the extra time she had to relax, the pressure of securing post-college employment still hung over Jackie's head until she received and accepted an offer from an accounting firm within driving distance from her parents' home. Upon reflection, Jackie realized that the challenge of finding employment while balancing other aspects of her life resulted in a tough fall semester for her.

This semester was stressful. (laugh). Extremely stressful. Um, it was, like, most stressful, only because I was looking for a job so early, and, you know, deciding what I want to do with a job and, you know, trying to balance school work and sports and my friends, and you know, my family, all at once, it was stressful. Once I got the job, you know, extreme relief. Now, the only thing I have to worry about is learning what I should have learned (laugh) here.

Tim's life at Private College from late October to the end of the semester was not as stressful as Jackie's. He still had not completed his resume and felt he might put off working until September. Tim was not nervous about finding employment, and he wanted to find the "right" job. Tim identified himself as a procrastinator and while he knew that

he should write his resume, he felt that it could wait until the spring semester. Even before he saw his final grades, Tim believed that he had done well academically, in spite of a mid-semester dip in the amount of effort he put into his studies.

A high point in Tim's fall semester occurred in November when he was one of five senior male students nominated by the entire student body for the title of Homecoming King<sup>20</sup>. A run-off election was held in which only members of the senior class voted to select the Homecoming King, Queen and Court. The final results of the run-off election were announced during halftime of Private College's homecoming football game. Tim was surprised when it was announced that he had been selected as Homecoming King. As he was escorted, along with the Homecoming Queen and the Homecoming Court, to the center of the football field, given his paper crown and asked to smile for yearbook pictures, he thought about how he had not seen himself as an "image type person" and felt the whole thing "was pretty funny. It wasn't... it's not a bad thing, but, it's not, like, the greatest thing in the world." But, Tim felt "kinda honored" to be selected, even if it was "kinda silly."

At Public College, Jennifer ended the fall semester feeling very tired and thinking she was getting sick with a cold. She had continued to work at her three jobs and would return to Public College the day after New Year's Day to start working again. Jennifer viewed the fall as very hectic, but uneventful.

Jennifer had thought about writing her resume, but by the end of December was still undecided about what she wanted to do after graduation, "so it never got done." She also was still unsure where she wanted to live after graduation. She thought she might

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<sup>20</sup> At Private College only members of the senior class are eligible for the title of Homecoming King, Queen and Court.

have to return home to help her mother, but really liked living on her own. Jennifer felt she could make all those decisions in the spring. By the end of the semester, Jennifer's priorities were to "sleep and, like, have a good Christmas with my family."

Lou also was tired by the end of his semester at Public College. He had continued to work 30 to 40 hours per week and attended all his classes. Lou also had several interviews in the fall semester for post-college employment. He had received a couple of good offers, but wanted to wait for something better that would fulfill his dream of working in Manhattan. Academically, he thought he had done well, but would have to wait and "see in a couple of days...when I get my report card." Lou's fall semester "was good. It was hard... you know, six classes. A lot of working. It was alright. But, like, a lot... a lot of things are changing lately."

When he said "a lot of things are changing lately," Lou was referring to experiences with his friends and roommates as well as what he had observed among his peers. He noticed that people, even friends, were detaching from one another. He hated the fact that there seemed to be no sense of "unity" among the students, especially among members of his class. What seemed to frustrate Lou the most was that he could not explain why it had happened.

I have no clue [why it's changed]. None whatsoever. Just, I just don't like it. I don't know why it's changed. I mean, I don't know if it's just this senior class maybe? I don't know. I mean, like, I'd hang out with the guys down the hall, up above me. Um... I used to talk to the girls down below, before they got mad at us. Um... I don't know. I mean, it also, it's horrible. And, I don't know. It just changed a lot, I think. Like a lot of people say how all people don't hang out together, or, people are showing their true colors now, and stuff like that. Like, one of my roommates hangs out with a sophomore and a junior. Those are like, his best friends. He barely ever lives in our room. He sleeps in their room, that's it. You know. So, I don't really know why it's like that, but it's not like that with all of my other friends either.



Lou indicated that everything that had happened between people during the semester made him feel that he was “ready to get out of here. I don’t know if I have matured or something, but I am ready to get out of here.” He was tired of the “bullshit” and how people had become “so petty” with one another. His disillusionment with the social life at Public College made him feel disconnected from his classmates and he wanted it to be different. He hesitated to say that he no longer felt part of the Public College community, but felt things were different.

Tim experienced a similar increased sense of disillusionment about the social life at Private College. By the end of the semester, he had had his fill of the underclassmen and the party life he used to enjoy. Unlike Lou who wanted more unity among his peers, Tim spoke, at length, of how he preferred socializing with fewer people and how much better it was for him to hang out at a local bar than to stay on campus. And, it was obvious by the end of the fall semester that Tim wanted to leave Private College.

Everyone says, once you get out, you’ll want to be back. (clears throat) And... I agree. I’m sure as soon as I get out, I’ll wish I was back in, but right now I just want to get out. Just, I don’t want to... I don’t like going to class. I don’t like school and whatnot. You know, I didn’t really want to go to school in the first place, and I ended up coming, so, I just feel like my time is up and I want to get out.

Jackie was also very ready to leave Private College. She had a tough semester and stated often that it was time to move on. She found life in her residence hall room on campus very unsatisfying. In particular, her relationship with her roommate had gone sour. She and her roommate of the past three years discovered during the fall semester that they had nothing more to say to each other. Once perceived as a major support person in Jackie’s life, her roommate had become an annoyance. Jackie had similar feelings about her relationships with the other two roommates who lived in her suite. She

was saddened and angered by what she perceived was their growing detachment from one another.

It's frustrating. You know. And when they don't understand, like how exciting it is to, you know, I got a job, and I was excited, and they were like, 'Oh.' The only ones that were excited were the ones who we have our jobs together. You know. So, we were all excited for each other. But, you know, in some people, it's hard for them to make a decision what they want to do, but some people just aren't even digging deep enough and going far enough. But, whatever they decide to do, you know, 'good luck to all of them.' It's hard when you have exciting news and they're like, 'Oh, okay. Great.' Ya, 'See you later.' (Laughing sarcastically).

Jackie responded to the feelings of disconnection from her roommates by further distancing herself from them. She decided that she was not going to clean up after them any more, "just to kind of show them, you know, you're the one that makes the mess all the time anyway, so you can clean it before break." Her frustration with her roommates and with the behavior of the underclassmen, which she said had "gotten worse" and "sickened" her, deepened her detachment from Private College. Jackie strongly felt that she was more connected to the world after Private College than to the social context in which she lived. But Jackie also had fears about the reality of graduating; she perceived it as having to finally grow up and not be "a kid anymore." She would be entering "the real world. God, [where there are] so many different things, its overwhelming sometimes."

Unlike the increased level of disillusionment and disenchantment Lou, Tim and Jackie had experienced with their friends and with their colleges, Jennifer felt strongly connected to Public College. In fact, the reality that it was her last fall semester as an undergraduate at Public College did not sink in until the onset of final exams. Even then, she did not express a sense of finality about the semester or an emotional detachment from Public College.

I actually think I will feel a part of [Public College] for a long time, because I know, like I became such good friends with [the Director of Residential Life] and you know, I know, my friend Veronica who had worked at the school, um, this past summer, I am such good friends with her, and like, we are all like, we have all bonded so much, its I don't think, I don't feel that I will ever feel... distant from [Public College].

It was clear that by the end of the fall semester, all the participants were glad that finals were over and they were very eager to return home for the holiday break. Even Jennifer, who had the strongest attachment to her college, wanted time away. They were all ready for some "down time" and for the opportunity to be free from the stresses of their college lives.

What also emerged from the participants' stories of their lives during the fall semester were reflections on some personal regrets. Lou regretted that he might have missed out on an experience that, somehow, would have transformed him and made him feel different as a senior, but he could not identify what that experience would have been. He was unsure what this different feeling should have been, or if he should have felt anything different at all. But he was struck by how he did not have any unusual feelings about being a senior. "I mean, I know I'm a senior, but I don't feel anything."

Lou also had second thoughts about how much time he had spent working during the fall semester, as it had interfered with time that he could have spent with his girlfriend, roommates and, of course, his studies. "But... you know, if you were going to go out to dinner with your girlfriend, that's like fifty bucks right there, on a Friday night. And just other expenses." He felt he needed to work to afford all the things he enjoyed. Regarding his fall semester's academic performance, Lou "basically would just probably change a few things with studying or... change something in a class, but that's it."

When Jennifer reflected on her misgivings about the fall semester, she spoke foremost about the number of social experiences she had missed out on. She blamed guilt over the troubles at home, combined with procrastination in finishing her academics on time, as the reasons she did not allow herself to have fun.

As Tim thought about what he would have liked to change most about his fall semester, it was time with friends. Tim also wished he had taken “a little more time for” himself to simply be alone and not have to work or worry about whether or not the students on his floor were misbehaving. He also wished he had written his resume, but was not overly concerned about it. Academically, he “would have done a little more schoolwork, too.” He felt he had truly applied himself and spent more time on his academics in the fall semester than in years past, but “I studied for some of them [classes], other ones I didn’t as much as I should have. I would’ve changed... I’d change that. I think that maybe would help my grades out a little better.”

Jackie also wished she had spent more time on her academics, but in retrospect she was pleased with the way she had coped with the semester and “probably would do the same thing if I could do it again.” While she would not have changed much about the way she managed her fall semester, Jackie did have a strong opinion about how she wished others had acted at Private College.

I just wish, you know, we talked about the [senior event], and all the underclassmen... I wish that, like, all the drug issues and everything and all the drinking issues, I wish that didn’t happen. You know. I wish that some of the kids that got involved with it didn’t get involved with it.

Trying to balance the various aspects of their lives emerged as a common experience for the participants, and the inability to achieve a real sense of balance during the fall semester was their greatest regret. But the participants were able to look ahead

and planned to make up for the perceived deficits of their fall semesters. Optimistically, they shared their hopes for a fun and less stressful final semester of college.

Both Lou and Jackie were finalizing plans for trips South for spring break. While both had some logistical problems to overcome, neither Lou nor Jackie were concerned about the matter, as they were determined to get out of New England, no matter what it took. And, Jennifer's plan for the spring semester -

Well, like I said, I am definitely going to manage my time much better, um, which is what I should have done like my sophomore year, but, oh well... (laugh). Um, I am going to go out a lot more because like, I was talking to my mother the other day, and she is like, 'Jennifer, you know, when you're laying on your death bed, what are you going to wish you had done more, study or go out with your friends?' And, she is so right. I know I am going to wish I had spent more time with people I love.

Lou's other priority for the spring semester was to find the right job. "That's like one of my main objectives now is to get a job, hopefully in Manhattan. That's what I'm really looking for." But he also emphasized,

I sort of want to have fun. I sort of want to say, like, my last semester was, like, my best semester here. Even though my best year here was my freshman year, but, in hanging out with everybody, it was my best year, but... as you know, policy was a lot more relaxed then, too. But I want to have like, my best year next semester. Like, best semester, or whatever you want to call it. Looking forward to like, all the stuff, you know, like senior trip. Hopefully everybody will go on it. I don't know what's gonna happen with that. I know last year a lot of people decided not to go, I think. Stuff like that. The pub has been doing a lot lately for senior activities, except for the occasional incident here and there. I mean, but like those have been good activities down there and stuff, and, plus my other friends can still come down and visit. I mean. Other than that, I hope, you know, that's what I'm looking forward to.

Tim's spring semester plans were very simple. He would take five classes, continue in his position as a resident assistant and in the early part of the spring he would begin working with the women's softball team as their manager: "That's a good time, usually." He hoped, but remained doubtful, that he might have a relationship with a

female that saw him as more than just a “friend.” For Tim, the spring semester would be about “having good times with friends” and “just doing the work, and get... find a job, and... depending upon the location of the job, find a place to live.”

Of the four participants, Jackie had the most ambitious and detailed ideas about what she hoped her spring semester would be. Other than her trip south, her primary objective was to “stay focused. I have to try to stay focused. And not worry too much about the future, about what it’s gonna be like, not coming back.” Since she had secured a job, Jackie’s remaining priorities for the spring semester were to just have fun whenever she could, and to play softball. In mid-February she would begin pre-season training for women’s softball and return to an “in-season” lifestyle. Jackie wanted to do a better job balancing sports and a social life in the spring semester, and struggled with which one was more important to her. Jackie felt that because she had already secured a job, it was going to be very hard for her to care about her academics.

And, um, I think it may just be a psychological thing. Like, the mentality of it. I have a job, you know, I don’t want (laugh)... I just feel as if we went to college to do what we needed to do, and we go to college to get a job, now we have a job, so I just want to, you know, kind of cruise, you know. ‘Cause, I don’t, I didn’t, you know everyone’s like, I’ve talked to everyone that has graduated, and they are like, ‘Oh, party it out, spend time with all your friends, you know, you have so many different groups of friends. Spend time with each one of them,’ you know. But, knowing me, I’ll just be like, ‘No, I’ve gotta do my homework (laugh).’

In spite of the fact that they were four unique individuals, located at two different campuses, the participants’ experiences during their fall semesters and their aspirations for the spring semester were strikingly similar. They experienced periods of disillusionment and disenchantment with the social life on their campuses. Three of the participants felt that they were more connected to life after college than to their current social context, and they all experienced some level of regret over how they had balanced

the various aspects of their fall semesters. But they also shared a sense of optimism and hope for a great spring semester. They all believed that the spring semester would be their last chance to enjoy the college experience, and for whatever that meant to them individually, they strongly desired a positive ending to their undergraduate experience.

### The Participants' Lives in March

The final interviews with the participants occurred in mid-March. They were held during the week after spring break, approximately six weeks before graduation. The themes that emerged from their stories at that time reflected their movement into the liminal stage of the transition process and the application of the “styles” each of them used in previous life transitions to cope with their anticipated graduation from college. In addition, they spoke adamantly about the importance of finding time to socialize with friends. Jackie, Tim and Lou commented that they saw the spring semester as their last chance to “just hang with people,” because in a matter of months they would be faced with the anticipated reality of graduation.

The literature written for people who counsel others through a life transition describes how, when faced with an anticipated transition, such as graduation, individuals begin to separate themselves from their current social context and begin to “move through” the transition process (Schlossberg, Waters and Goodman, 1995). Van Gennep (1960) found that in “moving through” the transition process, individuals enter into a liminal stage where they are caught between their detachment from current social contexts and their assimilation and adaptation to new worlds. For some, the liminal stage is characterized by feelings of insecurity and a sense of chaos as they struggle with the

“here and now” of their worlds and the ambiguity of their new beginning. For others the liminal stage can be a positive experience as it offers an opportunity for reflection and decision-making before facing the challenges of a new beginning.

Upon returning from spring break, Lou had still not found the right job, and still did not know where he was going to live after graduation. His sudden awareness of the cost of living on his own had become a frightening reality. He had the option of working for the car rental agency where he was currently employed, and though the company offered him a job close to his parents’ home, it was not what he wanted. The ambiguity and insecurity Lou was experiencing as a consequence of not having any post-college plans in place resulted in Lou feeling “wicked stressed” and very worried that he would not be able to get the right job or live in Manhattan as he hoped.

Tim’s emotional response to his liminal status was very different than Lou’s. Tim still had not decided where to live or secured post-college employment, but he was far less stressed than Lou. He decided that he would return to his parents’ home, “unless I find a job somewhere where I can’t commute from there. But moving home is no big deal. I’m 22, they kind of let me do what I want.” Tim had completed his resume in late January, sent it to prospective employers and had a couple of interviews, but his sense of urgency about securing post-college employment was significantly less than Lou’s. He shared Lou’s concerns about finding the right job, but he was also struggling with his own procrastinating approach to things, his lack of desire to work full-time, and his failure to identify what he wanted to do for employment.

Securing post-college employment had become the least of Jennifer’s concerns during her spring semester at Public College, as she was struggling to pass a statistics



course. A couple weeks prior to spring break, Jennifer “stopped going [to class], because I did not want to get a ‘C’ or a ‘D.’ I want to boost my GPA, you know, I’m leaving, I want to get all the ‘A’s I can.” Anticipating there was no way that she could do well in the course, she withdrew from the class. By doing so, Jennifer would not graduate in May.

While she initially felt she had failed herself and her family by delaying her graduation from Public College, Jennifer saw her decision as the right one for “where I am right now.” She expressed relief that all the things she should have done earlier in the year no longer encumbered her, and she admitted that she was still very unsure about what she wanted to do with her life. More importantly, she was elated by the fact that she did not have to leave Public College. “I don’t want to go. I am just not, like, ready to go. I can’t see myself not, like, here. Now I don’t (laugh).” Jennifer felt that by delaying her exit from Public College, she now “had a plan” and an opportunity to put things in order before she graduated<sup>21</sup>.

Prior to deciding to stay for another semester at Public College, Jennifer had viewed most of her experiences in her senior year negatively. But she was also able to point out one element of her senior year experience that she viewed positively.

So, everything is your last and like, ‘Oh my God, like as you’re doing this, and like this is my last everything.’ It always pops into your head, and you get a bit of sadness then, at the time you hit yourself, and go ‘All right, well it’s good, you’re getting out of here, you’ve been here for four years,’ so uh, that is pretty much what, you know, it’s like. You know, you get sad. But then it’s always good when you have friends with you who are going through the same thing, because you can

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<sup>21</sup> In coping with an anticipated life transition Bridges (1980) found that some individuals, during the liminal stage, would not allow themselves to become detached from their current social context because of their fears of what life might be like after the transition. By doing so, individuals protect themselves from possible anguish, discomfort and/or displacement from what they perceive is a safe and structured environment. In delaying or putting off an anticipated transition, individuals also delay having to face their own feelings of disillusionment, disorientation and dissatisfaction with their current social context, but they also deny themselves the opportunity for growth (Bridges, 1980; Schlossberg, Waters & Goodman, 1995).

just talk about it in the dorm or even with the commuters, like everyone always has someone here who is going through the same thing. With graduation, and the nervousness, and not knowing what you're gonna do, uh, so, (laugh), usually we go to the pub and Taco Bell and just cry (laugh).

As Jennifer reflected on what the senior year was like for her, she articulated one of the central phenomenon of the liminal stage: "It's always good when you have friends with you who are going through the same thing." This phenomenon of "communitas" or sense of community that develops among individuals, who are concurrently experiencing the liminal stage, is one of the most positive aspects of this stage, according to Van Genep (1960). Through interactions with others experiencing the same situation, individuals gain personal insights into other styles or approaches of coping with a life transition, thereby helping them resolve their own anxieties. Schlossberg, Waters & Goodman (1995) note that friends can be a source of great strength as individuals cope with a transition, but they also can become a liability if they halt growth. When individuals are in life transitions, "friends can move from one column to the other" (Schlossberg, Waters & Goodman, 1995, p. 124) by helping one "move on," or by holding one back.

In addition to Jennifer's descriptions of her experiences with "communitas," Jackie, Tim and Lou also had their own experiences with this phenomenon. Jackie had decided to play softball in the spring semester and although it meant returning to an "in-season" lifestyle, she was glad she would finish her college career as part of a sports team. But, the people Jackie socialized with in her spring semester were outside her normal circle of friends. She attributed this change in "who she hung out with" to where she was in preparation for her post-college life, and to the fact that she was very open about being ready to leave Private College. She indicated that her eagerness to move on

with her life was not a shared sentiment among her peers, and that she had distanced herself from them and connected with other seniors who felt as she did.

Characteristic of the “communitas” phenomenon, Jackie had developed a bond with another female senior who, like Jackie, was an accounting major and had also secured post-college employment. Jackie believed the fact that they were in a similar position but did not live together helped to make this relationship work.

If I could take 20 people with me when I go, I'd be happy. I don't know. Some people just... I don't know. I feel like I'm on different pages than a lot of my... a lot of my friends and stuff, and I'm ready to get out and a lot of them aren't. So, it's... I'm the bad person because I'm ready to... I want to leave. You know? It's hard... it's really hard to explain, because, I don't know, I just... It's not so much of a maturity thing, but, I'm the bitch because I'm, I'm ready, I want to leave and... I think that a lot of them take it personally, too, you know. But... I can't... this, this should be a three-year school, I swear to God (laugh)!

Tim expressed the same feelings as Jackie about being ready to leave Private College, but he had no post-college plan. “I want to get out, but, I don't want to rush either, 'cause I don't know what I am doing yet. And it's going by real fast. I am not anxious to get out. But I don't want to stay either.”

Tim's relationships with his peers remained a constant in his life. In addition to being at Private College at the same time as his brother, there were other students at Private College that Tim had known since elementary school, and remaining bonded to them was helping him with this life transition. While he had made many new friends in college, Tim was confident that these relationships would change after graduation.

I learned from high school, like, you don't want to say bye to all your friends in high school, but then you go halfway through college and, you know, you realize you only talk with like, three of 'em, so, you know, that's not a lot of kids, so you know, you're gonna... you know you're not gonna see everyone after college.

Lou's relationships with his friends were the primary reason he felt any connection to Public College: "I feel a part of Public College because of my friends, but the rest of it, I'm already mentally gone from here." By March, Lou's disillusionment with how his peers were interacting with one another, intensified. And while Lou longed for the experience of "communitas," he continued to be frustrated by what he felt was a lack of class unity and by changes in his classmates' attitudes and behaviors. He saw his peers distancing themselves from each other, when he believed they should, in fact, be growing closer, and was envious of what he had witnessed in previous years. Ironically, as much as Lou wanted to bond with his peers, he openly admitted that he was also tired of sharing a living space with other people and longed for his own space. He was also jealous of the fact that his roommates spent most of their time in front of the television, while he had to work to support his lifestyle.

The participants' experiences, both positive and negative, with the phenomenon of "communitas" illuminated one of the ways in which they were experiencing liminality. Another way the participants' liminal status was apparent was in their reflections on how they viewed their connections to their colleges. In December, Jackie, Lou and Tim stated that they felt detached from their colleges and were ready to leave. But in March, as they viewed their connections to their colleges from the liminal stage, their responses changed. As individuals begin to exit the roles that have provided them a sense of identity in their current social context, during the liminal stage, they begin to form ideas of how their new role and identity will relate to their old social context (Ebaugh, 1988).

What began to surface as these three participants described how they felt about their current connections to their colleges, were their perceptions of themselves through

the lens of their impending role as alumni of their institutions. Tim said that he felt connected to Private College because of his level of involvement and social status. But at the same time, he also felt that he was disconnected from or done with this life experience. He enjoyed his high level of visibility at Private College and indicated that giving that up would be hard. He could visualize himself as an alum of Private College.

You know, I see myself as, like, a good alum. I really love this place and, like, what it has done for me and I will help out. I don't mind it. I don't know. I'd help out, like, any other, any of the people I was acquainted with here, if they ask. But, um, coming back, it's still my school, but won't be my school. It will be weird and stuff, but, like, so many of my family, my brothers, are connected to this place, so I will always be, like, linked to this place. But, um, I will... it will be, probably, like different.

Lou still felt a connection existed between him and Public College. The connection he experienced was with his close friends, not with the academic demands or the other members of his college community. Lou could visualize himself as an alum, but he did not expect his relationship with Public College to continue for years. Instead, and similar to what had been expressed to him by other graduates of Public College, Lou planned to return to Public College a few times for alumni weekends and then once he no longer knew the on-campus undergraduates, he would stop attending.

Jackie described her connection to Private College as "kind of in between." Not wanting to leave her close friends and not wanting to give up the college lifestyle contributed to her sense of connection with Private College, but the excitement of starting a new career was drawing her away from it. Jackie perceived her anticipated involvement in the school's alumni association as important to maintaining her link to Private College.

Like, I know that I'll still have a lot of involvement here, you know, like I went and talked with the [assistant director of alumni relations], and he said 'Oh, I need some of your ideas for alumni events, and stuff like that.' Like, we were just talking about things like that, and with [director of alumni relations], and I know

he'll call me, and continue on my phone-a-thon. You know, stuff like that. I know that I'll still be a part of, so I'll still have my time here, and I know that I'll still stay close to a lot of these people.

While Jackie, Tim and Lou could visualize themselves in their roles as alumni, they had a difficult time reflecting on what their lives would be like as they entered post-college employment. Both Tim and Lou's reflections were vague because they were unsure of where they would be working and they found it hard to say what they might be concerned about. Jackie, on the other hand, was excited about working and very happy about the position she had secured, but was unclear about how she would manage the lifestyle change. Consistent with the characteristics of the liminal stage, all three shared some feelings of anxiety and nervousness about fitting into their new social contexts and felt confident that once they learned "the ropes" they would be fine. Additionally, all three stated that they had not thought much about the issues of adapting and assimilating to a new social context, but rather were focused on managing the "here and now" of their academic demands.

At the conclusion of the March interviews, the participants were asked, "What is the senior year like?" While the question was posed as a way to elicit broader reflections from the participants on how they viewed the overall essence of the senior year, the responses they shared were based on their personal experiences and the challenges they were facing in the immediacy, which is also a characteristic of the liminal stage (Van Gennep, 1960; Turner, 1969; Carson, 1997). Lou and Tim both described the senior year as "hectic." Tim was overwhelmed by the amount of coursework he needed to complete and saw studying, working, finding post-college employment and wanting a social life as conflicting priorities. He indicated that as a senior, one has an advantage in juggling these

priorities because “you know the lay of the land.” But even with this level of insight on how to balance the various aspects of his world, Tim spoke, at great length, on how this life transition was different.

Uh, I think this transition’s harder [than from high school], because... in college, like, I didn’t want to go in the first place, so like, if I didn’t decide where I wanted to go and get things done by a certain time and stuff, it didn’t matter. I don’t know, it’s like, the deadlines, they’re real. Um, you know, I know it’s just like my older brother, cause he graduated, three weeks later, he got a bill... um, saying, you know... or a letter, being like, you have two or three months ‘till you have to start repayment of your loan. By the way, this was mailed out two weeks ago, so now you have a month and a half, you know? So, I know I’m gonna have to start doing stuff like that, so it’s kinda like the deadlines are real.

Lou’s reflections on the senior year mirrored Tim’s. Lou simply wanted to move on and “lead a normal life.” The challenges of finding post-college employment, the academic demands and yearning for a social life had become a burden for him and he was tired.

I’m just hurting... I don’t want to do anything. It’s like a chore to do anything. Like, a five-minute project is like five hours now. So... I’d say it’s hectic, though. Like, I’m really worried about jobs. I’m not so worried about school anymore. I’m tired of it now. And, I think that everyone feels that way or at least my friends do. So, I don’t know... the senior year... it is hectic and draining.

Overall, Jackie’s senior year was “awesome.” Though she had problems with her roommates and felt the underclassmen had caused her to feel disenchanting with Public College, the new relationships she had developed with other seniors and the excitement of starting her new post-college employment contributed to a positive reflection on her entire year. She felt that distance from her friends would help remedy the strained relationships she had experienced. As she spoke about her impending graduation, she became very emotional.

I don’t know. I’m so excited for it, I really am. But, you know, (beginning to cry) I’m thinking about those twenty people I want to take with me (sniffing). But. I

don't know. Graduating will be exciting. Like, I'm gonna cry making my dad cry. He cried at my high school graduation. He cries with me now like, you know? (sniffing). Seeing my dad cry, I'm gonna be like, 'noooo' (laugh) you know? And I don't want to see [the athletic trainer]. [The athletic trainer] is just, he's awesome. And he cries with us too (sniffing). When I walked in there and told him that I had a job, he bawled (laugh). He was bawling with me. And then he came up to me a couple weeks ago. He's like, 'I'm gonna miss you' (laugh). I cried again (sniffle). So, that stuff will make me cry, but, you know, if anyone says to me about stupid things, I'm gonna be like, 'Not gonna miss it at all' (sniffle and laugh).

Although she would not be graduating in May, Jennifer felt she could reflect upon what the senior year was like and shared her perceptions of her entire college experience. Her love for Public College was unquestionable. And, Jennifer's description of what her experiences were at Public College demonstrated the dichotomous emotional experiences she had in her senior year and over the course of her entire undergraduate experience.

It's been great. It's been hard. It's been sad sometimes. It's been happy sometimes. Everything. You spend four years here and you get to know people. You learn to hate them, you learn to love them, you learn not to do things with them because you hate them then, and you love them at other times. You know I love this campus. It's small enough that, you know, you know a good amount of people, but not like high school. It's big enough that it's not like high school. It's great. That's probably why I don't want to leave. And even, like, this year, with all the bad stuff I can look back and it's been great.

In many ways, Jennifer's reflections of her experiences as a senior and over her full tenure as an undergraduate at Public College encapsulated all of the participants' senior year experiences. Similar to Jennifer, each of the participants had positive experiences, but also experienced frustration. Despite the various challenges and obstacles each participant faced during the year, they all remained hopeful and enthusiastic about their post-college lives.

The March interviews described the participants' experiences in the liminal stage of the transition process. They also evidenced how the "styles" the participants' used in



copied with their liminal status were the same as the “styles” (identified in Chapter Four) they had used in coping with other life transitions. Jackie’s style of “planning and severing relationships” as a way of coping with her life transitions reemerged in the manner in which Jackie approached the challenge of securing a post-college life and emotionally separating from her peers. While external factors<sup>22</sup> influenced how she experienced securing a post-college life, once Jackie had a plan in place, as in previous life transitions, she experienced a sense of relief. Additionally, it would appear Jackie’s style of severing relationships with peers (particularly those who do not share her points of views) rather than coping with her real feelings on saying goodbye to her friends was consistent with the way she had terminated other relationships in previous life transitions.

Tim’s style of “going with the flow” as he faced the challenge of securing a post-college life and detaching from Private College was also consistent with how he had coped with his previous life transitions. He identified his transition from college “as tougher” than his previous life transitions, but he did not let the year’s challenges or his own anxieties about leaving Private College overwhelm him. Rather, he chose to “go with the flow” and enjoy this time in his life with his friends, and would concern himself with securing a post-college life later. Tim’s “go with the flow” style helped him avoid the stresses the other participants experienced.

Lou’s experiences in the liminal stage reflected his unsuccessful attempt to use his style (find a friend) to cope with this life transition — his desire for the experience of “communitas” with his peers and his perception of that not occurring. Lou had also put many restrictions on what he wanted in his post-college life and as a result experienced a

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<sup>22</sup> The pressure placed on accounting majors at Private College to secure post-college employment by the end of the fall semester and Jackie’s parents’ assumption that she would return to their home after graduation.

great amount of stress when things were not happening as he had hoped. The combination of these two factors contributed to Lou's feelings during the liminal stage of being "wicked stressed" and "just hurting... I don't want to do anything." Lou's style did not help him cope with the liminal stage. In fact, it caused him to experience a greater degree of anxiety and led to a negative perception of his senior year.

During the liminal stage Jennifer utilized the "style" (withdrawal) she had used when she was faced with previous unanticipated life transitions. Often stating that she "wasn't ready to go" or "I can't see myself somewhere else," Jennifer chose to withdraw from a course that she could have successfully completed rather than face the reality of her departure from Public College. Her decision to delay her graduation alleviated her stress about not knowing what she wanted to do after college, and allowed her to avoid saying goodbye to her undergraduate experience.

### Summary

Chapter Four introduced Jackie, Tim, Jennifer and Lou and described their experiences with life transitions and how each had developed a style or pattern for managing these transitions. In Chapter Five we learned how these four students struggled to balance the various aspects of their everyday college lives, and how they coped with the anticipated transition of graduation from college. In spite of the fact that these were four unique individuals, attending two different colleges, their descriptions of what their senior years were like had many similarities.

It was evident that securing post-college employment and deciding where to live after college were the two most pressing challenges for these students. During the fall

semester, the participants' inability to balance the various aspects of their lives (securing post-college lives, work, academics, sports and friends) had become a source of frustration and personal regret. Also, their feelings of disillusionment and disenchantment with the social life on campus contributed to their sense of detachment (the first stage of transition process) from their college lives.

In the March interviews we saw the participants' liminal status reflected in their experiences with "communitas," in their perceptions of how they would remain connected to their colleges as alumni, and in their views on what the senior year is like. To a lesser degree, we gained some insights into their fears about how they would adapt and assimilate to new social contexts. And, we saw how these individuals used their personal "styles," identified in Chapter Four, to cope with this life transition.

The next chapter compares the results of this study with what we already know from previous research into life transitions and the challenges of the senior year. It discusses the efficacy of the in-depth phenomenological interviewing methodology as well as the use of Schlossberg's theoretical framework by researchers who are interested in studying the senior year experience. This chapter also features a discussion about how the experiences of these four individuals provide a deeper understanding of the essence of what the senior year is like for college undergraduates as they experience the detachment and liminal stages of the transition process. Finally, recommendations are made to conduct further research on the topics of the senior year experience and the transition process for college students.

## CHAPTER VI

### CONCLUSION

The findings of this study contradict the myth that all students enter their final year of college ready to graduate (Smith & Gast, 1998), and confirm what we already suspect about the challenges students face in their senior year of college<sup>23</sup>. This study contributes new knowledge to the research on the senior year experience, which emerged from the perceptions the students shared about their senior year experience. Specifically, this study describes the rich and complex insights that can be gained by examining students over the course of their senior year, as they experience and prepare for the transition out of college. The students' reflections on their senior year experience brought to light themes that are characteristic of a life transition.

#### Discussion of the Results

Rather than attempting to quantify the changes in their academic competencies or level of interpersonal growth from their freshmen to senior year, this study engaged four college seniors in an in-depth discussion of their experiences with previous life transitions and focused on what they experienced and felt as they journeyed through their senior year.

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<sup>23</sup> Securing post-college lives is a major focus for students in their senior year (Karr & Mahrer, 1972; Kenny, 1990; Long, Sowa & Niles, 1995) and this process is strongly impacted by their level of preparedness to face these challenges (Feitler-Karchin & Wallace-Schutzman, 1982; Sampson, Peterson, Lenz, Reardon & Saunders, 1998).

## Research Methodology and Theoretical Framework

This study offers for consideration a methodology and theoretical framework for researchers who are interested in studying the senior year experience, as well as career counselors, faculty, and other student affairs professionals who work directly with college seniors. Using the phenomenological methodology, this study sought to gain insights into the essence of the undergraduate's senior year (Schuman, 1982; Seidman, 1991). There are three reasons why this methodology was appropriate. First, "real life" examples and actual narratives from the participants provide a deep and rich understanding of the emotional experiences of the undergraduate (Schuman, 1982; Seidman, 1991). Second, in-depth interviewing allowed for reciprocity between the participant and the researcher in investigating the focused topic of the senior year (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). Third, the methodology allows for the inclusion of the "voices" of the undergraduate during the senior year, which was not part of other studies on college seniors (Schillings & Schillings, 1998).

This study moves away from learning statistical facts based on their responses to a prepared survey. Instead, it moves toward understanding students by listening to them describe their experiences and how they made meaning of them. The use of an in-depth interviewing methodology provided the opportunity to be descriptive and interpretive, offering a deeper immersion into the complexities of the focused topic and the experiences of the participants. The result is a richer understanding of the senior year experience, not a collection of statistical facts.

In addition to demonstrating that the phenomenological methodology is effective in researching the senior year, this study also proposes a theoretical framework that may

be useful in understanding the transition out of the senior year. Conceptually, this qualitative study investigated the senior year experience and the data was analyzed parallel to three transitional theories: 1) Schlossberg's (1981) three-stage theory of adult transitions, 2) Bridges' (1980) hypothesis that individuals develop "styles" of dealing with life transitions, and 3) Van Gennep (1960) and Turner's (1969) description of the liminal stage of the transition process. Based on the assumption that the entire senior year is a life transition, the use of Schlossberg's theory as a primary source for this discussion showed that it can be applicable in the study of the senior year experience (Forney & Gringrich, 1983; Champagne & Petitpas, 1989; Pearson & Petitpas, 1990; Chickering & Schlossberg, 1998). Schlossberg's theory of adult transitions is an effective model for the exploration of the senior year because it can provide a clear definition of the transition, an explanation of the students' transition process, and an awareness of the coping strategies they use to manage the changes (Schlossberg, Waters & Goodman, 1995).

This study also found that a phenomenological examination of the senior year experience through the lens of Bridges' (1980) theory can assist in explaining "how present situations [may have] resulted from past decisions or incidents" (Rubin & Rubin, 1995, p. 51) regarding life transitions. Through the analysis of the participants' narratives of their life stories, similarities surfaced in how they coped with their current life transition in relation to previous life transitions. Their reflections on the past and present indicated the participants had developed individual "styles" to cope with change. In future studies of seniors' transition from college, Bridges' (1980) theory could help explain why there may not be a singular manner in which students cope with this specific life transition.

The final area in which this study broadens the discussion of the senior year was in the inclusion of the theoretical concept of liminality and its connections to what the participants described. Van Gennep (1960) describes the liminal experience as “ambiguous... the subject passes through a cultural realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or the coming state. He or she exists outside of the structure roles, statuses, and positions within society” (Anfara, 1998, <http://www.nationalforum.com/ANFARAt8e3.html>, retrieved 8/12/99, p. 3). In many respects the liminal experience “is essentially one of emptiness in which the old reality looks transparent and nothing feels solid anymore” (Bridges, 1980, p. 117). The challenges individuals face in the liminal stage include overcoming fear of this perceived “emptiness,” and seeking ways to experience this as a time of self-renewal that allows one to explore the possibilities of “what if,” rather than to experience the sense of loss over “what was” (Bridges, 1980).

The students’ insights and reflections demonstrate that they entered the liminal stage of the transition process after their emotional detachment from college. Their descriptions of feeling caught between their current lives in college and the world after graduation are characteristic of what Van Gennep (1960) metaphorically described as standing in a doorway that separates two rooms. While there, the individual experiences neither the previous room nor the room that is about to be entered. In essence, the individual is between two social contexts. Symbolically, “in this metaphor, a doorway separates the departure from an old state and entry into a new one” (Noble & Walker, 1997, p. 31).

In the same way Schlossberg’s (1981) and Bridges’ (1980) theories aid in our overall understanding of the transition process for college seniors, inclusion of the

theoretical concept of liminality in the exploration of the senior year broadens our awareness of its complexity. The addition of liminality into the discussion of what the senior year is like adds to the framework for studying the senior year transition and expands the possibilities for further research. For example, future research could explore the deeper meaning of the liminal experience and its connections to past transitions. It could also focus on the value of embracing this in-between time as an opportunity for self-renewal and reflection, rather than a period in which feelings of ambiguity, insecurity and isolation direct emotions and behaviors (Van Gennepe, 1960; Turner, 1969; Bridges, 1980; Reischl & Hirsch, 1989; Goethe, 1990; Schlossberg, Waters & Goodman, 1995; Carson, 1997; Nobel & Walker, 1997)

Using the phenomenological approach to investigate the seniors' world, and applying Schlossberg's (1981), Bridges' (1980) and Van Gennepe's (1960) theories of transitions to the context of this study did not provide direct solutions to the challenges students face as seniors. But the qualitative analysis of their experiences does deepen our awareness of what the entire senior year is like for undergraduates.

### The Senior Year as a Life Transition

Schlossberg, Waters & Goodman (1995) note "although the onset of a transition may be linked to one identifiable event or non-event, transitions are really a process over time" (p. 35). In the analysis of the students' senior year experiences, it became evident that they were experiencing a life transition. As their descriptions of their perceptions, feelings and experiences during their senior year characterized the first two stages of the



transition process — detachment and liminality (Van Gennep, 1960; Schlossberg, 1981; Schlossberg, Waters & Goodman, 1995).

### Detachment

To understand and chronicle the transition process, a starting point separate from the trigger transitional event must be identified (Van Gennep, 1960; Bridges, 1980; Schlossberg, 1981). The starting point of the transition process occurs with a physical, emotional or cognitive “separation... a time of detachment and detaching from an earlier period, place or state in the cultural or social context” (Carson, 1997, p. 3). In essence, individuals are “moving out” (physically, emotionally or cognitively) of a current social context and into the first stage of the transition process (Schlossberg, Waters & Goodman, 1995).

Ebaugh (1988) said the detachment stage begins when individuals exit the roles that have served as their identity in a specific social context, as well as when they disengage themselves from the relationships, routines and assumptions that they have about themselves or their current social contexts. Early in their fall semester, the participants in this study described how their perception of changing social environments on their campuses contributed to their sense of detachment from their colleges. Lou, Tim, Jennifer and Jackie detailed their emotional disillusionment, disenchantment and dissatisfaction with their current social context, and described how they distanced themselves from the cultures of drug use and promiscuity they perceived were emerging on their campuses. Lou, Jackie and Tim said in their December interviews that they simply wanted to move on with their lives outside of college.

In the students' descriptions of feeling detached from college early in their senior year, we see something contrary to what has been indicated in other studies of college seniors. These other studies indicate the detachment stage occurs in the final weeks of the semester, or a few days before the graduation ceremony, or as seniors transition into the post-college work environment (Brammer & Abrego, 1981; Bradley-Sagen, Lundak & Peterson, 1990; Vickio, 1990). If the experiences of the students in this study are reflective of the general population of college seniors, it is possible that there is a gap between what has been assumed about the senior year experience and its reality.

Both symbolically and physically, a college graduation ceremony marks the student's detachment from college — immediately following the ceremony, students leave campus and begin their post-college lives. The findings of this study illustrate that students may experience an emotional separation from the college environment long before the actual symbolic and physical separation of graduation. As a result, they could become so frightened by the impending ambiguity of this transition that they lose all internal drive or motivation (Bridges, 1980) to complete their graduation requirements.

This study's participants spoke of feeling the lack of motivation or desire to continue with their college experience. For Jackie, who had secured post-college employment in the fall semester, completing the spring semester's coursework seemed pointless. Tim and Lou described similar attitudes toward their academic requirements. All three of them said their desire to maintain some of the friendships that had developed during their undergraduate years was the only thing that kept them going and helped them feel connected to their colleges. By the end of the fall semester, Jackie, Tim and Lou, equally, expressed a singular sentiment: "I'm ready to get out of here."

If college seniors do in fact become emotionally detached from their college experience at some point in the fall semester of their senior year, this raises new areas of inquiry. Further research could address questions such as: If students detach from college in the fall semester, should the school seek ways to reconnect them, or simply let the transition process follow its course? When college seniors become emotionally detached from their social context, what is the possible impact on their academic performance and other areas of their development?

The participants in this study gave the impression that continuing to meet the challenges and demands of the senior year, after they had already mentally and emotionally detached from it, made them question the purpose and meaning of what they still needed to accomplish. They even went so far as to describe academic requirements as a barrier to doing what they truly wanted to do — spend time with friends. Further focused research on this particular aspect of the senior experience may help us gain a deeper understanding of the impact of detachment on the college senior's life.

### Liminality

There are no specific markers or a set duration to determine when the detachment stage has been or will be completed (Bridges, 1980). It is understood that the detachment stage is a prelude to the next stage of the transition process. An individual's movement into the next stage is often identified when there are intensified feelings of disillusionment and dissatisfaction with a current situation or social context (Van Genep, 1960; Bridges, 1980; Schlossberg, Waters & Goodman, 1995). The feeling of wanting to leave a specific physical or emotional state, but being unable to move forward

because of some internal or external reason, results in the entrance to an in-between state — referred to as the liminal stage of the transition process (Van Gennep, 1960; Turner, 1969; Carson, 1997).

The liminal stage differs from detachment in that it is generally characterized as “ambiguous” (Anfara, 1998, <http://www.nationalforum.com/ANFARAte8e3.html>, retrieved 8/12/99) and a time of “genuine puzzlement” (Bridges, 1980, p. 117). It gives rise to new challenges and questions about oneself and one’s world (Schlossberg, Waters & Goodman, 1998). Individuals in the liminal stage might ask, “Do I have the ability to cope with change? Why do I feel like I am not connected to anything?” It is a period during a life transition when individuals can be contemplative or reflective and can experience a range of positive and negative emotions as they struggle with their exit from their current social context (Van Gennep, 1960; Bridges, 1980; Schlossberg, 1981).

By examining the insights and reflections of the students in this study, connections can be made with the theoretical concept of liminality and their experiences after they became dissatisfied with college. As they described in their March interviews, they felt caught between two worlds — their current social context and life after graduation. The liminal status of the participants was observable in how they chose to cope with this stage. As they faced the anticipated life transition of graduation, they selected and attempted to use coping styles that were similar to styles they had used during previous life transitions. Each participant experienced a different degree of success in the application of his or her chosen coping style.

Additionally, in their stories of how they emotionally and behaviorally responded to their liminal status, it became apparent that Jackie, Tim, Lou and Jennifer were

“redefining [their] social role identities, restructuring [their] social networks, and reorganizing [their] daily activities” (Nobel & Walker, 1997, p. 36). It is important to note that these shifts in their worlds should not be perceived as purely negative. The value of the liminal stage is that it gives individuals the chance to look at their current social context from a dramatically different point of view, and to make the changes needed in order to assist with their assimilation and adaptation to their next social context (Van Genep, 1960; Bridges, 1980; Schlossberg, 1981).

As these seniors began to share their reflections from the point of view of their liminal status, they were able to describe both the positive and negative elements of their senior year. Initial discussions focused on the frustrations and challenges they faced on a particular day, but as they described their perceptions of the larger context of the senior year, it appeared that they were sifting through the memories they will cherish and the experiences they either regretted or wished never happened. When asked what advice about the senior year they would give to juniors — again, from their liminal point of view — Tim, Lou, Jackie and Jennifer all advised juniors to avoid the frustrations that they had experienced and “to stay on top of the process of securing a post-college life.” This recommendation was often coupled with an equally strong assertion that securing a post-college life is important, but it should never be at the expense of “personal time for yourself” or of opportunities “to hang out with friends.”

It would seem that the liminal experience for college seniors is strongly influenced by two factors — 1) the individual’s success in securing a post-college life<sup>24</sup> and 2) friends. The students’ insights cause new questions to surface: If students do

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<sup>24</sup> This would include securing post-college employment or admission to graduate school and deciding where to live after graduation.

secure post-college employment while still in their liminal status, what emotional or behavioral changes we can expect to see? Do students who get jobs early in their senior year have a different experience with liminality?<sup>25</sup> Additional research that focuses on the emotional elements of the liminal stage and the challenge of securing post-college lives may provide insight to how these aspects of seniors' lives can be addressed. The results might also indicate that students can benefit from this challenging experience, as it may help them develop strategies to cope with future life transitions.

In addition to securing post-college lives, another theme that frequently emerged was the description of both positive and negative interactions with friends. In each interview, and as they described previous life transitions, comments such as, "once I found a friend, then I felt better," and "this is the last chance I will have to just hang with friends," surfaced repeatedly. Based on the frequency with which the students mentioned this, it seems that relationships with friends and others might effect one's detachment and liminal status during the senior year.

Grimes' (1982) research on life transition found that as individuals either physically or psychologically detach themselves from a social context, they could also become detached from people in their lives. So, when individuals, such as Jackie, Tim, Lou and Jennifer, enter the liminal stage of a transition, they do so alone (Trubshaw, n.d., <http://www.indigogroup.co.uk/edge/htm>, retrieved 8/10/1999). Subsequently, movement through liminality is a personal and reflective self-journey (Bridges, 1980), and the phenomenon of the liminal stage belongs to no one other than the person experiencing it (Reed, 1996). As a result, individuals (including college seniors) may view liminal status

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<sup>25</sup> From Jackie's reflections it appears her experiences in the liminal stage were different than the other participants, i.e., struggling to restructure her social network rather than finding employment.

as a “marginalized experience, often accompanied by isolation and suspension of social status” (Gentry, Kennedy, Paul & Paul Hill, 1995, p. 68).

Van Gennep (1960) and Turner (1969) note that over the course of the liminal stage, and due to its reflective nature, individuals evaluate current relationships and determine if they will be supportive or unsupportive during their transitions. A consequence of this evaluation may result in the end of old friendships and the development of new ones (Schlossberg, Waters & Goodman, 1995). These new relationships often develop out of an emotional need to find others who are having a similar experience<sup>26</sup> or who have been through a similar transition (Carson, 1997), or to provide stability, security and a sense of connection to something while between social contexts (Turner, 1969; Bridges, 1980; Schlossberg, Waters & Goodman, 1995).

In examining the students’ comments expressed during their liminal status, it seems that the purpose of friends (from these participants’ stories) was to meet the various emotional needs<sup>27</sup> that have been identified in the literature on liminality. But there also seems to be something more. In fact, it appears that there exists a paradox between the students’ reflections on friends and friendships during the liminal stage and the theory. The literature states that liminality is an individual state, which can only be experienced and resolved by the individual moving through a transition (Van Gennep,

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<sup>26</sup> Also referred to in the literature as “*communitas*.”

<sup>27</sup> In looking at previous life transitions and at current reflections, Tim and Lou describe friends and friendships during life transitions as providing the support and structure they need to fill a sense of emptiness as they struggled to clarify the ambiguity and chaos they felt. This is characteristic of the liminal stage (Van Gennep, 1960; Turner, 1969; Bridges, 1980; Schlossberg, Waters & Goodman, 1995). Jennifer’s descriptions of her interactions with friends who were also experiencing this stage seemed to reflect a search for other possible styles or approaches she could use to resolve her anxieties as she coped with the liminal stage (Van Gennep, 1960; Turner, 1969; Carson, 1997). It appeared that the bond Jackie made with a fellow female student who was outside her normal social network, but was experiencing many of the same emotional issues, is consistent with what Carson (1997) described as *communitas*.

1960; Turner, 1969; Bridges, 1980). And yet, the students' frequent references to "being with friends," and "needing friends" during their liminal status may infer that there is a tension between the essence of the liminal stage and the experiences of these students.

Bridges (1980) interprets the existence of such a paradox as occurring "because it is likely to feel lonely" (p. 121) in the liminal stage. As a result the "temptation is to seek more and better contacts with others" (Bridges, 1980, p. 121). Attempting to avoid their feelings of loneliness may be one of the reasons these students identified friends so prominently in their reflections. It is also possible that the fear of leaving the college lifestyle and dependence on relationships that have provided a certain level of support during the undergraduate years may have been too frightening. Graduation and reestablishing oneself in a new social context "represents a significant life change, and may cause excessive worry and stress as graduation approaches" (Karr & Mahrer, 1972, p. 288).

Bridges (1980) cautions what might be lost when individuals remain too dependent on friends (as they experience the liminal stage) is "the real need for a genuine sort of aloneness" (p. 121). This aloneness is essential for individuals as they cognitively assess their own assets and liabilities before moving into the next stage of the transition process – new beginnings. Over dependence on friends can result in a clinging to the "here and now" worlds of individuals and perhaps inhibit an openness to the possibilities in which a new beginnings may bring (Bridges, 1980; Schlossberg, Waters & Goodman, 1995).

While it appears that the students' reflections on friends did concur with specific segments of the literature on liminality, the findings did not provide insights into other



reasons why friends surfaced so prominently in this study. Further focused research on the impact of friends on college seniors might explain its prominence. Assuming the resolution of the liminal stage must come from within the individual (Van Gennep, 1960; Turner, 1969), then these questions must be asked: Can friends and friendship during the senior year assist in the resolution of the liminal stage? If so, how? A focused study would allow deeper questioning and further exploration into the degree to which peers influence or impact (positively or negatively) decision making, behaviors, emotional reactions and the resolution of this stage of the transition process.

#### Recommendations for Further Research

The findings of this study emerged through the use of a qualitative methodology, which provided detailed descriptions of the participants' experiences during their senior year. This rich detail provides a clearer picture of the worlds of these four students and a better understanding of the senior year experience from their perspectives. On the other hand, the findings cannot be generalized to all undergraduate seniors. This limitation is due, in part, to the study's small sampling. In order to broaden the generalization of the findings, additional research could be done utilizing the phenomenological methodology and the application of the theoretical models used in this study. Further research would need to expand the participant pool, include a diverse population of students and be conducted at a number of different colleges and universities. Such research may help refine and further develop the theoretical findings of this study as well as assist in the generalization of the results.

While the results of this study are based on the insights of only four college seniors, researchers can use these findings as a foundation for further research. For example, the insights of the participants illustrate that students may experience an emotional separation (detachment) from the college environment long before (as early as December) the actual symbolic and physical separation of graduation (in May). Further research could include quantitative methods, conducted over the course of the senior year, that investigate this finding. Such research could ask students to rate the degree to which they feel connected to their institutions or to life after college, or it could ask them to answer a series of “yes” or “no” questions. Such a methodology should include a larger subject pool from many different types of colleges and universities, to develop a broader generalization of the point in the senior year when college students experience emotional detachment from their institutions, as inferred by this study’s participants.

The insights gained from this study also suggest two factors that a researcher should incorporate in a quantitative method of determining the specific point in the senior year when students begin feeling detached from college. The first factor is the timing of the inquiry. This study investigated students at three points during their senior year: October, December and March. Their insights identified December as the point at which three of them felt a strong degree of emotional separation. It is possible that the separation occurred sooner; conversely, it may occur later for the general student population. Conducting a monthly or bi-weekly inquiry of college seniors may result in identifying a definitive point at which seniors feel detached.

The second factor researchers should incorporate in their inquiry is terminology. The participants in this study consistently referred to life after college as the “real world.”

Because this phrase seems to be the most common reference among students, using it may help to define the nebulousness of life after college. Also, terminology that distinguishes the participants' feelings toward their institutions from their feelings toward their friends could help them more clearly understand the difference between these two realms. This study's methodology gave students the opportunity to expand upon and clarify what they specifically felt detached from (their colleges) and what they still felt connected to (their friends). A quantitative methodology would need to use specific phrases and lines of inquiry to insure that these two aspects of the student's world are delineated, thereby increasing the validity and generalization of the results.

While the results of this study do not describe what colleges could do to help seniors during this transitional phase, the insights do provide implications for additional research and possible pedagogical practices for faculty as a student moves from detachment to a liminal status. In December and in March, the participants in this study spoke of feeling a lack of motivation or desire to continue with their college experience, specifically their academic requirements. Additional quantitative research could be done to determine if there is a decline in academic performance in the spring semester of the senior year.

Researchers could compare a student's overall academic performance to that of his or her spring semester. If the research does show a decline in academic performance during the spring semester, faculty may choose to select a different pedagogical style to re-engage students in learning. For example, the participants describe academic requirements as a barrier to doing what they truly wanted to do — spend time with friends. Based on this insight and the prominent role of friends throughout this study, it

would seem plausible that faculty consider designing senior-level courses that include a larger portion of group or team projects.

Such academic practices would serve two purposes. First, academic requirements could be met, though in a different modality. Second, students would have the peer interaction they value. While it is not specifically the social interaction (i.e., just hanging with friends or going to bars) that the participants described, it may help motivate students and engage them in learning. Follow-up research would be required to determine if a change in pedagogy to group assignments and teamwork does assist with academic performance and engagement in learning.

The insights reported by the participants in this study open new areas of inquiry and practice for college career services and student affairs professionals. The participants' descriptions of the post-college employment seeking process support the research that indicates how critical this slice of the senior year is to students. Career counselors must continue to research what might be done at the individual and institutional level to aid students through this process. The participants reported varying degrees of stress as they searched for "the right job," and reported increased stress when they did not find it. It seems that students might more successfully cope with this stress if they could participate in programs that address the emotional issues they face during their senior year, in addition to participating in recruitment opportunities, interviewing seminars and resume writing programs.

To determine if such programs would help students, researchers could compare the transition process of college seniors who attend institutions that offer a wide range of career services programs (including programs that look at post-college employment

expectations and separation issues) with students from institutions that do not offer such programs. They could distribute to college seniors a self-reporting quantitative instrument designed to measure degrees of stress. The findings may help colleges and universities identify institutional interventions that could help seniors with the transition out of college.

Student affairs professionals, specifically those who work in the mental health area, can benefit from the participants' descriptions of how they used a coping "style" to deal with the transition out of college that was similar to a "style" they had used in previous transitions. This insight suggests that when practitioners provide support to a student during this life transition, it might be helpful to explore how the student coped with similar transitions in the past. Bridges (1980) notes that the ultimate power and often-missed opportunity of a life transition, specifically in the liminal stage, is the chance to reflect on past and present circumstances. Mental health counselors working with college seniors may find it beneficial to explore previous life transitions and to encourage students to evaluate what strategies helped or hindered them as they moved through the stages of the transition process in the past.

Further case study research could explore this assumption. In this methodology, researchers could re-test the current hypothesis to determine if most individuals will revert to a developed "style" to cope with transition, or if there is an alternative way to define the transition process of college seniors. It will be "through these studies, and others that may follow, [that] data will emerge that can be used in refining the model thus developing a clearer picture of [students'] adaptation to transition" (Schlossberg, 1981, p. 160). The refinement of a theoretical model specific to the context of the senior year may

lead to a deeper understanding of the experience, and may help to develop practical interventions that counseling practitioners can use to aid seniors with this life transition.

Finally, this study examined only two of the three stages of the transition process: detachment and liminality. Because this study focused on these students' perceptions while they were in the midst of their senior year, the results often reflected only the immediate worlds of the participants. What we know from the literature is that if an individual is ready to begin anew, there appears to be a shift from the original questions that are hallmarks of liminality to definitive answers: "I did the right thing. I am committed to this life change. I am ready to be challenged. I can handle this, and I am ready to feel connected to something or someone again" (Van Gennep, 1960; Turner, 1969; Bridges, 1980; Schlossberg, Waters & Goodman, 1995). This shift represents a change from the realm of inner thoughts and reflection to a course of action.

Additional research on the senior year experience that includes interviews with students three or six months after graduation might provide insights to all three facets of the transition process, and would also allow the participants to reflect upon their senior year from outside the social context of their colleges. Time and physical separation from the college environment may or may not change perceptions of the senior year, but a follow-up interview subsequent to graduation and immersion into new social contexts could prove beneficial to an overall understanding of the senior year experience.

The stories and reflections of the students in this study present new insights into the essence of the senior year experience. This study does not intend to identify specific solutions to their challenges or frustrations, but rather offer for consideration the insights of four college seniors as they experienced another life transition. In an attempt to

understand the various phenomena of their experiences, a qualitative methodology for exploring the senior year was used and a possible theoretical framework that provided context to their experiences was offered. From Lou, Tim, Jennifer and Jackie's reflections of their senior year, we learned that the essence of the senior year encompasses more than securing post-college employment or deciding where to live after graduation, and is much more than a "static endpoint." The words, thoughts, feelings, perceptions and insights that each student shared show those who are interested in the senior year that the essence of this experience, though very stressful and chaotic, resembles the "ordinary and extraordinary process of living" (Schlossberg, 1984, p. vii).

## Appendix A

### VOLUNTARY CONSENT FORM

#### The Senior Year: A Study of Transition, Liminality and Students' Perspectives of Their Final Year as Undergraduates

I volunteer to participate in this qualitative study and understand that:

1. Brian McCoy will interview me, on three occasions (October, December and March), for one and one half hours, each time, using an in-depth phenomenological methodology of research.
2. The questions I will be answering address my views on issues related to my own experiences with life transitions and my experiences as an undergraduate college student in his or her senior year. I understand that the primary purpose of this research is to provide new insights into the challenges college seniors face over the course of their last year of college thereby increasing the awareness of these issues for those in higher education that work with college seniors.
3. The interviews will be tape recorded to facilitate analysis of the data.
4. My name will not be used, nor will I be identified personally in any way or at any time. I understand it will be necessary to identify participants in the dissertation by student leadership positions and/or by membership within campus clubs or organizations.
5. I may withdraw from part or all of this study at any time.
6. I have the right to review material prior to the final oral exam or other publication.
7. I understand that the data collected in the interviews will be included in Brian McCoy's doctoral dissertation and may also be included in manuscripts submitted to professional journals for publication.
8. I am free to participate or not participate without prejudice.
9. Because of the small number of participants, four, I understand that there is some risk that I may be identified as a participant in this study.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Researcher's Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant's Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date



## APPENDIX B

### STRUCTURED QUESTIONS FOR FIRST INTERVIEW

1. What is your age?
2. What is your hometown?
3. What is your major field of study?
4. Do you work in addition to attending college? How many hours per week?
5. Do you play a sport?
6. Are you involved in any campus clubs or activities? Are you a leader in any of these clubs?
7. How many brothers or sisters do you have? What are their ages?
8. Are your brother(s) or sister(s) in school? Or do they work?
9. Are your parents married? Number of years?
10. What do your parents do for work?
11. What are the educational backgrounds of your parents?
12. What was your first day of kindergarten like? First day of junior high; high school; college?
13. What were your last days of kindergarten like? Last days of junior high; high school?
14. What was high school graduation like?
15. How did you end up at this college?

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