1-14-2020

Exploring How Community College Transfer Students Experience Connection in a Commuter University

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by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Science
in
Sociology

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Portland State University
2019

ABSTRACT

Over the last 40 years, the expansion of the U.S. community college system resulted in a growing number of students choosing to begin their undergraduate education at a two-year institution and then transfer to a four-year institution. However, many students struggle to establish connection after transferring, especially if they transfer into a commuter university. For many college students, feelings of engagement and connection influence their persistence decisions. Using Tinto's (1975; 1993) and Astin's (1984) theories of student persistence as a framework, the purpose of this in-depth interview study is to explore how commuter community college students who transfer to Portland State University in Portland, Oregon experience connection to the university. This study also aims to identify how commuter community college transfer students become connected to PSU and how the connection experiences for these students change over time.

This in-depth interview study explores the connection experiences of 14 commuter community college transfer students who transferred as college juniors. Students were at different points after transferring at the time of their interviews. This study suggests that commuter community college transfer students enroll at four-year universities with no intention of connecting to the institution. Instead, students initially focus on their academic progress. Students then establish instrumental relationships with faculty and classmates as needed in order to progress in their academics. Only once students establish strong connections with faculty and classmates do they begin to establish social relationships that provide additional forms of social support outside of the support they receive from their home social systems.

DEDICATION

To my mother, Mary Louise Hammond, the woman who taught me that sometimes done is better than perfect. You taught me to believe in myself and never questioned my ability to do anything, even when I doubted myself. Mom, this is for you. I wish you could have been here to see this.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank a number of people who helped to make the completion of this research project a possibility. First of all, I would like to thank my thesis committee, Dr. Lindsey Wilkinson, Dr. Alex Stepick, and Dr. Dara Shifrer, for their willingness to jump into assist me halfway through this research project. Without their mentorship and guidance, this research project would not have been possible. I also owe my sincere gratitude to my graduate cohort at PSU. Thank for you for not only helping me quickly load a moving truck when my life was turned upside down after my mom got sick. I would especially like to thank Schaylee Esparza and Heidi Esbensen for always having a place for me to stay when I visited Portland as I worked to complete my degree. I would also like to take this opportunity to show my appreciation for the families I built as a student at Gonzaga University and as an employee at South Seattle College. Your cheerleading provided me with encouragement and support to keep going. I would also like to recognize Mariano Sampaio for pushing me to complete what I started. I also need to recognize the advice and guidance I received from my dad, Dr. Robert Zinke. Thank you for your valuable perspective and endless support of me. Finally, and most importantly, I would especially like to recognize Brian Ruff for his continued support and taking on more than his fair share of our responsibilities while I completed this project. Brian, you put your own ambitions on hold so that I could focus on mine. Without that support at home, none of this would have been possible. I will be forever grateful to you for that.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract i
Dedication ii
Acknowledgments iii
List of Tables v
List of Figures vi

Chapter I
Introduction 1

Chapter II
Literature Review 5

Chapter III
Methods 38

Chapter IV
Exploring the Connection Process 50

Chapter V
Nature of Student Connection 108

Chapter VI
Discussion and Conclusion 137

References 171

Appendix:
Interview Guide 176

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1: Participant Characteristics 42

Table 2: Timeline of Student Connection 153

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Tinto's (1993:114) longitudinal model of student departure..... 10

Figure 2 Guiffrida's (2006:461) recommended changes to Tinto's theory in bold 15

Figure 3 Berger and Milem's (1999:645) Causal Model of Student Persistence..... 20

Figure 4: Stage 1 Acclimation 140

Figure 5 Stage 2 Transition..... 146

Figure 6: Stage 3 Acceptance 150

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

For many college students, feelings of engagement and connection influence their decisions about continuing their education. Studies have shown that students who are more academically and socially connected to their college or university are more likely to persist at that institution than students who are less connected (Ishitani and McKitrick 2010; Pascarella and Terenzini 2003). Current models of student persistence depict connection as occurring in a variety of ways, from living on-campus and participating in extracurricular activities to participating in undergraduate research opportunities with professors (Astin 1984; Tinto 1975, 1993).

This presents an issue for commuter schools whose students have less time to participate in these types of activities and are more likely to feel disconnected (Kodama 2002). These schools often have large populations of transfer students, many of whom transfer from community colleges. Over 40% of first-time college students begin their education at community colleges and many of those students end up transferring to large, urban, four-year commuter institutions (Shapiro et al. 2018; Jacoby & Garland 2004). Increases in community college transfer students connection represents an additional challenge for commuter schools, since many community college transfer students report being less connected to their four-year university than traditional students who attend only one institution (Ishitani and McKitrick 2010; Townsend and Wilson 2006). After transferring to the four-year institution, community college transfer students must navigate a new environment where they often encounter many challenges to connection (Ruiz & Pryor 2011; Kirk-Kuwaye & Kirk-Kuwaye 2007; Kodama 2002). This is a particular issue for schools like Portland State University whose undergraduate

population is comprised of more than 60% transfer students, with over half of those students transferring from community colleges (PSU Office of Institutional Research and Planning).

The purpose of this in-depth interview study is to explore how 14 commuter community college students who transferred to Portland State University in Portland, Oregon experience connection to the university. The commuter community college transfer students interviewed all transferred to PSU with junior status. A second purpose of this study is to identify how commuter community college transfer students become connected to PSU and how commuter community college transfer student connection experiences change over time. In order to understand how connection experience change, 7 of the commuter community college transfer students participating in this study where interviewed during their first year after transferring to PSU and 7 commuter community college transfer students were interviewed within three quarters of graduating from PSU.

An additional aim of this study is to determine whether current theories of student persistence apply to today's the changing demographics of students enrolled in higher education. First developed over thirty years ago, Tinto's (1975; 1993) Stages of Student Departure model and Astin's (1984) Theory of Student Involvement have become widely accepted by researchers studying student persistence (Pascarella, Terenzini, and Wolfe 1986; Ose 1997; Herzog 2005; Leppel 2006). However, recent research has suggested that little of the research studying these theories addresses the validity of each theories' conceptualization of connection as they relate to community college transfer students (D'Amico et al 2014; Deil-Amen 2011). As such, this study will utilize these theories as

a theoretical framework in order to determine their relevancy to commuter community college transfer students.

This study utilized a qualitative research design in order to uncover a deeper understanding of the complex process of connection. Qualitative methodology will allow for further understanding of how these processes play out in the lived experiences of students while also allowing for the emergence of new understandings of transfer student connection. All of the students in the study were asked to reflect on their experiences during orientation, their first quarter, and the end of their first year after transferring. Additionally, the 7 participants who were approaching graduation were asked to reflect on their experiences during their last year at PSU.

For the purpose of this study, 'commuter community college transfer students' are students who do not live on campus and attended a community college prior to transferring to Portland State University. 'Connection' refers to student adjustment and the ways in which students feel attached to the university. 'Persistence' is understood to mean students' decision to continue enrolling in school from quarter to quarter. 'First-quarter' is understood to refer to the first full quarter that a student was enrolled at PSU while 'End of first year' is understood to refer to the end of a students' third quarter of enrollment at PSU. Finally, 'graduation' is understood to refer to the last year of school at PSU for a student who has either graduated or is within three quarters of graduating from PSU.

This study aims to answer the following questions:

1. *How do commuter community college transfer students experience connection to PSU?*

2. *How do commuter community college transfer student connection experiences change over time?*

This thesis will be organized as follows: This chapter introduces the research topic and presents the research questions. Chapter two will review the relevant literature on community college transfer students and current models of persistence that will be used in this study. Chapter three will present this study's methodology, including research design, participants & recruitment, data collection, and analysis. Chapter four is the first of two findings' sections and will present findings on student experiences of connection by point in time after transfer. Chapter five presents findings on how students experience academic connection, how academic connection affects social connection, and the impact of student living situations on connection. Finally, Chapter six will discuss the findings in relation to current models of student persistence, identify key contributions of this study, acknowledge this study's limitations, and provide suggestions for future research.

CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

With a changing dynamic of student populations, understanding factors that influence student retention for different types of students is more important than ever. Institutions of higher education need this information so they can best serve the needs for each sub-population. Some research indicates the amount of social support students perceive is also related to academic persistence (Dixon Rayle et al. 2006; Nicpon et al. 2006; Laanan 2007). Others have found that financial concerns influence student transfer decisions (Hoyt & Winn 2004, Herzog 2005; Luo et al 2007). Taking into account the variety of possible factors contributing to student retention, it becomes even more imperative for institutions to assess the specific needs of their own student bodies.

DIFFERING PATHWAYS TO COLLEGE

The last twenty years has seen a shift in the pathways that students take to degree completion. Undergraduate students are now less likely to follow a traditional pathway to a college degree, where students enter a four-year university right out of high school and earn a degree from that same institution. Instead, students are more likely to attend multiple institutions. Nearly 40% of all first-time students who enrolled in college in fall 2011 went on to enroll at more than one institution of higher education within 6 years before earning a bachelor's degree (Shapiro et al. 2018). These students may have transferred in a variety of ways, including vertically from 2-year institutions to four-year institutions, laterally between four-year institutions, or swirling from four-year institutions to 2-year institutions before returning to four-year institutions to complete their bachelor's degree (Luo, Williams, & Vieweg 2007; Shapiro et al. 2018).

In Townsend's (2007) review of community college student attainment, she identified several typically cited reasons, like low-cost tuition and geographical convenience. Townsend also added a couple reasons for enrolling at a two-year institution not explored in community college literature: wanting the comfort of the small campus environment and or as an avenue for students to determine whether college is right for them. Generally, community colleges provide a diverse group of students with access to college who otherwise might not continue their education.

COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENTS

Today, more than 40% of first time college students begin their undergraduate careers at community colleges (Shapiro et al. 2018). Costing nearly $5,000 less in tuition costs on average than in-state public four-year universities (American Association of Community Colleges [AACC] 2018), community colleges provide a low-cost access to higher education for disadvantaged populations.

Community colleges have historically been an access point to higher education for minorities (Mullin 2012). Over half of all minorities attend community colleges as opposed to four-year institutions (Mullin 2012; AACC 2018). According to AACC's 2018 Fact Sheet, 56% of Native American, 40% of Asian/Pacific Islander, 43% of black, and 52% of Hispanic undergraduate students attend community colleges rather than four-year institutions. This is consistent with past findings that minority students are more likely to attend community colleges than their white peers (Paulsen & St. John 2002; Lee & Frank 1990). Similarly, two-year institutions also have been marketed as an affordable option for low-income students. As such, community college students are more likely to be from lower social classes than students who first attend four-year institutions

(Goldrick-Rab 2007; Paulsen & St. John 2002; Lee & Frank 1990). In fact, community colleges enroll over 40% of all undergraduate students living in poverty (Mullin 2012). Additional studies have also consistently found that students who enter community colleges are less academically prepared than their peers at four-year institutions (Goldrick-Rab 2007; Lee & Frank 1990).

MODELS OF STUDENT PERSISTENCE

Throughout the 1960s, research on college student retention focused mainly on individual characteristics of students and institutions (Tinto 1975, 1993). Retention research with a systematic focus began in earnest during the 1970s (Tinto 1975, 1993; Astin 1984). It was through this research that Spady (1970) began developing the first theory of student retention. Applying Durkheim's (1961) suicide to the concept of college student departure, Spady proposed that by looking at the college or institution as a social system comprised of its own values and social structures that when a student drops out of that social system, it is analogous to suicide. From that, Spady (1971) developed a model of student departure explaining the process of how students' individual attributes (values, interests, attitudes, etc) interact with their college environments (peers, faculty, administrators). When a student's individual attributes are in congruence with the cultural norms of the college social system then the student is more likely to persist.

Spady's (1971) model helped to form the foundation for Tinto's (1975; 1988; 1993) and Astin's (1984) models that have become among the best known and most often cited theories of student retention (Berger, Ramirez, & Lyons 2012). The frameworks developed by both Astin (1984) and Tinto (1975; 1988; 1993) focus on involvement as influencing student retention. While these theories have been widely accepted as

reflecting the experience for students entering higher education directly after high school, it is important to examine these theories as they apply to the changing population of students described at the beginning of this chapter. The students currently enrolling in higher education may not experience connection to their institutions in the same way that students from previous generations connected. By looking at both theories, this study aims to determine whether the current models of student persistence are still relevant and whether concepts within the theories may need to be redefined to more accurately depict the experiences of the current population of students enrolled in institutions of higher education.

Tinto's Student Departure Model.

Drawing upon Spady's (1971) application of Durkheim's theory, Tinto (1975, 1993) developed his Student Departure Model to be more predictive in nature than descriptive. According to Durkheim's (1961) theory, suicide is more likely to occur when an individual is not integrated into society either morally or due to a lack of collective affiliations. Like Spady (1971), Tinto (1975) based his theory around the argument that the college or institution is the social system with its own set of values and social structures. Therefore, conditions that may lead to suicide on a large scale may lead to behaviors such as dropping out of college on a smaller scale.

Identifying the institution as a social system, Tinto's (1975, 1993) argues that colleges are comprised of both social and academic systems to which students must integrate. This important distinction is important because it identifies the two ways in which a student departs, through either voluntary withdrawal or academic dismissal. This also suggests that a student can be integrated in one domain while not in the other. At the

same time, these systems have a reciprocal functional relationship where what happens in one system affects the other (see Figure 1). As a result, too much focus on one area may negatively impact persistence. For example, a student may excel academically but struggle socially and choose to withdraw. Similarly, a student may do well socially but struggle academically and result in academic dismissal from the institution.

According to Tinto's (1975, 1993) Student Departure Model, students' persistence is longitudinal and interactional in nature. Students come to the college or institution with a unique combination of pre-entry attributes, including family background, individual attributes, and pre-college schooling. Family background describes influences such as student's childhood socioeconomic status, family values, and family expectations. Individual attributes include factors such as sex, gender, race, and student ability-levels. Finally, pre-college schooling accounts for student's pre-college GPA, academic attainment, and other pre-college education experiences. Tinto argues that the combination of these background characteristics both directly and indirectly influence a student's academic performance in college. This study controls for individual characteristics to some extent by focusing on a select group of undergraduates, commuter community college transfer students.

Tinto also argues that these pre-entry attributes that a student brings with them to college influence their intentions (the student's desired level of education and future occupation), their level of commitment to their intention (goal commitment) and the expectations that a student has for college (institutional commitment). For example, a student who intends to obtain a PhD may be more likely to complete their four-year degree than someone with lower expectations. Similarly, a student's commitment to their

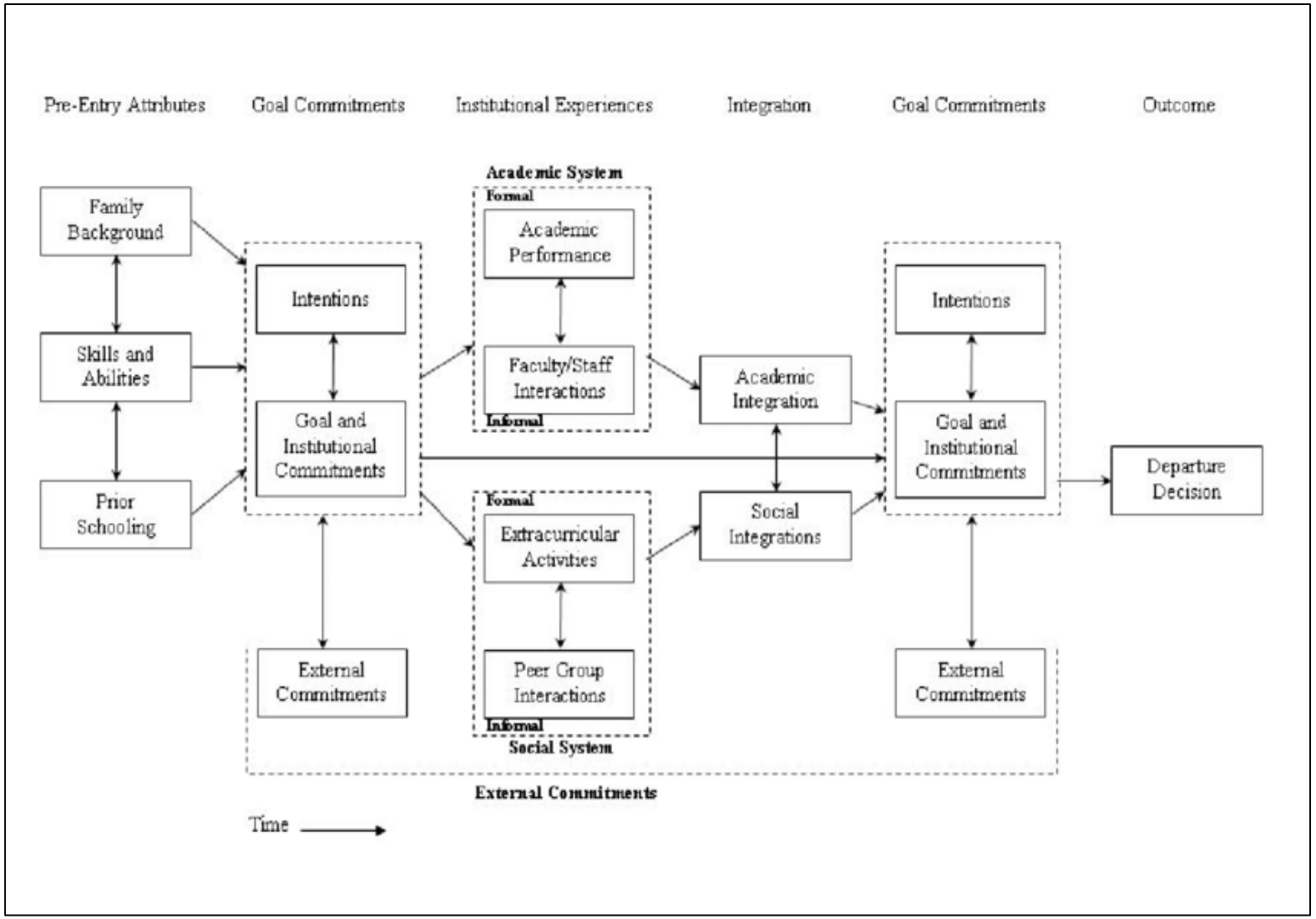

Figure 1: Tinto's (1993:114) longitudinal model of student departure

institution influences their likelihood of persistence. Tinto argues that student institutional commitment is based upon factors like financial commitment, student disposition (how a student perceives a particular institution due to institutional prestige or relatives who previously attended the institution), time commitments, and other commitments external to the institution.

Then, after a student reaches campus, their intentions and commitments to the institution, their goals, and other external commitments predict and reflect the student's experiences in the formal and informal academic and social systems that exist within the college environment. In turn, the student's institutional experiences influence their overall level of academic and social integration. According to Tinto (1975:96), "it is the person's normative and structural integration into the academic and social systems that lead to new levels of commitment." The longitudinal nature of Tinto's model suggests that student's experiences in the social and academic systems within the college environment and their subsequent integration lead students to continually modify their intentions and various commitments. This ultimately affects student departure outcomes. As stated by Tinto (1975),

> It is the interplay between the individual's commitment to the goal of college completion and his commitment to the institution that determines whether or not the individual decides to drop out of college and the forms of dropout behavior the individual adopts. (P. 96)

Academic and social integration

For Tinto (1988), understanding the process of academic and social integration is integral to understanding the longitudinal nature of his model. Using Van Gennep's *The Rites of Passage* as a way to think about the longitudinal process, Tinto suggests that integration occurs in three stages: *separation, transition, and incorporation.*

In the first stage of *separation,* students begin the process of leaving behind their past associations. During this stage, students typically decrease their interactions with individuals from their past, like childhood friends and family. This stage may be a difficult stage for some students and accepted by others as part of the process (Tinto 1988). Tinto suggests that the student's adjustment during this stage largely depends on the views of college attendance by their past communities. For example, students whose parents attended college may view this stage more favorably than first-generation college students and adjust more smoothly to their new environment. That being said, Tinto argues that there is always a degree of transformation and the accompanying stress that may be severe enough for students to drop-out of college or transfer institutions. This is especially relevant for students who attend schools far from home or with vastly different social and intellectual values than their home communities. Similarly, while students who choose to live at home may potentially experience less stress, they may end up having less contact with their college community and therefore "They may not be able to reap the full social and intellectual rewards that social membership in college communities brings" (Tinto 1988:443). Tinto suggests that students living at home may experience more external forces that pull them from the college community and, as a result, decrease their likelihood of persistence compared to their peers living on-campus. This stage of the Tinto's model suggests that commuter community college transfer students who persist would describe decreased involvement in their home communities while they attend school.

The second stage of *transition* is an intermediary period between the first and third stages. During this time, students have separated themselves from their past

communities but have not yet acquired the new norms of their college community. This is a stressful time for students, who may not feel tied to any community and are experiencing a sense of loss for their past and bewilderment about their future (Tinto 1988). This uncertainty leads some students to withdraw. Tinto (1988) argues that departure at this stage is less about an inability to integrate into the social and academic systems of the college environment than it is about students' lack of coping skills or weak goal or institutional commitments. Furthermore, some students may experience greater change in this stage than others. Tinto (1988) suggests that the degree to which students must adjust depends on a multitude of factors "not the least of which is the degree of difference between the norms and practices of behavior of the past and those required for incorporation into the life of the college" (P. 445). As a result, students coming from families and communities with differing values than the college may experience greater challenges than students coming from families and communities with more aligning values. These challenges may be even greater for students living off-campus or at home since they may not feel it is necessary to adjust to the college environment and limit their on-campus involvement. The resulting limited interaction with other members of the college community may impede the student from acquiring the norms and behavioral patterns required for the final stage of integration, incorporation. Based on this, commuter community college transfer students who are less involved may have issues acquiring the norms and behaviors that will assist with adjustment to the institution's academic and social systems.

Finally, for students who persist beyond the first two stages, *incorporation* is the stage where students become full-fledged members of the college community. Student

involvement is key at this point. Incorporation comes from continued contact with other members of the community, in this case other students, faculty, and staff. Tinto (1988) argues that while orientations are a popular way to introduce students to the campus community, they are more symbolic in nature and much of student contact occurs through involvement in smaller programs or communities such as student organizations, fraternities, and other extracurricular activities that are often not well marketed to new students. As such, students are often left to their own devices to learn college life since institutions often have few formal mechanisms to assist students to become connected. Students who struggle making connections on their own may begin to feel isolated, like they do not belong, and leave the college, either dropping out of college altogether or transferring to an institution that more closely aligns with their internalized values or identities. As a result, this would imply that the commuter community college transfer students who persist would describe feeling like full-fledged members of the Portland State community.

In recent years, Tinto's original theoretical framework has been updated to reflect more cultural sensitivity due to criticisms regarding the theory's failure to recognize cultural variables that affect student outcomes, particularly for minorities (Guiffrida 2006; Tinto 2012). Guiffrida (2006) put forth a cultural advancement of Tinto's theory (see Figure 2 on next page) "with the goal of strengthening it, enhancing its cultural sensitivity, and making it more descriptive of minority student academic achievement and persistence" (p. 453). Guiffrida asserts that greater cultural sensitivity includes taking into account the varying norms of increasingly more diverse student populations. Taking these into account allows researchers to develop further a theoretical framework that

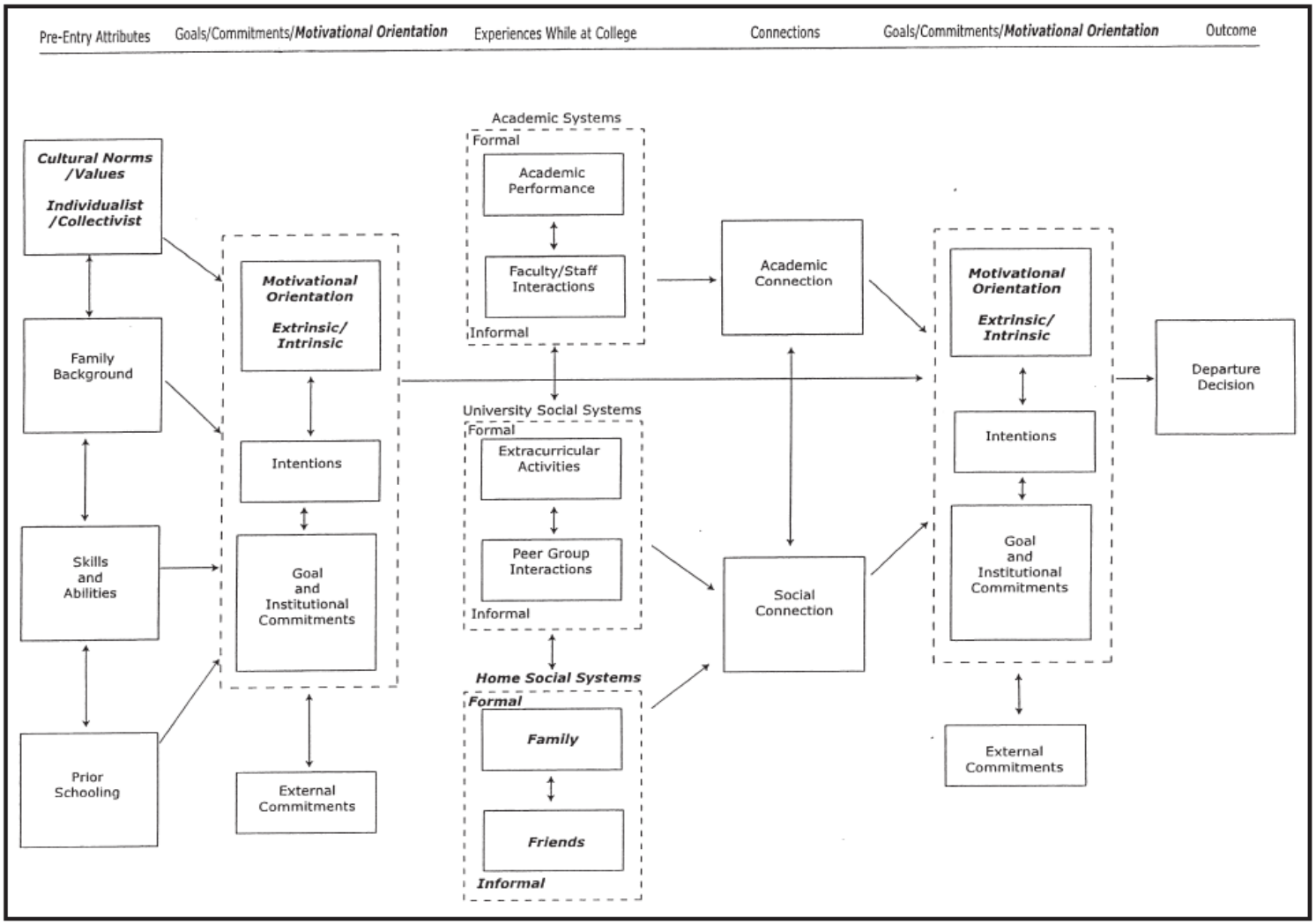

Figure 2 Guiffrida's (2006:461) recommended changes to Tinto's

applies to these diverse students.

Guiffrida's (2006) modifications incorporate both Self-Determination Theory (SDT) and Job Involvement Theory (JIT) into the longitudinal model by adding the concepts of *cultural norms/values* and *motivational orientation* to the first two stages of Tinto's (1993) model. Drawing from SDT, Guiffrida argues that students are motivated to learn due to either *intrinsic* or *extrinsic* motivational orientations. Intrinsic motivational orientations are comprised of three primary components: autonomy (the need to choose to become engaged in learning due to the alignment of the subject matter with students' interests and values), competence (the need for continual growth and self-improvement while demonstrating effective interactions with their environment), and relatedness (the need for close, secure relationships with others). Extrinsic motivational orientations can take one of three forms: external regulation (motivation due to external punishments or rewards), introjected regulation (when students partially internalize external punishments or rewards), and identified regulation (when students fully internalize the external pressures to engage in learning). Guiffrida argues that students with intrinsic motivational orientations are more likely to succeed than students who are extrinsically motivated, except in the case of identified regulation which may help students who understand that the material is important but find it personally uninteresting.

To understand student's motivational orientation one must recognize how a student's ingrained cultural norms impact their motivational orientation. Guiffrida (2006) posits that this can be done through the incorporation of JIT. Like SDT, JIT argues that intrinsic and extrinsic motivation fuel all human behavior. However, JIT asserts that involvement in an activity depends on the activity's ability to fulfill salient needs of an

individual, whether intrinsic or extrinsic, and that the intrinsic motivations for people socialized in individualistic cultures is different from those socialized in collectivist cultures. As such, Guiffrida asserts that adding the influence of cultural norms/values to students' pre-entry attributes will help predict student motivational orientations, which in turn affect student intentions, commitments, and college experiences.

The last two changes that Guiffrida (2006) proposed for Tinto's (1993) theory included adding *home social systems* as a distinct category and replacing *integration* with *connection.* Guiffrida (2006) argues that while Tinto's original theory incorporates the impact of family on pre-college commitments, that "to truly be descriptive of students who espouse collectivist cultural orientations, the theory must also recognize the potential of families and friends from home… to support students once they arrive at college" (P. 457). For many students, particularly those who hold collectivist values, the influence of family and friends from their home social systems assists students in coping with challenges while they are in school. Furthermore, Guiffrida argues that the term integration emphasizes students' adaptation to the majority culture whereas connection encourages institutions to affirm and value their diverse student cultures and the need for students to draw support from cultural connections both internal and external to the institution.

By using Guiffrida's revision of Tinto's theory, this study aims to be more inclusive of the diverse experiences of commuter community college transfer students. Rather than discussing "integration" to social and academic systems, this study will utilize Guiffrida's term "connection" to refer to ways in which students feel attached to the university. Not assuming that students must leave behind their home social

communities in order to establish connection to an institution allows the researcher to assess the affect of living off-campus on connection from a more neutral perspective.

Astin's Theory of Student Involvement

Astin (1984) developed the framework for his Theory of Student Involvement from observations that indicated students who participated more on campus were more likely to return than those less involved. When developing his theory, Astin sought to create a simple theory that did not need to be diagramed, could explain empirical knowledge gathered by many researchers, embraced principles across many different disciplines, and could be used by both researchers and college administrators to guide further research and programmatic design. Astin further argues that his theory closely resembles the Freudian concept of *cathexis* where people invest psychological energy into other people or objects. As such, Astin identifies this psychological investment as *involvement* and defines it as "the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience" (1984:518).

Five basic postulates comprise Astin's (1984) Theory of Student Involvement. The first focuses on involvement, whereby students invest physical and psychological energy into an object, either large (general environment) or small (studying for a specific test). The second assumption suggests that involvement occurs along a continuum and that students' degree of involvement with various objects changes at different points in time. Third, involvement is both quantitative and qualitative in nature. Fourth, student learning and self-development is proportional to the quality and quantity of the student's involvement in that activity. Finally, there is a positive correlation between the success of educational policies and the capability of the specific program or policy to increase

student involvement. Although Astin admits that the last two postulates are not actually postulates in the literal sense due to the fact that they are subject to empirical proof, he argues that it is these two propositions that research on involvement would be designed to test.

Astin (1984) also argues that studying student involvement should focus on student behaviors. According to him, student time may be the most important institutional resource since student success in achieving their goals is directly associated with the amount of time and effort that they devote to activities designed to assist students achieve those goals. Therefore, Astin argues that a student's level of involvement with the following factors influences their likelihood of retention or persistence: living on or off-campus, participation in honors programs, academic involvement, student-faculty interaction, athletic involvement, and participation in student government.

This study aims to explore the nuances of commuter community college transfer student connection. Using Astin's theory of student involvement will allow for a more nuanced understanding of connection experiences for this population.

Berger and Milem's Causal Model of Student Persistence

While Astin's (1984) and Tinto's (1974,1993) theories have both been tested extensively, but separately, Berger and Milem (1999) sought to connect the two models explicitly. While Tinto's (1975,1993) theory focuses on student outcomes, Astin (1984) asserts that his theory "is more concerned with the behavioral mechanisms or processes that facilitate student development" (522). Astin (1984) further argues that other theories of student persistence are concerned more with motivation, which focuses more on the psychological state of the student. In this way, Astin's theory focuses more on the

mechanisms of how students become connected while Tinto's theory focuses on the results of student connection. Berger and Milem (1999) argue that both Astin's

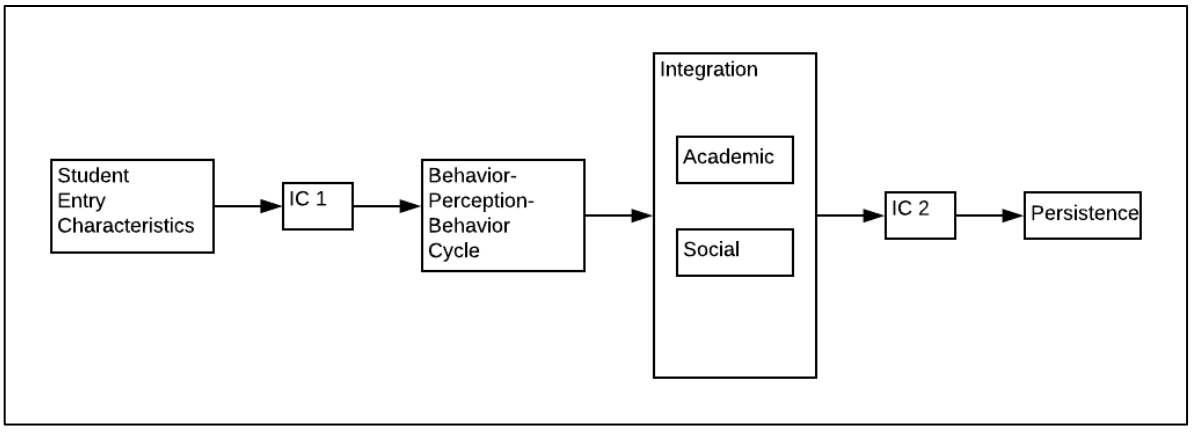

Figure 3 Berger and Milem's (1999:645) Causal Model of Student Persistence

behavioral concept of involvement and Tinto's definition of integration are key conceptual underpinnings in an integrated model of college student persistence. By combining the two theories, Berger and Milem attempted to "further the understanding of the relationship between behavioral involvement and perceptual integration in the college persistence process" (1999:642). Using this more comprehensive model of student departure decisions, Berger and Milem found support for using Astin's smaller framework as a helper theory to Tinto's larger framework. They argue that this model expands upon other student persistence models by illustrating the ongoing process by which students make departure decisions, where students' behaviors and perceptions are continually modifying each other (see Figure 3).

Theoretical Framework

Both Tinto's *Student Departure Model* (including its various updates) and Astin's *Theory of Student Involvement* have been supported by research findings over a long period of time for traditional students (Pascarella, Terenzini, and Wolfe 1986; Ose 1997; Herzog 2005; Leppel 2006). Similarly, these theories have also been discussed in relation

to transfer students as well (Lee & Frank 1990; Ashar & Skenes 1993; Ishitani & McKitrick 2010; Laanan 2007; Ose 1997). However, some researchers argue that little of the research using these theories addresses the validity of social and academic connection as concepts as they relate to community college transfer students (D'Amico et al 2014; Deil-Amen, 2011). For the purposes of this study, I will use Guiffrida's (2006) update of Tinto's (1975,1993) theory and Astin's (1984) theory as a helper theory to Tinto's theory to explore how community college transfer students experience connection to PSU and how those experiences change over time. By following Berger and Milem's (1993) lead and using Astin's theory as a helper theory to Tinto's framework, this study hopes to expand upon the concept of connection after transferring to a four-year institution for commuter community college transfer students.

In the following sections, I will discuss what research has found about community college persistence, which community college students transfer, how students navigate the transfer transition, and finally I will use Tinto and Astin's theories as a framework to discuss current understandings of transfer student experiences.

COMMUNITY COLLEGE PERSISTENCE

Literature examining community college student persistence has mainly focused on the influence of student characteristics on student persistence while still attending the two-year institution. Among these studies, a number of factors have been identified as influencing persistence. Multiple studies have found that, for the majority of students, utilizing more financial aid in the form of loans leads to a decrease in persistence (McKinney & Burridge 2015; Dougherty & Kienzl 2006; Dowd & Coury 2006), except for older students, where taking out greater amounts in loans actually increases

persistence (Dowd & Coury 2006; Jackson & Laanan 2015).

Academic preparation is another factor identified in the literature as influencing community college student persistence. Hurtado and Ponjuan (2005) found a positive relationship between academic preparation and persistence. Similarly, Crisp and Nora (2010) found that community college students who had been enrolled in advance high school math courses were more likely to persist than students who were enrolled in less challenging high school math. Moreover, enrolling in developmental courses while at the community college increases students' time to completion of degree, which results in a decrease in persistence for these students (D'Amico et al 2011). Furthermore, associated with academic preparation, multiple studies have shown that students whose parents hold higher levels of education are more likely to persist at the community college than students whose parents are less educated (Crisp & Nora 2010; Dougherty & Kienzl 2006; Porchea et al 2005).

Meanwhile, a small amount of literature has examined community college student behaviors while in school and their influence on persistence. Crisp and Nora (2010) found that students who worked a greater number of hours were less likely to persist than students who worked fewer hours. Mamiseishvili (2010) found that differences in role orientation influenced student persistence among students who worked while in school. He found that students who primarily identified as being an employee were generally disengaged and less interested in school, which significantly decreased their persistence to their second year compared to working students who perceived their primary role as a student.

Involvement with learning communities and student success programs has also been identified as increasing academic persistence among community college students (Cho & Karp 2013; Engstrom & Tinto 2008). While examining the effect of learning communities at both two-and four-year institutions, Engstrom and Tinto found that under-academically prepared students involved in learning communities were more likely to interact with faculty, be engaged with their classwork, and interact with their peers and were ultimately more likely to persist at their same institution to the next academic year. Studying only two-year institutions, Clark (2012) found that students who enrolled in student success courses during their first semester at the two-year institution were more likely to persist to their second year than students who did not participate in these courses. They also found that students enrolled in developmental courses who also enrolled in the student success courses were more likely to earn more college credits during their first year than other students enrolled in developmental courses. Often, enrolling in these courses results in increased interactions with faculty both in and out of the class, something that has also been identified as one of the most important factors contributing to academic persistence at the community college (Clark 2012).

Although little research has looked explicitly at connection in relations to community college students, Schudde (2018) found that when community college students engaged with faculty and peers about their academics they were more likely to persist. This research supports previous findings that academic and social connection are interrelated for community college students (Diel-Amen 2011). Diel-Amen (2011) proposed that instead of experiencing academic and social connection as two distinct experiences, students instead experience “socio-academic integrative moments” where

both academic and social connection is occurring, like studying with peers and interacting during class.

COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENTS WHO TRANSFER

A growing body of research on community college students emerged with the expansion of the community college system over the last fifty years, mostly looking at their likelihood of transferring. Jenkins and Fink (2016) report that while 80% of students enrolled at community colleges intend to transfer, only 25% of community college transfer students transfer to a four-year institution within five years. Current research indicates that community college students who do transfer to four-year institutions typically come from higher social classes than community college students who do not transfer (Chetty et al 2017; Dougherty & Kienzl 2006; Porchea et al 2005), although they are from lower social classes than students who first enroll at four-year institutions (Lee & Frank 1990). According to Dougherty and Kienzl (2006), this may be a result of inadequate academic preparation. This is consistent with other research that indicates students with better academic preparation are more likely to earn two-year degrees and transfer to four-year institutions (Porchea et al 2005).

Similarly, students are more likely to transfer when they plan to attend college at an earlier age (Wang 2009; Lee & Frank 1990). This supports research suggesting that younger students are more likely to transfer to a senior institution than older students, especially if they enroll at the community college directly after high school (Dougherty & Kienzl 2006). Younger students also transfer without earning their associates degrees at higher rates than older students (Porchea et al 2005).

As a result, community college students who transfer may be different from the traditional college students. As mentioned earlier, they are more likely to be from lower social classes than students who begin at four-year institutions however students from the lowest social class are less likely to transfer. Therefore, those students who do transfer typically belong to a social class that falls between those who begin at community college but do not transfer and those who begin at four-year institutions. This same pattern follows for academic preparation.

NAVIGATING THE TRANSFER TRANSITION

Once transferring, community college students then must adjust to their new four-year institution. According to Flaga (2006), transfer students must learn to navigate through new environments at their new institution. She identifies the first environment as the academic environment, which includes situations like interacting within the classroom, with faculty, with advisors. The next environment, social, encompasses the student interactions outside of the classroom such as contact with other students through student organizations, common areas, and residence halls. Studies examining the social and academic environments are common throughout the literature (e.g. Jackson & Laanan 2015; Mayhew 2011; Laanan et al 2010, Berger & Milem 1999), but Flaga introduces a third: the physical environment. This new environment looks not only at the physical buildings on campus but encompasses "the structure in which campus services and departments are organized, campus logistics, overall campus culture, student finances, and parking" (2006:6). Typically, research combines the social and physical environments, but Flaga asserts that by separating the physical and social it enhances the

understanding of how transfer students navigate their transition to the four-year institution.

Flaga (2006) also found five dimensions of transition within these three environments: learning resources, connection, familiarity, negotiating, and integration. The learning resources dimension refers to the means by which students learn about the campus and the way that the institutional system works. Connection occurs through relationships with others both socially and academically. It also emerges through the amount of time students spend on campus. With regards to familiarity, students become used to their new environments and begin to internalize their new experiences, becoming comfortable at their new institution. Next, transfer students use negotiating strategies to transition into their new environments by changing their behaviors and surroundings in order to become comfortable within their environment. Finally, transfer students begin to integrate into their new environments, shifting their perceptions and identity students have relating to their new environments. Together, these dimensions draw a comprehensive picture of how students transition within each of the different environments individually and the institution as a whole.

Along with transitioning through the various dimensions within an institution's environments, other researchers have identified other parts of the transfer process such as transferring credits and registering for classes (Monaghan and Attewell 2015; Gard et al 2012; Davies & Casey 1998), communication with institutional representatives (Jackson & Laanan 2015; Ruiz and Pryor 2011; Laanan 2010), financial aid (Jackson & Laanan 2015; Gard et al 2012; Dougherty 1992), and experiencing transfer shock (Glass and Harrington 2002; Cedja, Kaylor & Rewey 1998).

Credits and Classes

Many transfer students have identified transferring credits and scheduling classes as common challenges that they face after transferring to a four-year institution. A number of studies have found that transfer students face issues with the senior institutions accepting the credits that they earned at the two-year institution (Jenkins and Fink 2016; Monaghan and Attewell 2015; Gard et al 2012; Davies & Casey 1998; Dougherty 1992). In fact, many community college transfer students face issues with credit transfer since lower division credits are less likely to transfer to four-year institutions (Monaghan and Attewell 2015; Dougherty 1992). Of the courses that did transfer, they may have transferred only as electives and not towards their degree's course requirements (Davies & Casey 1998).

However, this is not an issue for all transfer students. Townsend and Wilson (2006) found that transferring credits was not an issue for the students in their study. They argue that articulation agreements between community colleges and four-year institutions can ease the transition and acceptance of credits. The researchers also argue that the increased availability provided through institution websites also increases the students' ability to find out which courses transfer to the senior institution. Similarly, Davies and Casey (1998) found that a transfer students' transition was made easier when there was more sufficient information provided in community college course catalogues about course transfer. They found that transfer students had an easier transition if the community college used a course catalogue system that marked transferable courses and university faculty made regular visits to the community college. In contrast, transfer students experienced more difficulties in their transition when the course catalogues at

their community colleges provided no clear demarcations regarding transferable courses or that the four-year program requirements were unclear.

Transfer students also experience course and credit difficulties in scheduling classes. First, transfer students have difficulties scheduling classes due to registration processes (Owens 2010). Although universities may have registration process where students with more credits receive priority registration, transfer students do not receive the same priority while registering for their first semester at the senior institution (Owens 2010). This leaves transfer students with few, if any, seats available in classes required for their degrees and graduation. Furthermore, transfer students have more time constraints and therefore feel that universities need to do a better job about being more flexible with regards to class schedules by adding more evening and weekend courses (Gard et al 2012).

Institutional Representatives

Communication with institutional representatives has been noted by a number of researchers as an important influence on successful transitions for transfer students (Jackson & Laanan 2015; Ruiz & Pryor 2011; Laanan et al 2010; Owens 2010; Berger & Malaney 2003; Davies & Casey 1998). Ruiz & Pryor (2011) found that the majority of transfer students never talked to a representative from either their community college or the senior institution about transferring. Most of these students discussed the difficulties they have accessing counseling and advising services outside of regular business hours. Of transfer students who did talk with community college counselors, bad experiences with these representatives often negatively affected student adjustment within the academic environment at the senior institution (Laanan et al. 2010). At the same time,

Owens (2010) indicates that many students feel that they are not receiving enough guidance during the transition to the senior institution. As such, many students rely upon classmates and other students to obtain most of their information about the four-year institution. This supports Davies and Casey's (1998) finding that transfer students feel that both the two-year and four-year institutions need to provide more accurate information in order to improve the transfer process. As such, it is important that institutions keep their articulation agreements updated and easily available to students to view in order to help with their transitions.

Financial Aid

As noted earlier, many transfer students choose to begin their collegiate education at community colleges due to lower tuition rates at two-year institutions compared to four-year institutions. Upon transferring to a four-year institution, many of these students experience sticker shock at the different tuition rates between the two institutions (Gard et al 2012). Gard et al (2012) also found that transfer students feel they are denied access to the financial aid that they need in order to pay for college. This may be due, in part, to the lack of merit-based financial aid offered to transfer students. Dougherty (1992) found that many four-year institutions do not offer merit-based aid to transfer students. Furthermore, he found that transfer students receive less financial aid than students who begin at the four-year institution. Combined with the lack of federal financial aid programs specifically aimed to help transfer students, this undermines the transfer process and creates an extra obstacle that transfer students must overcome.

Transfer Shock

The term "transfer shock" originated from Hills (1965) who found community college transfer students typically experienced a drop in GPA of between .30 and .50 during the first semester after transferring. For a long period of time, the majority of research on transfer students focused on transfer shock, confirming Hill's (1965) finding that that a small drop in GPA does occur at the time of transfer (Glass & Harrington 2002; Cedja et al 1998; Buckley 1970). Glass and Harrington (2002) found that while transfer students had similar GPAs to students who began college at a four-year institution during their first two years of college, transfer students experienced a one semester drop in GPA after transferring from a community college into their major at the four-year institution while the native students experienced no such upon entering their major during the same semester. On the other hand, some research indicates that one's major influences the presence of transfer shock for many students. Cedja et al (1998) found that students majoring in math and science experienced a drop, however no other majors experienced any drop in grades.

UNDERSTANDING STUDENT CONNECTION

While Astin's (1984) and Tinto's (1988) studies were originally developed to understand and improve student retention of freshman students, their approaches have also been used to study the satisfaction of transfer students at their second institution. The most prominent are studies by Ose (1997) and Woosley and Johnson (2006). Both of these researchers found that overall transfer students who spent less time participating in extracurricular activities reported being less satisfied with student activities and less like a member of the community than native students, those students who began their college

career at that institution. Overall, these impressions generally lasted through the first and second terms after matriculation for all transfer students (Ose 1997). After these initial terms, transfer students who participated in extracurricular activities became more satisfied with the institution and while they had once felt like outsiders, during their senior year they reported feeling like insiders in the community (Ose 1997).

While a few studies on transfer students examined the involvement of these students, most of the studies focused on general perceptions of their new institution. The majority of transfer students, whether they have transferred from a community college or another four-year university reported feeling less like members of their new community than students who began their first year there (Cherniack and Mock 1968; Buckley 1971; Andersen and Peterson 1973; Anstett 1973; Ose 1997; Woosley and Johnson 2006). In fact, students who transferred from community colleges reported feeling like the general atmosphere on campus was more cautious, less rebellious, and more conventional than students who matriculated at the institution as freshmen perceived it (Andersen and Peterson 1973).

Transfer Expectations and Perceptions of Campus Environment

Buckley (1971) discovered what he termed the "transfer myth," where prior to starting at their new institution community college transfer students anticipate an idealized atmosphere that is different from what is perceived by the school's upperclassmen. Andersen and Peterson's (1973) findings support this theory, but also they found that the expectations of community college transfers formed a self-fulfilling prophecy: students who came with higher expectations regarding their new school

generally felt greater satisfaction with the institution and felt as though they had made the right choice in transferring.

More recently, Laanan (2007) also found that community college transfers with negative perceptions of the four-year environment experienced more difficulty adjusting academically. In a more recent study, Laanan, Starobin, and Eggleston (2010) found that when community college transfer students recognize stigma from the campus environment they experience more difficulty adjusting academically. These studies both confirm Kodama's (2002) findings that suggest that commuter community college transfer students who perceive greater levels of support on campus are less likely to feel marginalized, despite still feeling more marginalized than students who began at the four-year institution as freshman. Taken together, this research indicates that satisfaction and feeling a sense of belonging within the four-year institutional environment is a very important factor for both the academic and social adjustment of community college transfer students. Similarly, Owens (2010) found idealized expectations among community college transfer students. However, unlike the quantitative approaches utilized by previous studies, Owens qualitative study found that students' identity changed during the transfer process, becoming more accepting of the reality of their new environment, leading to more positive transitions. Conversely, some transfer students still feel excluded from campus activities and lost on four-year institution campuses (Ruiz & Pryor 2011).

Examining differences between community college and four-year transfers, Anstett (1973) found that while both groups had similar pre-enrollment perceptions, once students matriculated, community college transfer students were more likely to perceive

the environment as being less friendly, cohesive, group oriented, polite, and considerate than four-year transfers. Anstett attributes this to fact that community college transfer students generally transfer from smaller schools where classes have fewer students and the instruction is more individualized. Overall, Anstett found that although community college transfer students viewed the institution's general atmosphere more negatively than four-year transfer students. However, both groups had more negative perceptions than the national average for all college students at the time, which is consistent with current findings that senior transfer students are significantly less likely to perceive a support campus environment than students who began at the same institution as freshman (Jacobs 2004). On the other hand, Kirk-Kuwaye and Kirk-Kuwaye (2007) found that four-year transfer students were less likely to perceive that campus environment as supportive than transfer students from community colleges. For community college transfer students, one of the important factors that influenced their positive feelings towards the environment was through working on-campus jobs. This suggests that student expectations move beyond just previous experiences in higher education.

Orientation

For many community college transfer students, orientation may be the first time they actually visit their new institution. As such, it is an important aspect of the transfer process, especially with regard to touring campus (Owens 2010). Kirk-Kuwaye and Kirk-Kuwaye (2007) found that transfer students who attend new student orientation had more positive experiences than transfer students who did not attend orientation. Transfer students who attended orientation are also more likely than freshman to agree that orientation was successful in helping students to develop effective study skills, manage

time efficiently, adjust to academic demands of the four-year university, and understand professors' expectations (Mayhew 2011). Davies and Casey (2011) also found that students who attended on-campus activities at the four-year institution prior to the beginning of fall term experienced smoother transitions that students who did not visit the campus prior to the first day of classes.

However, transfer students feel that four-year institutions need to be more flexible with regards to scheduling transfer student orientations (Owens 2010; Flaga 2006). Flaga (2006) found that it was important for these orientations to be scheduled at times that transfer students can attend not only because of their outside responsibilities that limit the times available to attend orientation, but also because at many four-year institutions students register for their courses during orientation. As such, not scheduling orientations with transfer student schedules in mind puts these students at significant disadvantages in terms of getting the courses that they need for their degrees. Similarly, Owens (2010) suggests that while universities assume that community college transfer students are familiar with the higher education environment, community college transfer students often feel overwhelmed by their new institutions. Furthermore, transfer students are not as likely to feel that orientation is successful at helping them adjust socially, like developing friendships and acquainting them with campus services (Mayhew 2011).

Influence of Place of Residence

Astin's (1984) theory of student involvement identifies student housing as a factor in social adjustment and persistence, with students living on-campus having more opportunities for involvement and so are more likely to persist. A number of studies support this, finding that commuter students are at a higher risk for being poorly socially

adjusted, compared to students living on-campus (Ishitani & McKitrick 2010; Winter & Morgan 2009; Flaga 2006;) and that they are more likely to feel marginalized (Kodama 2002). Furthermore, commuter students' lack of significant relationships on-campus often leaves them without any feelings of connection or belonging to the institution or that they are even wanted by the institution (Jacoby and Garland 2004). In terms of persistence, Schudde (2011) found that students living on-campus were more likely to persist than students living off-campus.

While most transfer students are commuter students, few studies have looked at commuter transfer students and connection. In one of few studies examining the influence of living on-or-off-campus on connection, D'Amico et al (2014) found that community college students' perceptions of connection did not vary based on their living situations. Despite this, little is known about the influence of place of residence on transfer student feelings of connection since most studies look at either transfer students or commuter students, treating them as two distinct groups despite the overlap (Kodama 2002).

Student-Faculty Interaction

In their theories on student persistence, Astin (1984) and Tinto (1988) both identify student-faculty interactions as predictors of student belonging and retention. In their study on learning communities, Engstrom and Tinto (2008) found that students in learning communities had more interactions with faculty and were more likely to persist from one academic year to the next academic year. Laanan (2007) found that transfer students who attended faculty office hours and felt professors were easy to approach were more likely to have a sense of belonging and to persist at their post-transfer institution.

Similarly, York and Ferndandez (2018) found that transfer students who felt they received helpful advice from faculty or felt that faculty were interested in their success were more likely to feel a sense of belonging to the four-year institution. However, Jackson & Laanan (2015) found that students who interacted more with faculty during their first few quarters after transferring were actually more likely to struggle adjusting academically.

Peer Interactions

Although few studies on transfer students have looked specifically at peer interaction, studies have indicated that peer support influences connection and transfer student adjustment (Jackson & Laanan 2015; Dennis, Calvillo, & Gonzalez 2008; Laanan 2007; Ose 1997). Jackson and Laanan (2015) found that spending more time with other students positively influenced community college transfer student feelings of belonging at the four-year institution. This included spending time working with classmates on group projects and being involved in student clubs and organizations where they spend large amounts of time interacting with other students. Similarly, Ose's (1997) study indicated that transfer students who have a solid group of school friends and are more involved in these extra-curricular activities and experience greater satisfaction and an easier transition period that influenced their overall satisfaction with the four-year institution.

CONCLUSION

As shown above, a large amount of research on transfer students focuses on academic success and persistence of transfer students (Ishitani and McKitrick 2010; Ose 1997). However, as noted by Townsend and Wilson (2006), the majority of research

explores the problem using a quantitative approach that neglects institutional factors such as size of school, nature of student body, and institutional mission. Additional gaps have been identified in the literature by other researchers, including that few studies look at the degree to which transfer students are connected and engaged in their post-transfer institutions (Ishitani and McKitrick 2010; Townsend and Wilson 2006). Still others call for research to focus on where and how students find support and connection post-transfer (Kodama 2002). A final gap in the literature is the lack of research on commuter transfer students. This study aims to contribute to these gaps in the literature by exploring how commuter community college transfer students connect to Portland State University, a large, urban commuter institution in Portland, Oregon. This will allow faculty, staff and the institution as a whole a better understanding of these students' perspectives in order to better serve the needs of this population. Furthermore, few studies have used a qualitative approach to understand the complex processes within Astin (1984) and Tinto's (1975, 1993) connection theories. A qualitative approach will allow this study to understand the subjective experiences of commuter community college transfer students in a way that quantitative studies cannot. As a result, this will help to expand the knowledge of the complex process of connection by potentially identifying ways that these students develop connection that may be not have previously been considered.

CHAPTER III: METHODS

The purpose of this in-depth interview study is to explore how commuter community college transfer students experience connection to Portland State University (PSU) in Portland, Oregon. This study further aims to identify the process of connection for commuter community college transfer students including how connection changes over time, the various ways in which students establish connection, and any impact that living off-campus may have on connection. In order to account for the longitudinal nature of connection on a limited timeframe, I focus on two groups of commuter community college transfer students – those who transferred between Fall 2012 and Spring 2013 and those who graduated in Spring 2013 or were within three quarters of graduation at the time of their interview. Interviews were conducted through the summer and fall of 2013. Commuter community college transfer students are students who do not live on campus and attended a community college prior to transferring to Portland State University. Commuter community college transfer students' experiences of connection are understood as a combination of interactions with faculty, other students', and the ways in which students interact with institutional processes as they navigate the transfer process.

Currently, a large amount of research on transfer students focuses on academic success and persistence of transfer students (Ishitani and McKitrick 2010; Ose 1997). However, the majority of research explores the problem using a quantitative approach (Townsend and Wilson 2006). While quantitative approach may yield results that are generalizable to many institutions, Townsend and Wilson (2006) argue that a qualitative approach provides institutional context by considering factors like size of school, nature of student body, and institutional mission that are sometimes ignored in quantitative

studies. Quantitative studies often aim for generalities across many contexts, while qualitative research is always situated within the specific context of the research setting. With Portland State's unique population of community college transfer students it is important to take the context of the research setting into account. Using a qualitative approach that focuses on the unique nature of Portland State's student body allows for further understanding from the perspective of the transfer students themselves in order to understand their subjective experiences of connection to Portland State. This may allow the researcher to gain insights into how students become engaged with their new university, which contributes to the understanding of this part of the transfer process. These are not experiences that can be understood through close-ended questions, since it does not allow us to gather the deeper nuances of the interactions being studied. As such, it is important to explore the problem of transfer students from a different perspective in order to build a more rounded picture of their collective experiences. Furthermore, by looking at both commuter community college transfer students in their first year after transferring to PSU and commuter community college transfer students who are about to graduate allows the research to construct a more complete understanding of commuter community college transfer student connection to PSU.

This study uses an in-depth interviewing design where two similar groups of commuter transfer students who live off-campus and transferred from community colleges with a similar amount of credits are interviewed at different points in time in their education at PSU. The in-depth interview design addresses the main research questions: how do commuter community college transfer students experience connection? This design provides a more complex understanding of students' subjective

experiences of connection than quantitative research "through capturing the deep meaning of experiences in participants' own words" (Marshal and Rossman 2011:93). This addresses the second research question: how does connection change over time for commuter community college transfer students? Interviewing two similar groups at different points in their progression toward graduation will advance the conceptual understanding of the collected data. This allows the researcher to detect any patterns that are similar between the two groups of students in order to develop a deeper understanding of how student connections change as they progress through their education.

SITE SELECTION

The site selected for this study is Portland State University in Portland, Oregon, an urban, commuter four-year university where few transfer students live on campus. According to PSU's Transfer Student Services, over 60% of all PSU undergraduates are transfer students. Of these transfer students, 60% transferred from community colleges in Oregon. As such, the prevalence of transfer students at this site allowed the researcher to address the purpose of this study: to explore the experiences of connection to PSU for commuter community college transfer students. Additionally, as a graduate student attending PSU, the researcher was able to gain access to PSU's transfer student population without having to develop new relationships. The researcher had the support of a key informant within PSU's University Studies program who was willing to provide access to students who had transfer students. Furthermore, the researcher is a former transfer student who also attended a community college prior to transferring to a four-year institution. This shared experienced allowed the researcher to build rapport with this study's participants. Finally, the selected research site allows the research to reasonably

assure the data quality and credibility of this study. Since the researcher was close to the people and phenomenon being studied, this provided the researcher with subjective understandings that increased the quality of the data collected (Marshall and Rossman 2011).

PARTICIPANTS

All of the participants in this study are students who lived off-campus and who transferred to Portland State University from a community college with between 80 and 100 credits to ensure that all students transferred into Portland State with junior status. In order to understand the longitudinal process of adjustment, two subgroups of commuter community college transfer students were chosen: commuter community college transfer students in their first-year at PSU and graduating commuter community college transfer students. Students were identified as first year PSU students if they had been enrolled at PSU for three quarters or less. Students in the graduating group either graduated in the Spring or Summer of 2013 or were within three quarters of graduating at the time of the interview. These parameters allow this study to explore the longitudinal nature of connection by exploring the connection experiences of similar groups of students at two different points in the transfer adjustment process.

For this study, I interviewed fourteen community college transfer students. Seven were in their first-year at PSU, five students had recently graduated, and two students were within three quarters of graduation. Participant characteristics, using pseudoynms, are presented in Table 1 on the following page:

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	First Generation Status	Quarters at PSU	Cohort	Work	Community College
Cooper	M	18-25	No	3	First Year	20 hours	OR
Haley	F	32-41	Yes	3	First Year	45 hours	OR
Hollis	M	18-25	Yes	3	First Year	30 hours	OR
Leah	F	18-25	No	3	First Year	30 hours	WA
Lizzie	F	26-31	Yes	3	First Year	20 hours	OR
Mike	M	32-41	Yes	2	First Year	0 hours	OR
Molly	F	18-25	No	3	First Year	30 hours	ID
Andrea	F	18-25	Yes	6	Graduating	30 hours	OR
Ashley	F	26-31	Yes	8	Graduate	0 hours	WA
Brooke	F	26-31	No	11	Graduate	0 hours	OR
Crystal	F	32-41	Yes	9	Graduating	30 hours	OR
Elijah	M	32-41	Yes	9	Graduate	30 hours	OR
Jenny	F	26-32	No	10	Graduate	40 hours	OR
Shelby	F	26-32	No	9	Graduate	30 hours	OR

Table 1: Participant Characteristics

RECRUITMENT

Participants in this study were recruited using a purposive sampling technique. After receiving IRB approval from Portland State, the researcher worked with PSU's Institutional Research and University Studies departments to obtain two lists of students who had transferred with between 80 and 100 credits. The first list included 395 students who had attended three or fewer quarters by the end of Spring 2013. The second list included 241 students who had earned more than 135 credits by the end of Spring 2013. The 135 credit threshold was identified with the assistance of the Institutional Research

department since that is the minimum number of credits required for students to be considered “Seniors” at the Portland State. Furthermore, pulling all students with 135 or more credits ensured that students who graduated at the end of Spring 2013 were also included.

Once students were identified in Summer 2013, an email was sent to students through an online survey tool inviting students to participate in the research project by filling out an online screening survey. Qualtrics survey software, a service provided to staff and students of Portland State, was utilized. A screening survey was chosen in order to provide students with autonomy while they chose whether to participate, alleviate any pressure to participate that potential participants may experience, and provide the investigator with demographic/screening information, allowing for eligibility to be assessed (see appendix for copy of screening survey). The online screening tool included a consent form describing the research project, participant assurance of confidentiality, and provided investigator contact information. At the end of the survey, students were asked if they were interested in participating in an interview. Students who were still interested were asked to provide their contact information.

Email invitations were resent twice over Summer 2013. Another invitation to participate was included in a daily e-mail sent out to PSU students that advertises events and publishes other campus announcements. Finally, the investigator created a Facebook event that linked to the screen survey and shared posts with invitations to participate to members of six Facebook groups associated with Portland State. These posts were updated twice over Summer 2013.

After a participant completed the online screening tool, participants were contacted via phone or e-mail to schedule an interview. Participants were provided with a hard copy of the consent form that they were asked to review and sign immediately before beginning the interview. Three interviews were conducted over the phone due to scheduling. These students were emailed an informed consent document that they were asked to review before sending an email to the researcher indicating that they had reviewed the document and were still willing to participate in the study. These students were also asked to confirm for a second time that they agreed to the consent form and were still willing to participate. After the interview, students were asked to contact other participants who met the criteria for inclusion and might be interested in participating.

DATA COLLECTION

Data was collected using in-depth interviews guided by a semi-structured interview guide (see appendix). Each interview began with less structured, general questions about students' experiences. Students were asked to reflect on why they had chosen to attend college, their experiences at the community college, their current living situations, and why they chose to transfer to Portland State. These questions were chosen in order to put students at ease with the interview process and to establish rapport between the participants and the interviewer. The next phase of the interview focused on student's experiences during their first-quarter after transferring to Portland State. During this phase, students were asked to reflect on their experiences at orientation, in classes, and interactions with classmates, faculty, and advisors. Students were also asked about their involvement with student-run clubs, organizations, and academic resources. Finally, students reflected on their perceptions of faculty, involvement compared to other

students, their feelings of connection to Portland State, and how their living situations impacted their feelings of connection. For each question, students were asked to compare their first-quarter experiences with their experiences at the community college. These questions were chosen to address factors identified in previous literature as impacts on student connection.

During the next phase of the interview, which focused on student experiences at the end of their first-year at Portland State, students were asked to answer the same questions they had reflected on for their first-quarter and compare how those experiences had changed between their first-quarter and the end of their first year. Students who had graduated or were close to graduating were asked to reflect on the same questions for a third time as they pertained to their most recent quarter. These students were also asked to reflect on how their experiences during their most recent quarter were the same or different from their experiences at the end of their first year. Asking students the same set of questions for each quarter allows the researcher to compare how individual student answers may change at different points in time. Furthermore, this structure allows the researcher to detect patterns that are similar amongst all students for the different points in time in order to identify potential stages of connection and factors that may cause student connection to change over time.

The final phase of the interview included questions asking students to reflect on what they, their faculty, or Portland State might have done differently and what advice they would to new Portland State transfer students. At the end of each interview, participants were given an opportunity to share anything else that was not covered in the interview. Students were then thanked for their participation.

All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. Interviews varied in length from 30 minutes to 2 hours. During each interview, the interviewer wrote memos about student answers. After each interview, the interviewer wrote a detailed memo reflecting on the interview process and content. The interviewer also wrote memoranda when listening to taped-interviews, while typing verbatim transcripts, and when reflecting on particular interviews.

DATA ANALYSIS

Data analysis took place on an on-going basis throughout the research process. In addition to writing memoranda at various points throughout the research process, the researcher listened to each of the recorded interviews two to three times before and after they were transcribed in order to develop a familiarity with the data and allow themes to emerge. Initial codes were based on the existing literature that guided the interview questions. Initial code categories included “Home Social System”, “Transfer Decision”, “Orientation”, “Classes”, “Classmates”, “Faculty”, “Advisors and Academic Resources”, “Clubs/Student-Organizations”, “Campus”, “Feelings of Connection”, and “Advice”. Each except was also coded with the following modifier codes: “Negative Experience”, “Positive Experience”, “Community College”, “First Quarter”, “End of First Year”, “Graduation” and “Difference.” The initial codes and modifier codes were used in order to allow for the exploration of the ways in which student experiences progressed over time.

Additionally, sub-codes were added during coding in order to clarify processes and mechanisms of student connection. For example, for each quarter that students were asked about faculty, students were asked: 1) to describe their relationship with faculty, 2)

how they felt about approaching faculty, 3) to describe their interactions with faculty, and 4) whether they attended office hours. The sub-codes for faculty then became: "Relationship with Faculty", "Approaching Faculty", "Interactions", and "Office Hours". For each sub-code, process-oriented codes were added that further described student experiences with faculty. After initial coding was complete for all interviews, interviews were recoded.

The researcher utilized thematic content analysis (Simons, Lathlean, & Squire, 2008) to identify themes and patterns in the data. Then, themes were analyzed based on point in time (orientation, first quarter, end of first year, and graduation) and then compared between quarters. Additionally, themes were analyzed within groups, first-year students and graduating students, and then compared between groups. This method of analyzing allowed for the identification of any patterns at various points in time as well as themes in how first-year and graduating students reflected on their experiences.

Dedoose, a web application used for qualitative and mixed-methods research, was utilized in order to improve efficiency of coding, organization, searching for data, and identifying themes. Dedoose provides easy to use tools to facilitate the coding process as well as tools to help with the initial analysis. Specifically, the memos feature allows the researcher to attach memoranda to specific excerpts for future reference during the coding process. Additionally, Dedoose was used to sort excerpts by code and used to identify excerpts with code co-occurrence. For example, identifying all excerpts that were coded both "First Quarter" and "Classes". Excerpts were then analyzed by hand in order to identify themes within the data.

RESEARCHER BIOGRAPHY

The researcher is a graduate student in the Sociology Department at Portland State University. While working towards her undergraduate degree, the researcher began her post-secondary education at a community college. After her time at the community college, the researcher transferred to a four-year university where she took classes for a year. After being unable to establish connection to her new institution, the researcher transferred again to another four-year university. There, the researcher established strong feelings of connection to the university. This influenced the researcher's undergraduate honors thesis where she conducted a quantitative research study on transfer student belonging. The study examined differences in belonging between students transferring from community colleges or four-year institutions, between students coming from different sized institutions, and students transferring from public or private institutions. As such, the researcher has experience undergoing the transfer student process, although these processes were at universities very different from Portland State University. The researcher shared this information with participants at the beginning of each interview. Commuter community college students may have felt more at ease discussing their transfer experiences since they were interviewed by a former community college transfer student who struggled with establish connection after transferring.

Although this study did not target first-generation college students, many participants in this study fit this population. While the researcher is not a first-generation, the researcher has an extensive background in higher education. The researcher's mother was faculty at a community college and her father is a graduate professor in a program with many first-generation college students. As a result, the researcher's parents shared

with her the struggles of many of their students and celebrated their successes. The researcher herself has also worked within the Washington State community college system in a variety of roles, including her current position in Workforce Education where she works with students receiving public assistance and who are primarily first-generation students of color. These experiences allow the researcher to be sensitive to the varying experiences of community college students. In order to account for potential bias, the researcher write reflexive memos about her own transfer experiences and identified where those experiences might be influencing her perceptions. While analyzing the data, the researcher actively looked for negative cases or examples of experiences that did not fit into the patterns found in the data.

CHAPTER IV: EXPLORING THE CONNECTION PROCESS

Students in this study experienced connection in a variety of ways that evolved throughout their enrollment at PSU. As a part of their interviews, students were asked to reflect back on their experiences at PSU during various points in time and describe feelings of connection. From feeling lost and alone, beginning to interact more with others on-campus, and finally establishing key relationships that facilitate connection, students' connection experiences varied based on how long they had been enrolled at PSU. This chapter, the first of two results chapters, will address research questions: how does connection for commuter community college transfer students change over time?

The results presented in this chapter are organized by the four points in time students were asked to reflect upon. The first section, "Orientation", presents students' recollections of their experiences during their initial introduction to PSU. The second section, "First Quarter", explores how students recall their initial experiences and interactions with classes, faculty, classmates, and other experiences with Portland State during students first quarter of enrollment at PSU. The third section, "End of First Year", describes how student experiences changed between students first quarter and their third quarter, the end of students' first academic year at PSU. The final section, "Graduation", describes the current experiences for students who either recently graduated or were close to graduation and explores how those experiences changed between students first and last years at PSU.

ORIENTATION

Colleges and universities commonly use mandatory new student orientations as a means to assist students with the transition to the institution. For many transfer students

at Portland State, this is the first time that they have the opportunity to visit the campus itself, an experience that can be exciting, overwhelming, and, for many students interviewed, disappointing. When student's spoke about Portland State's New Student Orientation, students spoke about receiving a guided tour of the campus, registering for classes, and learning about campus resources.

Campus Tour

Navigating a new campus is often one of the first challenges faced by incoming students. When discussing their experiences at orientation, ten students mentioned taking a guided tour of campus. Students spoke about being shown the location of important departments like financial aid and the cashier's office. While this provided many students with a general overview of PSU's campus, a few students expressed disappointment with the tour. One first-year transfer student, Leah, said that she "wish[ed] the tour was a little better just because after I started going to the classes, I was kind of like, I still don't know where these things are. It was a little not easy." Other students described similar experiences, observing that the sheer size of the PSU campus was much larger in comparison to their community colleges and calling the tour "scattered".

Advising and Registering for Classes

In addition to taking a tour of campus, students met with advisors and registered for their first quarter classes during orientation. A few students appreciated the opportunity to learn how to register for classes with someone there to help. Molly, a first-year transfer student, says that "without meeting my counselor on orientation, I would have been lost with the class[es] I should have started with, what not to jump into." Lizzie, another transfer student in her first year at PSU, mentioned that it was great

having someone there, “making sure that you were actually registered”. While these students had positive experiences with their advisors, the majority of transfer students expressed disappointment with the advising offered during orientation.

First- year transfer students were much more vocal in their disappointment than transfer students approaching graduation. When asked to describe orientation, Haley explained:

> They broke us up into like groups according to what we wanted to do and they had one general advisor come in and try to advise us and I was in a group with like eight people and one advisor and we had an hour and then they escorted us to a computer lab where we registered for classes that we just randomly selected because there was no real advising.

When first-year students spoke about the advising that they did receive, the majority felt that it was either more geared towards freshman or impersonal in nature. Cooper, a first-year student, reflected that his advising session focused more on planning out students’ first couple quarters, which consisted of the majority of classes he had previously taken at the community college.

> I told them I was a transfer student and everything, but they still treated me like a freshman and went through everything the same. I didn’t get any advising and I kind of just followed along... it was just something to get a hold waived.

This was a shared experience by all but one of the first-year students. Hollis, another first-year student receiving veterans’ benefits, states

> I met with my counselor for the first time and she just handed me a piece of paper that said these are the classes you need to take and so it was pretty much the same thing [as earlier]. I was never told in that first experience with my counselor that I had to see her once a term and she didn’t really explain the veteran process to me here so I had to learn all that stuff out on my own.

The explanation of Portland State’s “cluster classes” also confused many students. Cluster classes are interdisciplinary general education requirements that are thematically link. Students are required to complete 12 credits within a single cluster in order to

graduate. This resulted in more than one student registering for classes that they discovered later did not satisfy the requirements. Leah reflected that "they basically ran through it and then when I actually started to look into what classes I wanted to take for it, I was a little confused how it worked. I wish there was something more of a follow-up for that."

Remembering back to their orientations, only three graduating transfer students brought up advising during orientation. These students shared similar frustrations to first-year students. Recent graduate, Elijah, highlighted the advising session as "the most important part" and yet the advisor for his department failed to show up. While he was able to connect with a general advisor, he reflected, "I felt like I had completely wasted my time."

Graduating transfer students also voiced frustration with the process of actually registering for classes. "I got to one of the last orientations, all the classes were taken and it was just a very painful afternoon with a very very nice advisor student trying to walk me through it, going 'okay, you can't take that' and I'm like fu--" (Shelby, recent graduate). While Shelby had a largely positive experience with her advisor, she had few options available for classes that would meet her degree requirements. This ended up negatively influencing her first quarter at PSU when she ended up enrolling in higher-level courses than she was ready to take on. Another graduating transfer student, Andrea, ultimately ended up changing her major during orientation in order to take the classes that she wanted.

> I went to their orientation and I was totally overwhelmed, totally confused. When I started registering for classes I was like, okay, I'm going to take a step back. I'm not going to register for those classes yet. I'll do a couple more elective courses and I knew I liked sociology... but then I realized that I couldn't register for

> sociology classes because I wasn't a sociology major. I had to change my major to sociology just so that I could take sociology classes.

Introduction to Other Resources

While discussing positive aspects of orientation, students also discussed how orientation helped them learn to navigate various institutional resources and departments, including e-mail, obtaining student ID cards, and other required institutional enrollment processes.

> Without orientation I wouldn't have known where to go, both on campus through the financial aid office, cashier's office, scheduling... they also go over the website and stuff like that too, so that was really handy. There's a lot of things online now. I really took a lot out of orientation. (Molly, first-year).
> Students also received their student identification cards during orientation.

Students are required to have student identification cards to access some on-campus resources like computer labs and the recreation center. This is something that many students, like Haley, likely would not have done until when they encountered a resource that required the ID card to access. Students commented on learning other helpful information, as well. Haley remarked, "knowing I had to waive my health insurance was kind of helpful cause I have health insurance." Students are required to show proof of health insurance otherwise the university will automatically enroll students in the university's health insurance.

While five of the seven first-year students focused on how orientation introduced students to these additional campus systems and resources, only one student approaching graduation brought up this topic. Reflecting backward, Andrea says

> I think it helped show me the ropes, like the minimum of understanding how to use the online resources, understanding how to log-in and use my e-mail and register for classes and giving me the tools I needed to be successful in other terms.

Role of Orientation in Facilitating Connection to PSU

When asked whether orientation helped students connect to PSU, the majority of students did not feel it had provided a positive impact upon their feelings of connection. However, first-year transfer students had more mixed feelings than students approaching graduation. First-year students had attended orientation more recently than students closer to graduation and so may have remembered more details about orientation than graduating students. Mike, a first-year transfer student, saw orientation more as an introduction to PSU, "letting me know that I'm a part of the [PSU] community, but to become connected, not at all." Other first-year students called orientation "useless," and said that "it wasn't really helpful."

Some first-year students did feel that orientation helped them build connection to PSU. Leah commented, "It definitely helped me to get to know what I needed to do and where I needed to be. More of the academic side of things" (Leah, first-year). For Leah, the sense of connection that orientation established was more academic in nature, helping to easy anxiety that she experienced regarding the transfer process. Similarly, Lizzie, another recent transfer, remembers orientation as contributing to her sense of connection to PSU after orientation,

> Because I got to see how large, and it wasn't even the first orientation that they had held, but when I went that place was pretty full. I mean, it definitely made me feel like I wasn't alone and I wasn't the first one transferring in…I did feel like it helped me feel more connected.

Students approaching graduation were more united in their experience that orientation did not help build any sense of connection during their first quarters. Shelby referred to orientation as "something I had to suffer through" and Crystal felt like "there was a lack of sincere welcoming. I think that the orientation felt very… routine. I just

didn't feel connected." Some students reflected on the fact that they were not seeking connection when they were attending and supposed that had that been something they were seeking it might have helped with connection.

When graduating students did speak about orientation and connection, five of the seven students focused less on what actually took place in orientation and more on what could have been done differently during orientation to facilitate connection building. These students sought a support system that extended beyond just the one-day orientation.

> It would've been nice to have someone with you during that first week when you're terrified walking around with you, or taking you around to your classes, or checking-in on you… People rarely talk about all the implicit things that go on with a person, when they're experiencing things, when they're giving them an orientation. Just telling students 'you know it's natural to feel intimidated.' (Crystal, graduating)

The graduating students interviewed all had at least 6 quarters behind them at the time of the interviews. As such, experiences occurring after these students' first years may have influenced these students' perceptions regarding the effects of orientation on their overall connection.

FIRST QUARTER

The first quarter at Portland State for commuter community college transfer students is a quarter filled with lots of uncertainty and change. These students have typically spent more than two years at a community college where they developed a familiarity with the campus, their faculty, and the types of students in their classes. Students spent the majority of their first quarter at Portland State going through the process of building familiarity with a college campus all over again. When discussing their experiences for first quarter, students were asked to reflect on their classes,

interactions with classmates, faculty, and advisors. Students were also asked about their use of academic resources, participation in student organizations, their experience navigating campus, and their overall sense of connection to PSU at the end of their first quarter. At the time of the interview, these experiences occurred within the last year for first-year transfer students while graduating transfer students were reflecting on experiences that occurred anywhere from six to eleven quarters previously.

Classes

The classroom experience is an important element for commuter community college transfer students during their first quarter. As students described their first-quarter classes, both students who transferred recently and students approaching graduation focused on the size of their classes, their comfort talking in class, and the academic difficulty of their classes.

Class size.

The size of the classes that students were enrolled in during their first quarter at PSU left a lasting impression on both recent transfers and students close to graduating. When describing those first classes, twelve of the fourteen participants made a point to mention that their classes were very large that quarter. These classes were sometimes as large as two or three hundred students. Brooke, a recent graduate, called them "weed out" classes. When asked what she remembered most about first quarter, Brooke responded that "The large class size really is what I remember the most. 'Cause as a science major you have these giant lecture halls. I mean, it felt giant to me… I thought that rooms this big only existed in movies." On the whole, students were especially disappointed in the class sizes at PSU in comparison to their experiences at the community college where

classes usually enroll a maximum of 30 students.

Talking in class.

When students were asked whether they were comfortable talking in class during their first quarter, students gave mixed responses. Six students, a little less than half of students interviewed, indicated that they were comfortable talking in class. Split evenly between first-year and graduating transfer students, students indicated that a fear of talking had "never been a problem" at any point during their academic experiences. Mike, a first-year transfer student, observed that

> I'm usually one of the most talkative and engaged students in most of my classes that I experience. Because I'm actually interested and there's questions that come up in my mind as the instructor's giving his instruction and I want to know the answer so I'm going to ask.

Of the remaining students, three students indicated that while they it did not feel natural to talk in class. These students usually felt comfortable with the material and indicated that they understood the material so did not have a reason to ask questions. However, there were times that they felt compelled to either address the class or ask a question. "I'll respond if I'm called upon usually, but unless someone says something completely off-putting and something needs to be said against them then that's the only times I really say anything" (Hollis, first-year). Another student approaching graduation, Jenny spoke about dislike of "voids of silence and so if nobody else is answering, I'm the person that decides to answer. If people are answering I'll stay quiet." For these students, it was not necessarily that they were uncomfortable talking in class, rather they did not feel the need or desire.

For the five students who discussed being very uncomfortable talking in class talked, all but one reflected that they were very concerned about how others perceived

them. For a few students, it was the insecurity of being new to their major or subject matter. Students felt like they did not have the knowledge to say anything of value. Andrea, a student in her last year at PSU, reflected that

> I liked listening to what other people had to say and I would create rebuttals or communications in my own head to what they were saying, but I wouldn't vocalize that in class because I didn't feel like anything I had to say was more valuable than anything anybody else had to say… I would have something to say but I would think about it and then I'd get ready to raise my hand and my mouth would get dry and I would get really sweaty and my hands would start shaking and I'm like, 'okay, just kidding.' It was a very anxiety driven task for me.

Similarly, another student approaching graduation, remembered that during her first quarter "it was difficult to speak up in class. There's the concern that you're going to say something stupid or going to be perceived stupid, lose the respect of your peers if you're trying to appeal to your professor" (Crystal, graduating student). Other students remembered feeling similar degrees of anxiety. Molly, a first-year student, quickly proclaimed, "Oh, I don't like to do that" when asked about talking in class during first-quarter classes.

Students' comfort levels regarding talking in classes may have been influenced by students' own personal characteristics, anxieties, and engagement with the material they were learning. This may have also been the result of how a particular faculty member or major structures their courses. Either way, students who are more comfortable talking in class experienced greater levels of connection to their academics, which is an important contributing factor to student persistence.

Academic difficulty.

Students also discussed the difficulty of coursework in the classes they were enrolled in during their first quarters at PSU. A few first-year students remembered the

classes as being easier than classes they took at the community college. These students came into PSU with high expectations about the academic difficulty of classes at a four-year institution. “I felt like I was pushed a little bit more at the community college. Here, I think they think they’re pushing you but really they aren’t in most cases” (Hollis, first-year) Similarly, Haley also felt a lack of challenge in most of her classes. Haley lamented that the only classes scheduled at times that worked for her work schedule during her first quarter at PSU were essentially retakes.

While a few students were disappointed in what they experienced as a lack of academic rigor, the majority of transfer students did feel academically challenged during that first quarter. For many, this experience was in alignment with their expectations of classes at a four-year institution. First-year student Mike compared his community college instructors to PSU faculty, stating

> I felt like instructors more spoon-fed the students until it got to about week 8 or 9 and then all of a sudden ‘oh… we’ve been running at a snail’s pace and now we need to cover all this material and let’s pack it in.’ Well, instructors at Portland State are not that way. They say this is the speed that we go at throughout the term to cover all this material and it’s sink or swim.

Lizzie felt that the quality of courses at PSU were “a little more sophisticated in some of the material” while Crystal similarly claimed that “there was a greater expectation I think on students overall.” Both first-year transfer students and transfer students approaching graduation shared this perception.

Along with perceiving higher academic standards and expectations, students discussed an increase in the overall amount of work required for each class. Remembering her first quarter, recent graduate Brook reflected that “I was so busy because of the labs, having two huge classes that required a lot of work – the lecture plus labs that required a ton of work. Plus, my sophomore inquiry class, which was a lot of

work." Students accustomed to taking a fulltime course load found themselves struggling with a similar schedule at PSU. Another graduating student, Andrea, remembered, "just feeling overwhelmed because all of a sudden I was taking these 300 level courses and I was just like, I'm really scared. I felt like this is a lot of work." Andrea started the quarter enrolled in three classes for a total of 12 credits and ultimately ended up dropping a class in order to successfully negotiate her classwork and work schedule.

Students also brought up feelings of being academically unprepared for their courses during that first quarter. Students described feeling like imposters during that quarter. Molly remembers feeling that her classes were "way out of my league" while Shelby reflected back on her first quarter classes as being "above my pay grade." A recent graduate, Shelby reflected, "I felt like everyone was smarter than me, like everyone in that room was smarter than me cause they knew what was going on." For some, this was the result of enrolling in subjects that they had never taken before. First-year transfer student Molly took a biology class and reflected, "I was so scared that I was going to fail because it was too late to drop out when I realized what I'd done… I hadn't even taken Biology 101 and here I am stuck in this class." Others, like Mike, remember feeling like they were receiving less assistance in classes from their professors, "It was definitely more challenging than at the community college. Instructors dealt with less one-on-one. It felt more separated. Instructors didn't really help as much, converse as much. They were there, gave their lecture, and then left."

Classmates

When students spoke about their interactions with classmates, a few themes emerged for both recent transfers and graduating transfers including: classroom-based

interactions, perceptions of an age gap between transfer students and traditional students, and a general lack of connection to classmates.

Classroom-based interactions

When asked about interactions with classmates or other students during their first quarter, half of all the transfer students interviewed responded that they did not have any interactions with classmates at all that quarter. Of the students who did not recall any interactions with classmates, five were first-year transfer students. When probed as to why they had no interactions, they were usually attributed it to personal choice. “I am a really shy person. I don’t like taking, I don’t like doing group projects. I don’t like, I just don’t like it unless I absolutely have to” (Molly, first-year). Similarly, Mike reflected, “I didn’t really talk to students, they didn’t really talk to me.”

When graduating transfer students reflected back on their first quarter classes, they spoke about working with other students in group projects. Andrea revealed that she did not know any other students at PSU when she transferred, “so I wasn’t able to take classes with my friends. So, I would go to class and the only way that I was interacting with people was based on who I was sitting with and then in group activities.” Andrea recalled one class where she only interacted with other students due to a group project. Other students recalled other minimal interactions with students in their classes. However, as Jenny explains, “it didn’t ever go beyond the class. It was… not a lot of social chit-chat. It was primarily about the actual material.”

The degree to which students interacted with their classmates also varied based on the size of the class. Brooke, a recent graduate, interacted with classmates in her smaller inquiry class that quarter but discloses that “I didn’t have any experiences with

classmates in those bigger classes because they were so big. They're so big. You're just like a faceless nobody in a sea of people." Larger classes were not set up in a way that was conducive for students to interact with one another. Students reported a different, more intimate experience in smaller classes. Shelby, another recent graduate, remembers that her class became close as a group due to the subject matter: "It was a very touchy [class], it wasn't necessarily touchy-feeling but you just ended up bringing up stuff."

Existing Relationships

While almost all of the students interviewed described very little interactions with classmates during their first quarter, six of the students discussed the impact of starting at PSU having already established relationships with one or more other students. Half of these relationships were established while attending a local community college and the other half had begun as friend or work relationships outside of academics. While students usually were not pursuing the same major or degree as their friends, these relationships were instrumental during their first quarter transition to PSU. Brooke, a single mother, remembers

> trading all of my childcare with a friend of mine. We would just shove, we finagled our schedules so that we were in class opposite times, we would shove our kids at each other between classes and then go to class. [I would] walk around with the babies for two hours, and then shove them at her and then she would walk around with the babies for two hours while I was in class. (recent graduate)

For Brooke, trying to juggle raising a child and going to school at the same time, that previous friendship was an important factor in her success during her first quarter. Ashley also spoke about running into classmates from her community college and felt like "It was kind of a Godsend, actually."

Students also learned about other academic resources due to these relationships. Cooper and Mike, both first-year computer science majors, attended the same community college and ended up aligning their schedules during the first week of the quarter. Mike recalls, "I ran into [Cooper] the first week and we had one class together and then he switched all his classes to my classes so we could work together… he was experiencing the same thing over there at fall term, you just felt really alone." Having someone going through a similar experience was an important experience for these two students. "It was nice to see someone from [Community College] there, but I didn't know anybody else. It seemed like a lot of other people already had like a bit of networking done" (Cooper, first-year student)

Connections with Classmates

Overall, students did not establish a sense of connection with any new classmates during their first quarter at PSU. While three students indicated that they had interacted on a fairly regularly basis with at least one other student, these connections were instrumental in nature, initiated based on required lab partners or mandatory group projects. None of the transfer students interviewed indicated that these relationships lasted beyond the end of the term. For some, this was a challenge. Cooper spoke about the difficulties of interaction with other students, stating that "a lot of people seemed like they were doing their own thing already," which was a completely different experience than he had encountered at his community college. Cooper explained that other PSU students seemed to be there because that was what was expected of them after graduating from high school, whereas at the community college "a lot more people at [my

community college] wanted to be there." For the majority of students, though, interacting with classmates was not a priority.

> This is going to sound really sad, but don't worry about it. I didn't really make any friends and that's totally fine with me because, like, I'm not the social person. Especially since like, what if I meet somebody and then we become friends but then, like, they live downtown and I don't live downtown and it's not going to be like I hang out with them, you know. But I didn't worry about it, I just focused on school. If I have interactions then, you know, whatever I did… I just focus on class and I went home and went to work, you know, whatever I need to do when school was over. I just kept my life separate, basically. (Molly, first-year)

Faculty

When students discussed their interactions with faculty during their first quarter, almost all students expressed disappointment or discomfort. Six transfer students explicitly described feeling uncomfortable or intimidated when approaching faculty. This was an experience recalled by both first-year and graduating transfer students. "Talking to the professors was something I just didn't do too much that first quarter… none of the professors seemed really too open to talking… I don't know why" (Hollis, first-year). Reflecting back, graduating student Crystal says, "I was intimidated to talk to them, talk to any professors to begin with."

Students also spoke about the impact of the large classes on their interactions with faculty. While Brooke was comfortable approaching faculty, she reflects that the larger classes were taught by "professors who were completely unavailable." Brooke goes on to explain that "Some of the people when they're teaching those huge classes are just really unapproachable and you can't blame them. They've got 300 people starting at them while playing video games." However, Brooke described a completely different experience during her sophomore inquiry class that quarter. The class only had 20 students enrolled

and while “the professor was also really overworked… she was completely available when we needed her and it more like a discussion class. I really enjoyed that.”

Students also discussed how large classes impacted the availability of professors to engage with students. Molly, a first-year student, explains:

> A lot of times I don’t have time to approach faculty like after class and stuff ‘cause other students are also wanting to talk to the professor and usually if I don’t have something important to say then I just don’t say it. It’s not like I don’t want to approach them because they’re intimidating… or I’ll feel stupid for asking, it’s just because there’s so many other people that want to talk to them too and I don’t want to interrupt.

Molly also reflected that she doesn’t usually have issues understanding the material presented in lectures that would drive her to need to talk with her professors. Similarly, Andrea remembers that “the classes that I was taking at the time were like 50, 60 students, so I didn’t engage with them if I didn’t absolutely, if it wasn’t of complete and utter importance.”

Students who expressed feeling comfortable approaching faculty often discussed it in relation to their age or career. Having returned to school later in life, these students viewed faculty in a different manner than students who experienced a sense of discomfort approaching faculty. “I don’t look at instructors as being such a level above me. These days I know my level of knowledge and I know what I’m going for and reasons why I’m there and I’m there on purpose. I feel that I’m at somewhat of the same playing field as them” (Mike, first-year). Mike explains that a lot of his faculty that first quarter were usually around his same age. Student’s previous work experience also influenced how these students perceived and interacted with faculty members. Lizzie, another first-year student, said “I’ve worked for many years, almost 10 years before I could go back to

school, so… I do understand how to approach people and my instructors in a professional manner and I think that's helped me a lot."

Office Hours

When asked about whether they attended faculty office hours, the majority of transfer students indicated that they did not attend during their first quarter. While some students did not feel they needed to talk with their professors, the majority of these students felt that office hours were inaccessible. Hollis explains,

> I feel like I really didn't even get the opportunity because the faculty that first term, a lot of people would be always waiting after class just to go talk to them… I went to one professor who I really needed to talk to a couple times and there was always long lines to talk to them about stuff and it was a little bit ridiculous… I think that's just what happens when you have a class where it's over 100 students.

Students also discussed how faculty held office hours at inconvenient times. "Professors would have certain hours and I was never available at those times because, between work and class I never really could make office hours*"* (Elijah, recent graduate). Students with professional jobs, many of whom take night and weekend courses whenever possible, often struggled to make office hours due to their work schedules. Haley, a first-year student, stated

> I've never been to office hours because they, every single office hours I've ever had for all my classes I've had have been in the middle of the day where I can't go even if I want to. So I've never been to office hours anywhere, even in times where I'd really like to go to office hours.

Students who attended office hours spoke about the need to clarify the requirements of class assignments or to receive further explanation of confusing or difficult course material. For some students, this was the first time that they had ever utilized office hours. Reflecting back, Crystal remembered "I would go into [my professor's] office

hours to ask her questions and that was kind of really the first time I had ever done that. I didn't even really know that was a thing to do."

Connection with Faculty

Transfer students varied in their overall experience of connection with faculty during their first quarter. When explicitly asked to describe their relationships with faculty that quarter, both first-year and graduating students were evenly split between feeling a sense of connection to at least one faculty member and not having established any relationships. Students who did not experience any connection with faculty often compared their experience at PSU to their relationships with faculty at their community colleges. Brooke illustrated this when she said that "I feel like I had a personal relationships with all of my professors at community college but the guy that taught that physics class [at PSU] doesn't recognize me when I pass him in the hallway."

A few students who recalled that they had not established any faculty connections that quarter also spoke about their overall perceptions and interactions of faculty as being hierarchical in nature. When comparing her first quarter at PSU to her last year, Andrea remembers,

> I had absolutely no engagement with any of the sociology faculty. I didn't have any engagement with my teachers or professors that I was taking courses with at the time… I was still very much stuck in this idea of not engaging with professors. You're just there to learn. Just sit back and don't ask questions.

These students did not view learning as a collaborative process, where students act as active participants in the action of learning. Instead, students viewed learning as more passive, where knowledge is gained by listening and observing subject matter experts, like faculty. For some, the collaborative learning process was something that would happen in the future.

> I'm not quite there yet, where I'm ready to get a mentor and do all that stuff and be interactive. I'm still trying to figure out my intro classes and just to get know what I need to do first before I really develop any relationships with any of the faculty. (Leah, first-year)

Students who indicated that they had developed with relationships with faculty during their first quarter described being actively involved in their education. Students would reach out to their professors regularly to discuss grades on papers and tests. Lizzie, a first-year student, talked about being more concerned about progressing in her writing skills than receiving a good grade and how she felt very supported by one of her professors as we she worked towards that goal:

> What was most important to me in the big picture was my writing style on the subject was progressing. That was great, that was nice, to be able to understand each other. And I did. My writing did really progress and I think a lot of it was just because I felt supported.

Students who felt a connection with their professors depicted relationships where students and faculty worked closely together to achieve the student's learning goals. Describing her relationship with one professor, Ashley recalled her connections with faculty as more "mentor relationships" where faculty told her "This is how you go from Point A to Point B; here are some people in this department that you should talk to; here is a book that you should read and opinions and challenging my thoughts. Things like that" (Ashley, recent graduate). Students with a sense of connection to their faculty described the effects of those relationships as very influential in later quarters, even if the relationships themselves did not last. Shelby voiced,

> I changed my major on probably a flipping comment from her… I can see how it would be more important to me than her, it is what it is, it's not a bad thing. [It was] always nice to see her in class, 'cause she did remember me, so she would always say hi in the hallways, so it was like 'hey, I'm not forgotten,' which is kind of cool.

For Shelby, making connections with faculty had not been a priority that first quarter. In fact, she spoke about trying to be invisible due to feeling out of place. Even though she ended up leaving this professor's department, Shelby reflects that her connection with that one professor is "one thing I'm going to take with me forever."

Academic Advisors

Students expressed disappointment when discussing interactions with academic advisors during their first quarter. Slightly more than half of the students met with an advisor during that first quarter. The majority sought help in order to plan for future quarters. A few students recounted frustrating experiences where they left as though they were running in circles between different departments.

> I felt like I was stuck in a loop because I went to go to talk my major advisor and she didn't know anything and so I went to talk to the general advisors and they were like, 'oh you should talk to your major advisor' and I was just like 'I'm going to tear the hair I don't have out'. Like, really? (Elijah, recent graduate)

Students also identified the lack of communication between departments as being particularly frustrating, especially when it came to understanding the requirements for PSU's cluster classes. None of the students who met with their advisors that quarter developed any sense of connection the advisor. First-year student Molly said, "I kind of would be surprised if I walked in there and she just kind of remember me… but, I mean, I have seen her a few times about schedule and stuff like that."

Academic Services

Only three students remembered utilizing any academic services or tutoring during their first quarter. Mike and Cooper, both first year computer science majors,

discussed study workshops held within their department for each of their classes. These workshops were tailored to specific classes.

> The workshops were really helpful. It was just kind of a group of students and it was student led by someone in the year ahead of us, and we all kind of worked on homework problems and got our own things of like little problems to do with the group instead of being like individually stuck and having not resources. (Cooper, first-year)

Mike and Cooper found out about these workshops from their professors on the first day of the quarter when tutors leading the workshops came in and made announcement to each class. The coordination between faculty and the tutoring services helped both Mike and Cooper feel more supported and successful in mastering the material for their courses.

Student Organizations

None of the transfer students interviewed participated in any student organizations during their first quarter at PSU. First-year students spoke more about their lack of participation, identifying a lack of information on the variety of clubs that existed on campus. “I don’t know how else you hear about them unless you look it up specifically,” (Leah, first-year). Hollis recounted a similar experience, lamenting that

> It would've like opened up my eyes to see if there was options of things to do to get connected, for sure, but it would've been nice just to see like displays or like groups of people out there explaining what their groups do or their clubs do. I've only seen it a couple times and it was for the same fraternity and the same sorority both times. And they wouldn't let me join the sorority. (Hollis, first-year)

Students also felt that there were few clubs or organizations geared towards students who were returning to school after having worked for a significant period of time.

> People always told me that there’s plenty of people that are my age there. There are and there aren’t. You know, there are people that are my age there but, really, the community of Portland State seems to be more for the people directly out of high school… really, most of the facilities or things

> of interactions, stuff like that, it's centered around that. So I'm just there for an education. (Mike, first-year)

Navigating Campus

> I think the handbook I had with the map was open at least a couple times a day. Trying to find just about anything. I must've gone to the wrong classroom or the wrong building multiple times in the first couple weeks. (Hollis, first-year).

Students spoke often about getting lost or disoriented during their first quarter at PSU and needing to consult a map in order to find their way. For some students, this meant finding where their classrooms were located the day before classes started or leaving enough time to get somewhere in case they got lost. "I didn't really have any idea where anything was. It was pretty much like I did everything 15 to 20 minutes early because I knew I had no idea where stuff was" (Cooper, first-year). Students often mentioned that the sheer size of PSU's campus made it hard to navigate.

> It was pretty confusing… not only just driving around there with all the one-ways and getting up on a different street than I thought I was… It just took a little while to kind of get to know directions of things, if that makes sense. (Leah, first year)

Students did not spend a lot of time exploring campus beyond their classrooms that quarter.

> I very much just stuck to my two classes and walked to essentially, I think I was in like Cramer and the 4th Avenue building or something. I didn't really engage with anything else on campus. I was… very stuck in my own bubble. (Andrea, graduating student)

Overall Connection to PSU

When asked to reflect on whether they felt like a part of the PSU community during their first quarter, none of the students spoke about feeling a sense of connection

to the larger community. Students perceived themselves as isolated from the larger student body.

> It seemed like a lot of people already had their own thing and like a lot of people already knew kind of what was going on cause they'd been there awhile. But it seemed like I was just of thrown in and I was just kind of out of place for some reason. I like I was trailing behind. Other people were doing their own thing. (Cooper, first-year)

Students spoke about feeling less involved than other students that they saw around campus. "Everyone's got their own little nook that they're centered in and you can see that everywhere. I don't really have any of that. I'm always doing my own thing" (Hollis, first-year). For a large number of students, this was due their own preferences. "I was taking my academics seriously and I wanted to get done. I felt involved, I felt as involved as I would let myself be. I could've definitely become more involved and I chose not to" (Ashley, recent graduate).

Students chose to attend PSU as a way to earn their bachelor's degree and therefore academic achievement was the focus for students. As a result, four students spoke about embracing their role as a student at PSU while not necessarily feeling connected to the institution itself. "I don't know about being a part of the community, but I sure felt like this was my school now" (Molly, first-year). As mentioned earlier, Molly's purpose for attending PSU was purely academic. Living outside of downtown and working a fulltime job, Molly did not have a lot of time for social relationships. Another first-year student, Haley, reflected,

> I felt like a student. I was proud to be a student at PSU and I am proud to be a student. I feel like I work really fucking hard to be a student. And I do work really hard at being a student, like that is something I take a lot of pride in, actually… I think that I like that the identity of a student I liked, and I did feel I got that, but I don't feel like I was connected to anything other than that. I'm very connected to my role as a student in that I want to be one and that identity is really strong for me. But, I would feel that at

> any institution you drop me into. It doesn't matter whether I was at PSU, you could drop me at any university and I would still feel the same level of connection because it's the act of being a student that I feel connected to and not the university itself.

Overall, while students did not experience connection to the faculty, classmates, and were not participating in any extracurricular activities during their first quarter, the students in this study were very still involved in their academics during their first quarter. While their experiences were more individual, all of the students invested a significant amount of time and energy into their classes. In this way, students connected to their role of a student and reaffirmed their commitment to earning their bachelor's degree.

END OF FIRST YEAR

After describing their first quarter experiences, both first-year and graduating students reflected on their experiences during their third quarter at PSU. Third quarter marked the end of their first academic year at PSU for all students interviewed. For first-year students, this was their most recent quarter while graduating students were asked to reflect back on experiences that occurred between three and eight quarters previously. At this point, students once again reflected on their experiences with classes, classmates, faculty, advisors, academic resources, student organizations, campus navigation, and connectedness to the PSU community. Students indicated that they were progressing along the path towards developing a greater familiarity with PSU, with many students showing marked changes in their answers between first quarter and the end of their first year.

Classes

While students frequently spoke about the number of students enrolled in their classes and the difficulty of the coursework when talking about first-quarter classes,

students spoke about these topics less in depth when reflecting on their classes at the end of their first year. “It’s really kind of the same as the first term, because I had the same kinds of classes” (Brooke, recent graduate). Students did discuss their comfort with talking in class and students began to reflect on their level of engagement in their courses.

Talking in Class

First-year and graduating students described their comfort levels that quarter in very similar terms. Over half of the students interviewed indicated that they were generally uncomfortable talking in classes during their first quarter. For many students, that had changed by the end of their third quarter. Eleven of the fourteen students discussed being very comfortable talking in class during their third quarter. ”Once I got really comfortable, you couldn’t get me to stop talking” (Jenny, recent graduate). Over the course of their year, students had gotten to know the academic environment at PSU and begun to understand class norms and behaviors expected of themselves and other students in the classroom. “Once I got the gauge of the general people that are in the classes and it’s like, okay I can I can say these things without upsetting too many people” (Hollis, first-year).

While not all students became very comfortable talking in class, those who were still uncomfortable discussed a change in their level of comfort. When asked how she approached talking in class during her third quarter as compared to her first quarter, Andrea, a student approaching graduation, said,

> Better. I still wouldn’t, I still had to write everything down… I’d still get really nervous if I could avoid speaking, I would. But if I felt like there was something maybe important that I could add, then I felt empowered to do that. But only if it was important or like I felt I would have a good point and people would laugh at me or think I was weird or something like that.

Andrea was still generally uncomfortable talking in class, however she no longer devalued her own contributions like she had during her first quarter. Students also spoke about how being enrolled in classes that required participation in discussions as influencing their level of comfort. “Two out of the three classes that I’ve been taking have been a lot more involved with discussion, talking with other classmates… my first term I didn’t have to talk to anybody in any of my classes” (Molly, first-year). Students who were required or encouraged to contribute to in-class discussions often began to become more comfortable actively engaging in those discussions by the end of their first year.

Engagement with academic material

Almost all the students interviewed described their third quarter classes as more engaging than classes they had taken at the beginning of the year. “It was the only real quarter actually out of the couple I’ve been here in this first year where I’ve actually enjoyed my classes” (Hollis, first-year). By the third quarter, many students were finishing their introductory courses and beginning to enroll in classes related more closely to their interests. “I was taking an environmental, like a women’s, women and the environment women’s studies class and I was taking Globalization with [professor name] and I was just feeling, I just felt like way more engaged” (Andrea, graduating).

Classmates

As students began talking more during class discussions and becoming more engaged in the academic material, students also began to interact more with their classmates. By their third quarter, all the students discussed a change in their interactions with their classmates. Students had begun interacting with their classmates on a fairly

regular basis. “I’m a little bit more sociable, because we’re always talking to each other in class” (Molly, first-year). The connections formed through these interactions usually revolved around the classroom environment. As Molly explained, “we don’t exchange numbers, we don’t hang out again, at all, it’s just a class-based relationship.” Students attributed many of these connections to the influence of participating in group-work, taking classes with the same students, and beginning to see familiar faces on campus. Students also discussed how they had begun discarding age stereotypes and a few students had begun to form deeper relationships with other students.

Group-work

Group work, either in the form of in-class small group discussions or required group projects, played a large role in student interactions with classmates by the end of their first year. When describing interactions with classmates in one of her classes, Leah attributes her connections to classmates to the setup of her class.

> We did have a lot of group discussions and got into smaller groups and interacted with that group more and got to know a lot more people. And also doing role play, we were able to get to know different people’s points of views and I think that helped to make us closer as a class. (first-year)

Classes where students are required to participate act as a social facilitator for students who may not normally interact with their classmates. By continually engaging in discussions with other students, students begin to form a sense of familiarity with one another that allows students to become more comfortable talking to one another before, during, and at the end of classes about a variety of subjects. At this point, interactions focused primarily on course material and assignments. Breaking larger classes up into smaller discussion groups was especially important for students who had not experienced large classes at their previous community colleges or high schools.

> I just felt that I was changing more. I was being more willing to open up in a class setting, especially with such a class setting cause that large class setting was completely not a thing when I was in high school or when I was in community college. I was feeling like I was also being able to work better in groups at that point and forging more of those relationships and getting familiar with the people that I would continue, that I have been continuing to take classes with (Andrea, graduating).

Familiar Faces

Students reflected that over the course of the year as they began to take more classes, they began to see more familiar faces on campus. For some students, this was a result of enrolling in sequence courses (i.e. Calculus I, II, and II) where students typically progress through the course sequence as a group.

> I had met some friends because I had take Turkish 101, 102, and 103 successively. So, it was all the same students in there pretty much. So, I became friends with some students in there. (Crystal, graduating)

Having familiar faces in class, whether because they had taken a class with them previously or had interacted with in somewhere else on campus, was a welcome sight for many students. “That was nice, you know, seeing some, taking a class with someone that I’ve seen around in my, in the area of campus that I was frequenting. That was always nice building rapport” (Lizzie, first-year). Familiar faces provided an anchor for students who may have felt socially isolated during their first couple of quarters.

For students entrenched in classes for their major, students began to develop almost an organic cohort as the year progressed, where students were enrolling in many of the same courses even when they were not the result of sequenced courses.

> I continued on with class with some of the same courses with some of the same people… it wasn’t until the middle of second term, start of third term, that I actually created those connections with some of the people in my first term classes” (Cooper, first-year).

Developing Connections

By the end of their third term, eleven of the fourteen students indicated some level of connection with their classmates. For all but three students, these connections centered around the classroom environment. For the three students whose connections did extend beyond the classroom, relationships were generally casual, studying together before class or meeting up for coffee when running into each other on campus. Students approaching graduation reflected that while these connections did not always evolve into lasting relationships, they were important factors in feeling a sense of community with students in their departments.

Faculty

Students spoke more about faculty relationships when reflecting on their third term than any other subject. Faculty connections were an important factor contributing to students' feelings of connection to their departments. By third quarter, the majority of students discussed an increased sense of comfort in approaching faculty than they experienced during their first quarters. For some, this was a result of being enrolled in a smaller class.

> In a more intimate setting, smaller class size, you feel more connected to your professor. You feel like you can really be yourself and then that means, at least in my mind, you can learn. You can learn more, because you're not preoccupied with having to play this role. The role is just happening naturally. (Crystal, graduating)

Enrolling in smaller class sizes allowed students more opportunities for individual interactions with faculty that are necessary for building connection. Students spoke about discussions they had with professors that extended beyond the class material. Hollis recounted how he and one of his professors bonded over their shared interest in Game of Thrones. "We would always talk about Game of Thrones and stuff and use the political

science aspect from that unless one of us hadn't watched the episode, then we couldn't talk about it for a bit. She was great" (Hollis, first-year). Individual interactions with faculty helped students to engage more in-depth with their material and feel a sense of larger connection to the PSU community.

> I did get a lot of one on one time with my instructors [during third quarter]. Since I take the MAX and I walk about a dozen blocks to get to the MAX, and my computer science instructor actually lives downtown in Portland, but quite a ways from his classroom, he asked me if I'd just walk with him… and we walked and talked, gosh, must have been at least for a dozen blocks, So, it's been much better last term. I'd felt a lot more engaged. (Mike, first-year)

For other students, comfort with faculty came from becoming more comfortable in large classes and learning that not all professors run their large classes well. Brooke described what she called "clicker classes." These are classes where professors take attendance and poll the class through the use of a "a little gadget you have [and] they ask you a question, you type in the answer and it sends them and [professors] can see how many people got the answer right or wrong and it shows up on a little graph" (recent graduate). Brooke remembered one professor during her third quarter who utilized these clickers in an engaging, helpful way that made an impact of how she viewed her large classes and her professors:

> She had clicker questions that were really helpful. She's always asking us if we had questions and she had a website that was really helpful. She personally put out a lot of resources to help us with the class. So many other classes that I had, I just taught myself everything because I would go to lecture, they would talk at us for 50 minutes or whatever and then I would leave and feel like I really didn't learn anything.

Feeling like a professor is engaging with the class and the material is important for students' experiences of connection not only with the class material, but also with the faculty themselves.

Repeat Professors

A few students also mentioned having taken more than one course with the same professor throughout their first year at PSU. Taking multiple courses from the same professor allowed students the opportunity to begin developing a deeper connection with their professors. Students said this was the result of "being around them and knowing their personality so you knew if you could joke around with them" (Jenny, recent graduate). Just as students developed familiarity with their classmates, developing familiarity with their professors was an important part of feeling connected. Being exposed to the same professor for different classes also allowed students to experience how the professors may set up their classes differently based on the size of the class they are teaching.

> "I'm taking one professor again now that I had that first quarter and she's completely different and I think it's due to class size. First quarter when I had her, it was a huge class. This term it's a really small class and she's really more relaxed and more open to talking with everybody. I think it had a lot to do with class size, maybe. Or just the person." (Hollis, first-year)

Office Hours

While the majority of students were still not attending office hours by the end of their first year, four students attended office hours during their third term who had not used office hours at the beginning of the year. For some students, this was because "it felt less intimidating" (Cooper, first-year). Of the seven students who indicated that they began meeting with their professors during office hours, all but one student had begun to establish strong connections with their professors by this point in their time at PSU. For some, attending office hours meant hanging around their academic department to study during their professor's office hours.

> I would go over to the computer science building… like four or five hours before class. [My professor] would be in his office and he carried open office hours during that whole time and so I'd go and visit him pretty much like every week. He would say, 'yeah, go ahead and pull up a chair and you're more than welcome to work on whatever you want and if you want my help with anything, just let me know.' So I worked right by him and we'd talk about stuff whether it was class related or not class related… we would talk about all kinds of different stuff. (Mike, first-year)

Office hours gave students the opportunity to spend time with their professors and develop the foundation for a strong sense of connection.

Half of the students interviewed still indicated that they had not attended office hours by the end of their third term. Similar to first quarter, there were many students who would have liked to go to office hours but could not due to their work schedules and home commitments. By this point, though, students were approaching faculty in other ways in order to seek assistance. When asked about how they got help from professors when they needed it, one student responded, "I learned that you can e-mail them, which helped a lot because I could never go to office hours. And they actually would return the e-mail eventually, so that helped a lot" (Elijah, recent graduate). E-mail was a common method of communication for students who could not attend office hours due to scheduling. Students used e-mail not only to communicate about class assignments, students also e-mail professors with additional information and articles pertaining to in-class discussions that students though might be of interest to the professor. In this way, students who were unable to physically attend office hours were beginning to feel comfortable reaching out to faculty in order to start establishing connections.

Academic Advisors

By third term, all but three students had met with their academic advisor. Similar to first quarter, students were generally using advisors in order to develop an educational

plan that laid out the sequences of courses that they would need to take in order to graduate.

> It was really nice to know that somebody could lay out all of the classes that I needed. She gave me a sheet of paper that had every term on which and filled in all the classes that I needed to take and when they were available which was really awesome because navigating that stuff online or trying to look through the bulletin and figure out what I'm supposed to do was just so, seemed like a completely insurmountable task. (Brooke, recent graduate)

Some students, like Brooke, found this to be incredibly helpful. However, the majority of students still used found other resources to be more helpful. "I still get most of my advisor stuff from people at the tutor center or people that have already done the major" (Cooper, first-year). For the most part, students did not feel like their department advisors were particularly helpful in planning out their educational paths. Some students, like graduating student Crystal, even commented,

> I think I only saw an advisor once or twice… initially when I first went to speak with someone, it was pretty clear what I needed to do so I didn't need to continue going back in… they just printed a DARs report out to see what I had to do.

Eleven of the fourteen students interviewed were able to speak with their advisors at some point by their third quarter. When students talked about third quarter advising, the most common theme students brought up was how difficult it was to get an appointment with their advisors. While both recent graduates and first-year students commented on their frustration, first-year students spoke about their frustrations with their advisor's lack of availability in a much more heated manner than students closer to graduation. First-year student Leah was fed up that the advising hours posted were not followed by her advisor:

> I'm not sure if people were working different hours or what, but I'd go to somebody and they'd be gone for a week… I'd go to somebody's office and

> they'd be closed, so I'd go back during office hours and they're not there, you know their drop-in hours.

Similarly, Haley, another first-year student, tried to get an appointment with her advisor every quarter but was not able to get an appointment until after the end of her third term, shortly before our interview.

> I called and I e-mailed and they basically were like, oh our schedule's booked until this day, call back on this day. I call back within, literally, three days they're booked out solid again and I booked my appointment to see my advisor four weeks I think before I actually, before my appointment. (Haley, first-year)

When students are working full-time jobs outside of school or trying to raise a family, it becomes exceedingly difficult to sit and wait for an advisor during their drop-in hours. However, when students try to be proactive and make appointments, they found that there were so few opportunities to meet with advisors outside of drop-in hours that it often meant they were not able to meet with an advisor at all. This left students to do their own advising using online resources like the website, which resulted in four students taking classes during their first-year that would not count towards any degree requirements beyond electives.

Academic Services

While only a few students discussed utilizing academic services during their first quarter, half of the students used some form of academic help during their third quarter. The majority of students discussed using tutoring resources. Students who had previously been using workshops associated with their classes were all still regularly attending those workshops each successive quarter. Other students sought out individual tutoring in the tutoring center or finding a graduate student who would give tutoring to small groups of students. Crystal, a student close to graduation, recalled "the primary TA [for my statistics class] ended up kind of giving private tutoring to myself and another student

who was struggling and really wanted to do well in stats." While some students regularly used tutoring services on campus, half of the students spoke about using tutoring for one or two assignments throughout the course of their first year. Students recalled hearing about tutoring services on-campus through their professors. "We actually got extra credit points if we went and had the tutor go through some of our final papers and if they initialed off on it, then we would get the additional credit" (Jenny, recent graduate).

Students did not talk about any additional academic resources on-campus. Of the 14 students interviewed, only one student enrolled in a student success program during their first year and only one other student even mentioned that they had considered enrolling in a student success program. For Elijah, the support services offered by TRiO, a federal student services program designed to provide services to students from disadvantaged programs, was vital to his success at PSU. By that point, he did not recall any connections with faculty during his first year and very few interactions with students in his classes. "I knew people from TRiO and SSS and I started to get to know them more because I would see them a lot more" (Elijah, recent graduate). TRiO assisted Elijah in building connection to a group of people on-campus when he might have otherwise felt socially isolated. TRiO also helped to pick up the load when Elijah found it difficult to obtain other services on-campus. "They helped me figure out what classes to take. They were always available to answer my questions. They provided a place I could hang out. I felt like there was more of a community there of my peers."

Student Organizations

Only one student discussed participating in any student organizations on-campus during their third term. "That was kind of in an effort to feel a little bit more involved"

(Brooke, recent graduate). Brooke volunteered in one of the resource centers on campus for three hours a week. Ultimately, Brooke recalled not continuing to volunteer because "I had to take my kid with me [and] there wasn't really anything for me to do. I just sat at a desk and it didn't feel like a good way of using my time." While she liked what the resource centered provided for the community and looked forward to working with them more in the future, it was not something that made her feel more connected to the school or community.

Other students indicated that while they were not involved, some students reflected that they might have been interested in participating in an organization. However, in order to participate in student organizations, students needed knowledge of what organizations were available to them. This lack of communication around student clubs and organizations was very frustrating for these students.

> I know there's other clubs and there's teams and stuff, but I don't really see any of them out there in the courtyard… I mean, you see signs throughout the school, but I'm like, it's a sign, who really wants to interact with a sign? (Hollis, first-year)

Other students did not feel comfortable participating in organizations by themselves.

> I wanted to, but didn't feel comfortable doing… people would tell me about the women's resource center but I would go in there and I didn't feel comfortable at all… I didn't feel like I had other friends that were involved in things that I wanted to be involved in so I didn't feel empowered to engage in those. (Andrea, graduating)

Already feeling like they were lost in the masses, students were reticent to jump into another organization without any friends or acquaintances that they could connect with to provide a social buffer in what could potentially be an uncomfortable situation. Still other students recalled not being able to participate due to their work and home commitments.

Navigating Campus

When speaking about walking around campus during their third quarter, students talked about developing a comfort level with finding on-campus resources that came through spending time on-campus over the course of the entire year. Students were less likely to get lost by the end of the year. Cooper, a first-year student, recounted trying to find places to study with classmates during his first quarter and reflected that by third quarter "it was easier since I knew the campus. They'd be like, 'oh yeah, have you been to this place' or 'we can meet up to study at this place' instead of having to try to find where everything was… it was way more smooth than first quarter." For other students, it was important that they knew where to go if they were hungry or where in the library would be a quiet place to study. At this point in their time at PSU, students were becoming more comfortable walking around campus and feeling comfortable giving directions to anyone who asked.

> I felt more familiar, because I'd spent so much time there… by the end of the year I got where all the buildings were because it seemed like every class would be in a different building so by the end of the first year I had had a class everywhere. Or at least everywhere that I would ever have a class. (Elijah, recent graduate)

Spending more time on campus was an important factor in terms of developing familiarity with the campus as a whole. Mike, a first-year student, stated when you spend more time there, "the campus doesn't seem as large in scale to you." Mike spent a lot of time on-campus each day and quickly discovered the best places to study and connect with other students.

> I'd be in the computer science building working on stuff or studying and I would show up and use one of the empty classrooms over by the classroom I was going to be in and I would go ahead and do my homework in there. Well, then I had about six other people from my class

> ended up coming into that same classroom and we'd go over stuff together and we'd talk about some of the different methodologies of programming.

Spending time on-campus and learning where the best places to study were helped Mike to connect with other students within his program in a way that facilitated his educational goals. Similarly, Brooke, a recent graduate, recounted that "Over the year I learned about other things… like the family playroom in the library and kind of adding those things into my knowledge of what's available over the year." As a single mom who often had her child with her, being able to find a place in the library that she could study without her son disturbing other students was important for her to get her schoolwork done.

Overall Connection

By the end of their third quarter, students were beginning to feel a greater sense of connection to PSU. More than half of the students interviewed spoke about how that greater connection contributed to feeling more a part of the PSU community. For students who did not yet feel fully like a part of the community, they still felt more secure in their connection than when they first walked onto campus three quarters before.

> I think it was mostly just my demeanor and feeling like I was actually in college… this is my third term, I'm like a seasoned veteran now. It's being able to navigate where I'm at and what I'm doing and who I needed to see and what resources I have so at that time I felt like I knew more of what was going on, I guess. (Andrea, graduating)

Students discussed how feeling more familiar with all aspects of the institution (classes, classmates, faculty, and navigating campus) contributed to their feelings of connection to PSU. "I like it now. I like it because I'm more familiar with it. I know more what to expect… I know that they can't throw anything at me that I can't handle" (Mike, first-year).

While the majority of students felt more connected to the university, five students still mentioned feeling isolated at the end of their third quarter. However, even these students had developed a connection to at least one other person or group at PSU by the end of the quarter. These usually came in the form of a relationship with a professor, a classmate, or for one student, TRiO. Elijah, a recent graduate, recounted:

> I just felt like I was doing it all on my own, I also didn't feel like there was any help. I wish I'd felt more, well no, you know, TRiO did help a lot. By the end of my first year, I really felt like they were cheering me on and helping me. So, that was kind of the thing I had. Outside of that, not really. I didn't really feel connection to school.

Similarly, when asked about feeling a part of the PSU community, Crystal spoke about not having any connection to the larger school by the end of that year. However, she does remember developing a relationship with one of her professors.

> I didn't have any connection. You know, I hadn't formed any really great friendships except for with the Turkish instructor… I wasn't a part of the student groups. I didn't know any faculty that probably knew me by name. (Crystal, graduating)

For these students, feeling connected meant being feeling like a social member of a community. At the same time, only one student did not identify a relationship or connection developing with one particular classmate, professor, or other institutional representative by the end of their third quarter. The remaining students all identified at least one classmate or professor that they had connected with regarding a topic outside of class material or while participating in some type of group activity for class.

As a result, students experiences of connection by the end of their first year occurred mainly in the form academic connection. These experiences largely occurred in the classroom, although students were beginning to connect academically with faculty and classmates outside of the classroom as well. Students also connected with the

physical campus. Finally, some students were beginning to have mixed academic and social connections, primarily with faculty. Similar to students' first quarter, students drew on these connection experiences to affirm their commitment to earning their degrees.

LAST YEAR

Only students who had either recently graduated or were in their last year at PSU were asked to reflect on the end of their last year at PSU as their most recent quarter. This group of interviews included five recent graduates and two students who were in their last year. All the students interviewed had either taken three years to complete their degrees or were currently in their third year at PSU. When discussing their most recent quarters, rather than focusing on just their most recent quarter, students opted instead to talk about experiences that spanned the entire most recent year.

Classes

When students spoke about the classes that they enrolled in during their last year, students discussed how content of their classes was more specialized than their first year of classes.

> I started focusing more on my area and then I started taking more classes at the higher level. This is when I started taking my 400 level class[es]. And I was really nervous at first and then I realized they're not that hard. It's no big deal and then by the end of Spring… I was a taking a graduate level class and I was feeling like really engaged and I was feeling really empowered with the classes that I was taking. More like I had finally reached this level that I had never gotten to and like most undergrads don't even go to anyway. So, I was really excited about it. (Andrea, graduating)

Students described being able to engage with their class material in a more meaningful way than they had engaged during their first year of classes. First year classes were more generalized, survey courses that introduced students to the culture of the PSU or an academic department. Taking introductory courses during their first-year also allowed

students the opportunity to assess whether their level of interest in their intended major and their commitments to their goal and the institution. Brooke, a recent graduate, reflected that

> Those huge classes, I feel like, are kind of set up to weed people out who aren't really serious about it. Once you get into 400 level biology class, you're with all these other people who have… you're not like so specialized, you're not like grad school specified, right, but you kind of have an idea about if you want to [study] organisms or botany or whatever.

Those students who decided to continue with their original major found an increased sense of engagement with their classes after their first year when they began enrolling in classes with a narrower focus on specializations within the larger field of study.

Talking in Class

By this point in their time at PSU, every student interviewed spoke about having become comfortable talking in all of their classes. For some students, this was a deliberate decision. Crystal, a student in her third year at PSU at the time of the interview, considered,

> Part of it, I think, was I now had an experience being at PSU and going home for the summer and reflecting on the year before. And then saying, 'well, this year I am really going to talk in class,' you know. 'I'm really going to try to get over my anxiety about that and my irrational concern that I'll be perceived a certain way. Because you can't really learn unless you're willing to put yourself out there. So I was a lot more invested on many levels in my classes and I think when you're more invested in something you get more out of it.

While Crystal may not have identified her anxiety as "irrational" at the beginning of her first year, by the time of the interview Crystal had spent enough time in classes at PSU that she was able to build a degree of confidence in her own academic abilities. As a result, she was able to identify and make a change to her behaviors that were not supporting her academic goals. Jenny, a recent graduate, attributed her own increased

comfort to "the building up of my own confidence in what I knew and how much knowledge I had gained over the whole couple years." Jenny recounted not wanting to talk in class during her first year due to a reluctance to feel like her intelligence was in question if she were to answer a question incorrectly.

One of the ways that students built enough confidence to speak up in class was actually to start talking in classes. Crystal revealed that

> A lot of [my comfort] has to do with Dr. ____. In his syllabus, he required us to participate in class so it's like, 'oh, that's 10% of my grade'… It did help a lot just to have that 'it's like oh, if it's 10% of your grade, there's no way I'm going to lose 10% just because I can't speak in class. That's a big percentage of the grade.

Forced participation gave students an opportunity to continually expose themselves to something that they feared on a regular basis until it became a normalized, non-anxiety inducing activity. Andrea also discussed how her professors required students to write discussions questions and come to class with prepared points of discussion. For Andrea,

> that helped me be able to just engage in class on my own and… without feeling nervous, 'cause I realized everyone, not everybody has something smart to say. Not everyone's just like engaging and just sitting and trying to engage with these readings or whatever. And it became less about little thingy activities that are just like tedious and monotonous for me, where I'm just like, well, this is stupid, and more like reading and going to class and engaging with other students.

Students often spoke about feeling like imposters in their classes. They felt as though their classmates were smarter than they were and that other students were able to engage more with the class material than they were. This triggered anxiety in many students. However, hearing what other students were thinking when professors forced everyone to engage in meaningful in-class discussions allowed students to relate more to their classmates. They saw more of their own experiences reflected in the experiences of their peers. As a result, requirements to participate in class discussions actually relieved a

sense of pressure to perform and allowed students to engage more fully with their material. Now, Andrea describes herself as "one of the most talkative people in the classes. I'm one of the people who has the most to say!"

Classmates

Graduating and recently graduated students' descriptions of their interactions and connections with classmates changed dramatically between the end of their first year at PSU and their last. While students previously spoke about their relationships with classmates as being focused on the classroom, students' relationships evolved beyond that by the end of their most recent year. Students still spoke about their relationships with classmates in relation to academics. "We would want to share our knowledge that we'd gotten from other classes with each other" (Brooke, recent graduate). Students also touched on the formation of organic cohorts of students progressing through their education at PSU at the same time and building relationships with classmates.

Organic Cohorts

More than half of the graduating students discussed the importance of building a core group of classmates to feeling connected. During her discussion about her third quarter, Andrea reflected that while none of the connections she had made with her classmates that quarter sustained throughout the next year, she would later notice that she and a few other students were progressing through their courses at the same time in "just like this kind of weird cohort-ish way. Like, it was all of a sudden, and that's like continued on since then, too. So I always am taking classes with at least like 5 or 6 people that I've already taken classes with." Elijah also felt that taking classes with the same people created a sense of connection with his classmates. Taking classes with the same students

creates this sense of shared experiences. These experiences bond students because they know that there are other students overcoming the same challenges that they are facing. As a result, sharing academic experiences with a group of classmates that they could relate to allowed students to develop a greater feeling of connection to those classmates.

As students become more connected to their classmates, the relationship because more reciprocal in nature. Students begin to rely on their classmates for support while also providing encouragement and support to their classmates. “I feel like I’m at a place where I’m kind of tutoring people again, or just helping more, and asking people for help more. Like, actually talking about the material with classmates” (Brooke, recent graduate). Brooke had describing tutoring other students while in community college. Those types of interactions with her classmates did not occur until she began enrolling in smaller classes after her first year with many of the same students.

Building Relationships

As students continued to attend PSU, they developed connections with their classmates that often extended into somewhat social relationships. For many students, these social relationships developed slowly over time. Some students began enrolling in the same classes and working on group projects on a consistent basis until they were communicating regularly outside of the classroom. Jenny reflected, “We spent a lot of time with each other throughout the day. Sometimes we would come early or leave late just so we could have a little time to catch up. I remember just, there was definitely a strong relationship.” Jenny’s relationships with her classmates developed in a social support system where her group of friends met for weekly happy hours and genuinely cared about each other’s lives outside of school. Other students discussed friendships

with classmates where they would occasionally meet for coffee or go to a local pub for drinks after classes. Over the course of time, as students spent more time together, they began to rely upon one another for the social support of someone who also understands the academic challenges that students experienced. When students graduated and no longer needed their connections for academic support, transfer students mentioned using social media to keep up with their classmates socially. "I would say most of our friendship is carried out online… that's just how it goes" (Brooke, recent graduate). For those who graduated, these relationships did not die off entirely once they received their degree however the relationships sometimes became more peripheral in nature than they had been while students were in school.

Faculty

> "I never really understood approaching faculty until my last year. I never understood, because to me, and the way I conceptualized it… is if I have a question the answer will be in the text" (Shelby, recent graduate).

Connection to faculty changed dramatically by the end of their most recent quarter for all students who were approaching graduation or were recent graduates. Over the course of their time at PSU, students began to develop more nuanced relationships with their professors. Students began approaching faculty not only to get assistance with their classwork, but for other reasons as well. Students could be motivated to approach faculty regarding a student's personal research interest, working for a professor in their research lab, seeking faculty expertise about a subject from another class, or a multitude of other reasons. As a result, students began to develop relationships that are professional and personal in nature. Brooke connects this to the smaller upper division classes where students are encouraged to ask questions and if

> you ask enough questions, you're involved enough with what they're teaching you, then, you kind of get their respect in a way and they, you know, like once people understand that you're serious about doing what you're trying to do then I think it opens a lot of doors. They help you open up a lot of doors.

Students saw their professors as more than just gatekeepers to their degrees. Students felt genuine connection with the faculty within their departments by the time they were close to graduation. "I'm completely 100% comfortable going and just talking to whoever I need to go talk to at any given time, even if I've never taken a class with [that] professor" (Andrea, graduating). This was a big change for students like Andrea who discussed a lot of fear with regards to interacting with faculty during their first few quarters at PSU.

Key Faculty Relationships

For many students, the increased comfort with approaching faculty came as a result of connecting with a few key faculty within their departments. For most students, having more than one key relationship with a faculty member was important to feel connected to their academic department. Students spoke about being able to go to anywhere from two or five professors within their department at any time for assistance and students were confident that the professor would find some way to assist them.

Students often established these connections through taking multiple classes taught by the same professor. Elijah, a recent graduate, commented, "I don't think I really got to know any of my professors until the second year. I found a couple of them I liked and I just started to maximize the amount of classes that I took from them, over and over again." Elijah did not feel comfortable talking with his professors during his first year at PSU. It wasn't until he had taken a professor in more than one class that he felt more comfortable approaching them. By the end of his last quarter at PSU, Elijah expressed that he "felt more able to contact them and actually have them, you know, care about

what I needed and helping me out. And I kind of expected more from them because I'd gotten to know them a little better." This was an experienced shared by all of the students who were close to graduation.

Students perceived faculty support as vital in helping them achieve their academic goals. Ashley made it a point to develop a relationship with each of her professors during her last year at PSU. "This is the time to really build those relationships because I'm going to use them" (Ashley, recent graduate). Ashely knew what she wanted to get out of her degree, and she made sure that she was communicating that with her faculty. Her dedication and persistence resulted in relationships where most of her faculty wrote her letters of recommendations when she was applying for jobs at PSU after graduation. Other students talked about the importance of discussing their plans for graduate school with their professors. Crystal, a student in her last year, applied for the McNair program at the suggestion of one of her professors. "He didn't have to do that, fortunately that's what he's interested in and I happened to meet him" (Crystal, graduating). Having the support of their professors was not only reassuring for these students, it also helped students to reaffirm their goals and expanded those goals beyond what students had originally envisioned.

Academic Advisors

By the end of their last year, graduating students were either meeting with their advisor regularly or seeking out advising from their professors on a regular basis despite feeling like they had a grasp of what classes they needed to take during their last few quarters. As a result, student described interactions with their advisors were less about planning classes and more about preparing for the future or addressing any unexpected

problems that arose throughout the quarter. Students largely had more positive experiences with their advisors than negative experiences compared to their first year. "My advisor was really good, actually. The political science advisor the last year I attended was actually really knowledgeable, very available, very friendly. I'm very happy with her" (Elijah, recent graduate). By this point, students were mostly using the advisors within their department as opposed to a general academic advisor. This helped students receive more personalized help when they encountered issues like when Brooke missed the only class meeting for a one-credit, weekend course after she had written down the wrong date on her calendar.

Academic Services

When asked whether they had used any academic resources during their most recent year PSU, many graduating students and recent graduates indicated that they were enrolled in either TRiO's McNair Scholars program or were working for a professor or lab within department. The McNair Scholars program "takes people whose parents didn't go to college and it tries to encourage them to continue their education in grad school. You get a fee waiver for applications" (Elijah, recent graduate). As a McNair Scholar, students connect with a mentor professor in their department to work on a research project around the subject of the student's choice. Elijah had completed his McNair project at the time of the interview, while Crystal and Andrea had recently been accepted into the program and had not become actively involved in the program beyond orientation. All three students had been encouraged to apply for this program at the suggestion of a key connection with either one of their professors or an advisor.

In addition to his participation with McNair, Elijah continued to participate in other TRiO programs on campus. Elijah considered his involvement with all the TRiO programs at PSU as "one of the best things that happened to me at PSU." He felt continually supported by them even despite the fact that he between a couple different majors multiple times while at PSU. While no other graduating student discussed participating in TRiO programs beyond McNair, they were vital for assisting Elijah to develop a sense of connection to PSU.

Students did speak about the impact of working in their departments or related departments on their overall sense of connection to PSU. Both Crystal and Brooke mentioned working for their professors in their labs on campus, while Andrea assisted with one of her professor's research projects and Jenny's human relation's internship involved an ambassadorship for a government agency within PSU's career center. All four students felt that these experiences increased their interactions with faculty and graduate students within their departments and ultimately aided in their overall sense of connection to their department. Crystal reflected that

> the graduate student who I work with… she's really inviting and open… it feels like she wants the best for me. We do have a friendship, and I think she's imparted a lot of valuable information to me whether she's aware of it or not. Implicitly and explicitly, so she's been a start in my life star in my life for the past, since January.

Working within their department provides students with a different type of academic service than the traditional academic services like tutoring and more structured support programs. Students obtain informal mentorship from both faculty and graduate students, as well as hands-on experience in the field that they are studying. These were valuable factors for students when considering their overall connection to their department.

Student Organizations

While only one graduating student had been involved with student organizations during their first year at PSU, almost all graduating students and recent graduates participated in at least one student organization or were actively involved in departments events within the last year at PSU. Students participated in a wide range of activities, including serving on student government, utilizing campus resource centers, participating in clubs, and department events. While students were involved in many aspects of campus, they spoke most about their participation in clubs and department events.

Clubs

Five of the seven graduating students discussed being a part of at least one club during the last year. These clubs were typically directly related to their major or a related interest closely associated with their area of study. Students spoke about being leaders in these clubs, as well and how they helped students to feel more actively involved with their department. Crystal was the treasurer for one club and at the time of the interview was communicating with the other club leaders to plan for the upcoming academic year despite school being out for the summer. Student involvement in clubs increased their interactions with other classmates, helping students to feel more strongly connected to their departments. Students also spoke about forming their own clubs, although they were not always successful. Elijah "tried to start a democratic student organization and found out how hard it was to recruit students… it just didn't end up really happening, but I did meet some students." Elijah had an area of interest that he wanted to pursue and connect with other students around. While he was not ultimately able to accomplish his goal of forming an organization, he was still able to build connections with other students.

Meanwhile, Andrea discussed starting to form a club as the result of a research project she was working on as a part of a class assignment. Through the process of completing her project, she found that there was a huge interest in the topic and "it was a way that class connected to activism and then reconnected me to it and then I was really interested in it, so it was like 'oh, let's keep doing this. This is really nice. It'll look good on my CV'" (Andrea, graduating). Discussing participation in clubs and graduate school applications was common among students who were involved in student organizations.

Department and Other Campus Events

Students also spoke about attending events on campus during the last year. Students mainly participated in events within their departments, like lectures and end of the year parties or graduations. "I went to every single event in the political science department that I could possibly go to," stated Ashley when asked about her participation in student organizations. Department events were another way for students to connect with both faculty and classmates.

> I remember going to the sociology party at the end of the year and all these people that I knew and knew me and so it's like I had all of these relationships, that maybe not necessarily carried out into the real world, but it was still like this connectedness of everybody knew me and I knew them and they knew people that I knew. (Andrea, graduating)

Navigating Campus

By the time students were close to graduation, most considered themselves to be experts of PSU's campus. Students spoke about giving directions to people on campus who are obviously lost.

> I feel like a pro now. I see people, like, so many times now, I see people standing around like, I can see they have a map in their hand and they're looking really confused and I feel completely confident asking them what they're looking for and pointing them in the right direction. (Brooke, recent graduate)

Any discomfort that students were experiencing during their first and third quarters had all but disappeared by this time. While students mentioned that they had spent much of the quarters directly after their first year exploring campus, by the time they graduated students had indicated they now only frequented a few spots on campus regularly. Andrea explains that it feels like "I entered really closed and then I like opened up briefly and now I'm closing back up again… I have all this focus again of what I'm supposed to be doing." Similar to the experiences that students discussed regarding talking in class, once students became comfortable with navigating campus they were no long distracted by their discomfort and more able to focus on their academic goals. Jenny reflected,

> I think just knowing the layout of campus has made a big difference. I used to be scared of the parking garages… well, for one, I didn't know where they were. I didn't know how to use the machines or how that whole situation worked… now that I've spent so much time on campus and had some general interaction with people, when you walk around you really know that you are a part of it. And I don't feel like I'm a small little ant in the big world. (Jenny, recent graduate)

The interim period was an important, necessary time of adjustment because it allowed students to identify their favorite places on campus that they could later use while focusing again on their academics.

Overall Connection

At the time of their interviews, all students who were close to graduation spoke about feeling connected to PSU. Students discussed their connection to the school with regards to feeling like they are a part of the community within their department and feeling a sense of connection with the larger school community. While not all students felt the same degree of connections, all students strongly identified with at least one part of the PSU community. For most students, these feelings of community revolved around

their connection to their academics. Shelby reflected that she was very vocal in her last year and it was because

> it wasn't like I felt I had to prove anything, I was just so comfortable in interaction with the teachers and I made friends in [my classes] so when I reached that level of comfortable, it was just smooth sailing.

For Shelby, gaining a sense of connection with the university was largely about being able to connect with her faculty and classmates around academic subject matter. Shelby's academic confidence tied very closely with her experiences of connection. By the end of her time at PSU, she no longer felt inferior when receiving a poor grade and was incredibly comfortable approaching her faculty seeking improvement. "I feel connected to the school now, if that makes sense. I feel like a Viking" (Shelby, recent graduate). Crystal described a similar sense of finding her own voice over the last year.

> I definitely feel more of a sense of agency… because I think I have social support and peers. I feel respected and valued, whereas I just felt like a little grain of sand in a big pile on the beach or something the first time, and I feel maybe like a rock now. A little tiny rock or pebble.

For graduating transfer students, feeling valued and respected in their academic communities played a large role in their overall feelings of connection.

As a result, by the time students in this study entered their last year at PSU their connection experiences consisted of strong academic connections that also provided students with additional social connection. Students had built strong connections based around academics with both faculty and classmates that had gradually gained social elements as well. Additionally, students were actively participating in extracurricular activities related to their academic connection.

CONCLUSION

Commuter community college transfer student connection to the four-year institution is a longitudinal process that begins even before students set foot on campus and continues to change with each subsequent quarter that students attend PSU. Both first-year students and graduating students shared similar experiences of connection throughout the first-year experiences, although first-year students tended to provide more details for orientation and first-quarter experiences while graduating students reflected more on those time periods as the part of a larger process. By the time students discussed their third term at PSU, they were sharing similar stories about establishing connection.

The students in this study all came to PSU with a set of expectations for their education and often found themselves as outsiders looking in on the larger community during both their initial orientation and their first full quarter on campus. Students struggled through talking in large classes and interacting with both classmates and their professors. Students felt uninvolved compared to other students on-campus and questioned their academic abilities. Most students tried to take it all on their own that quarter, either through advising or working through class assignments and material on their own without the help of professors or classmates. Students spent minimal time on campus during their first-quarter and often stuck to the buildings they had classes in when they were on campus. They rarely used any academic services and were not involved in any student organizations. Overall, most students did not experience any sense of connection to the institution by the end of the first quarter.

Students' experiences of connection began to change throughout the course of that first year, albeit slowly for some students. As students spent more time on campus

they began to develop a familiarity not only with the physical campus environment and buildings, but also began to see familiar faces in their classrooms. Students began to engage more with their professors and classmates as they became more comfortable in the four-year environment. Students became more comfortable talking with their classmates during class discussions and group work, although their relationships often ended at the classroom doors and did not continue through to the next quarter or year. Students were more engaged with their faculty than with their classmates by the end of their first year. Students were talking about class material and how it related to other areas of interests and they were beginning to seek out the advice of certain professors whom they had taken more than one class with. While students prioritized their connection to faculty during their first year, students did not prioritize involvement within their departments and the larger community. Most students did not participate in any student organizations or academic services during their first year. For these students, a lack of involvement in these types of activities did not impact their view of themselves as students. That being said, by the end of their first year most students still felt a sense of isolation from the PSU community. Students did reflect that they felt more connected than their first quarter and some feelings of connection to student's identity as a student and their connection to their academic goals was forming.

This all changed by the time students entered their last year at PSU. Most students had already attended PSU for two years by this time and had become very comfortable within the campus environment. Students were extremely connected to the institution by this point. Students actively participated in the classroom, contributing to discussions and forming closer relationships with their classmates as they enrolled in courses with fewer

students. Over the course of their time at PSU, the students in this study had found groups of students with whom they could connect over shared experiences. However, the most important relationships that students forged over their time at PSU were with professors. Students interviewed in their final year all had established relationships with at least a couple key faculty who students felt encouraged them to succeed at levels beyond they anticipated when students first began at PSU. For some students, this meant working within their departments or participating in academic related clubs and organizations. For these students, it was not an increase in the amount of time that they spent involved in activities on campus that contributed to a stronger sense of connection to their departments and the PSU community. Instead, it was the quality of student involvement that contributed to students' connection experiences. Students were deeply committed to their academics and their goal of completing their degrees and saw these activities as contributing positively to their goals. As a result, graduating students experienced a strong sense of connection to their departments and the overall community and an increased commitment to their academic goals.

Overall, connection for commuter community college transfer students develops over the course of time around their academic experiences and commitment to their goal of earning a bachelor's degree. Due to the academic nature of their connection, commuter community college transfer student connection can be summarized as consisting of a strong engagement with academic material and a limited degree of social connection. This sense of engagement drives students to develop strong relationships with the faculty in their department. Additionally, students build relationships with classmates based on their shared academic interests and goals. As a result, when students begin to connect

outside of the classroom it is almost always directly related to their academic interests. In this same way, students connect with the physical campus in ways that support their academic interests. For example, learning which buildings their classes are primarily held in, finding the best study spots, and addressing any other pressing needs that students may have while on campus like where to find food.

In conclusion, as Tinto (1975;1993) suggests, the students in this study experiences of connection change over time. However, while Tinto also suggests that both academic and social connection are important contributors to student persistence, the commuter community college transfer students in this study were focused primarily on their academic connection and their lack of social connection did not contribute to their persistence decisions. Instead, students chose to participate in activities that focused on their academic connection. In this way, the quality of student involvement was just as important as the amount of time students spent participating in extracurricular activities (Astin 1984). Students drew connection not from the act of participating in activities alone, instead connection was established due to their involvement in activities they saw as contributing to their goal of completing their bachelor's degrees.

The next findings chapters, Nature of Connection, will take a more in-depth look at the academic nature of commuter community college transfer student connection, how academic connection facilitates social connection, and how living off-campus affects connection in order to address this study's research sub-questions.

CHAPTER V: NATURE OF STUDENT CONNECTION

All of the students in this study enrolled at PSU with the goal of earning their bachelor's degree. As students pursued their degree, they connected with PSU in a variety of ways, although for the majority of students this was through academic connection. This chapter focuses on the results of analyses of interview data in order to answer the following research questions: how do commuter community college transfer students experience connection to PSU? This chapter expands upon how commuter community college transfer students experience connection through their academics. Commuter community college transfer students' commitment to earning their degrees drives students to prioritize their academic connection over social connection. Only once commuter community college transfer students develop strong academic connections to faculty and classmates do they begin to establish social relationships. In this way, their academic connection facilitates social connection. However, this sense of social connection only serves to supplement the social support that students draw from their home social systems rather than supplant other forms of social support.

The results of this chapter are organized into three major sections. The first section, "Academic Connection" explores what academic connection consists of for commuter community college transfer students and how student experiences of academic connection change over time. The second section, "Changing Connections" examines how students' connection with faculty and classmates starts as academic and evolves to include elements of social connection as well. The final section, "Impact of Home Social System on Connection", explores the effect of living-off campus on student connection

by examining students' perceptions of their education coming into PSU and the impact of student's home priorities on their expectations of connection.

ACADEMIC CONNECTION

The primary form of connection for the commuter community college transfer students in this study consisted of their connection to their academics. From the beginning of their enrollment at PSU, students were actively engaged intellectually with their area of study or educational pursuit. When students spoke about their classes over the course of their time at Portland State, the majority of students interviewed identified their main objective for attending school was to learn as much as they possibly could in order to become an expert in their area of study. This was a conviction that students brought with them to PSU and persisted with the passing of each quarter. For Crystal, she was "coming to school to be enriched, and that was really important to me. I mean, getting a credential was a big accomplishment, but it's not just about the destination. It's about the journey… and I always loved learning." Students came to the four-year institution with the desire to learn.

As a result, students were more concerned about the quality of their education than earning good grades. "It wasn't necessarily that I was going to be upset if I didn't get an A or got a B instead of an A… I wanted to see progression in my writing… it's not all about the letter grade for me." Lizzie, a first-year student, discussed communicating with each of her professors early in the quarter how she prioritized learning over earning good grades. Similarly, when Molly was asked at the end of her interview how faculty might have assisted her in overcoming any challenges she had faced during her first she,

she felt that “what they’ve done has been enough for me to, you know, learn and not just get a good grade in class.”

Even students who did not necessarily come to PSU following the principle that learning material was more important than earning good grades ended up subscribing to that belief by the end. Ashley, a recent graduate, explained that “My first year at PSU, I was always about like getting good grades, like how do I get the good grades, like how do I do the extra credit, what’s going to make me get the best grade I can.” Ashley came into PSU very focused on the appearance of success. Ultimately, she ended up leaving school for a significant period of time partway through her second year before returning for one final year to complete her degree. By that time, she reasoned to herself,

> If you’re going to be here, and you’re going to take time away from family and friends and work, then you need to be like, understanding the material and walking away with knowledge rather than walking away with a grade. And so, it was definitely a switch for me… any little tiny bit of information that could have come out of that class, or any suggested reading, it was done. Because I was like, I’m going to learn everything I can possibly learn.

Due to students’ focus on learning, the students in this study experienced connection through their engagement with their academics. This connection to their academics began before students transferred to PSU. However, the ways in which the students in this study connected to their academics changed over time as they became more familiar with PSU. The following section will discuss how the ways that students connected to their academics changed throughout the course of student enrollment at PSU. First, students experienced connection to their academics on an individual level. Then, as students begin to collaborate more with professors and classmates, their academic connection shifted into an interactive experience within the classroom

environment. Finally, students experienced academic connection as a being part of a larger learning community.

Individual Connection

Students spoke very little about their initial educational experiences and connection with academics at PSU. When students did discuss their educational experiences, they described solitary experiences. The majority of students described minimal to no interactions with their faculty or other classmates during their first quarter, a trend that continued for some students for their first few quarters at PSU. As a result, student academic experiences primarily consisted of sitting in large lectures, often without asking questions, and completing homework and readings on their own. Brooke, a recent graduate, explained that in most of her classes, "I just taught myself everything because I would go to lecture, they would talk at us for 50 minutes or whatever and then I would leave and feel like I really didn't learn anything." Another recent graduate, Elijah, commented that

> I didn't have a single professor who engaged us in discussion, so we never talked to each other, ever. If we talked, we talked outside of class, and since I never spent any time on campus, that never happened. I didn't have any, I wasn't involved in any groups or clubs or whatever, so I just didn't get to know any of my classmates. Or my professors, either really.

As a result, students were not actively participating in classes. Instead, students took responsibility for their own learning. When asked about whether she used any academic support services during her first quarter, Brooke reflected that "I often didn't really need to, like I could just figure stuff out on my own and that for me works a lot better." Students saw connecting to their academics as an individual endeavor, where their comprehension of class material was the result of working through readings and homework assignments on their own. Despite initially struggling in a biology class that

she was ill-prepared for, first-year student Molly did not seek any additional resources offered to her by her professor. Instead, "I read the textbook and I did the homework and I paid attention in class, so I didn't really need any help other than that." Molly took it upon herself to catch up on the material she did not understand in order to pass her class.

Overall, the initial experiences of academic connection for the students in this study consisted of their individual engagement with their class material and their dedication to learning. When students struggled in classes or did not feel properly prepared, they invested a substantial amount of effort on learning their class material. Students' individual involvement with their academics formed the foundation for their academic connection.

Connection Through Interaction

As students began enrolling in smaller classes and becoming more familiar with PSU, students' connection experiences became more complex, adding to their initial foundation of academic connection. Student experiences of academic connection began to include interactions with faculty and classmates. As discussed in the previous chapter, students often connected first with their professors over the course of their first year before beginning to establish connections with their classmates towards the end of the year. As students spoke more about their interactions with faculty and classmates, they also spoke more about what they were learning and the ways they were learning. Twelve of the fourteen students interviewed talked about participating in structured discussions during class and group projects. Leah, a first-year student, described how in one of her classes

> We did have a lot of group discussions, and um, got into smaller groups and interacted with that group more and got to know a lot of more people. And, also,

> doing role play we were also able to get to know different people's points of views and I think that helped to kind of make us a closer class. And, it was also a class with only 30 students instead of 50 or so with the other lecture classes that I had been taking.

For many students, participating in class not only facilitated connection with their faculty and classmates, but it enabled students to connect more intimately with the class material. As Leah alluded to, discussions and group-work allowed students to talk with one another and exchange ideas in a way that allowed students to understand multiple different points of view around a topic. Students valued the insight that their classmates brought into the conversation. Crystal recalled that one of her professors graded students on how often they spoke in class. This was an experience that changed the way Crystal perceived her educational experience.

> Having people talk in class, I think, requiring them to at least say one thing here or there, you know, it's good for them because then they get to interact with their peers and then they see their, I think it creates a community. If everybody's just sitting there with their own head, I mean, what's the point of even sharing. I mean, you're not sharing knowledge so you're just a bunch of bodies with a pulse in a classroom listening to someone talk.

Students began to see learning more as an explorative experience, an experienced based on the exchange of ideas as opposed to rote memorization of facts. In this way, students began to connect with their academics through structured interactive learning that facilitated student connection to their classmates. This connection not only created a temporary bond between classmates, but also assisted students in connecting more deeply with the course material by facilitating an exchange of ideas. As such, student academic connection no longer included only students' individual involvement with their academics. Over time, academic connection began to include interactions within the classroom as well.

Connection Through Learning Communities

As students began to interact more within the classroom, the ways in which students connected to their academics expanded once again. As students approached graduation, students began to see their connection to their academics as also including their connection to a larger learning community. While they still connected with their academics through the exchange of ideas between faculty, classmates, and themselves, five of the seven graduating students began speaking about building "learning communities." For these students, learning communities were less structured than they had previously experienced. Students now experienced academic connection through both structured, in-class exchanges and through less structured interactions outside of the classroom.

> Being in class got to a point where it's like I'm learning more from [classmates] and what they're knowing and what they're, what class they're taking. And, the teacher's involved, in like lecturing and engaging, but you're also learning, I think, it becomes more like a large community in classes and classmates. It just becomes, yeah, it just became more like, I guess, a learning community instead of lecturing at. So, then, it's like you get to know your classmates and you're engaging with them on a personal level instead of engaging with your professor and they're hearing you in in this weird triangle of communication. (Andrea, approaching graduation)

Engaging with classmates in the classroom setting eventually resulted in engaging with her classmates outside of the classroom as well. Andrea became a part of what she described as a "cohort" of students who frequently found themselves with similar class schedules each quarter. As she began to interact with the same students in multiple classes, she recalled feeling like a larger part of what she called the "sociology community" and became actively involved with her department's student club. In addition to her participation in the club, Andrea's work with professors on their research led her to view professors as students in the learning community as well. In this way, her

connection with faculty and classmates extended her connection to her academics beyond the classroom.

Andrea's experience was a common experience for students who felt like they were a part of a larger learning community. When looking back at her connections with classmates during her last year, Brooke echoed a similar experience. "We would want to share our knowledge that we'd gotten from other classes with each other. And, you know, we're all just really interested in learning as much as we can about science and in general. And that, it just felt really different." Although Brooke was not involved in any departmental clubs, she worked closely with her professors and other classmates in a department lab and recalled that,

> It really kind of hit me in the last nine months or so that I'm really highly educated, which is weird. Very weird. I've always kind of been like a jack of all trades, master of none and like, I actually know a ton about biology. And that's really cool. And, you know, you don't really think about it until you talk to people about it at work and it's been really nice.

Working within her department provided Brooke with the feeling of being a part of a larger community where she could connect with faculty and classmates around her academics. This reinforced her own feelings of academic connection when she began to realize just how knowledgeable she was in her subject area as the result of increased connection with faculty and classmates. Crystal and Ashley described similar experiences when they spoke about their own involvement with departmental clubs and participating in as many department events as they were able to as they approached graduation.

Overall, academic connection for the students in this study consisted of varying degrees of their individual connection with their class material and area of study, active participation within the classroom, and participation in learning communities within their

departments outside of class time that are related to their area of study but may not be directly tied to a specific class.

CONNECTIONS

As mentioned in the previous section, all of the students in this study spoke about the way that their interactions with faculty and classmates evolved from the beginning of their first quarter at PSU up until the time of their interviews. Students initially established connections with both faculty and classmates based on their academic interests. As students continued through their degree programs at PSU, student connections with faculty and classmates developed elements of social connection as well. The following section will discuss the nature of student connections with faculty and classmates and how those connections shifted to include both academic and social elements.

Faculty

For ten of the twelve students interviewed, their connections with faculty held more significance than any other form of connection at PSU. While half of the students in this study had previously developed strong relationships with their instructors at the community college level, students often perceived their professors at PSU in a different light than their community college professors. Students connections with PSU faculty often began confined within the boundaries of the classroom and subject material. As students continued taking classes within their department, the connections transformed into mentorship relationships. Finally, as students developed their own sense of agency within their education, students began to view professors more as colleagues working towards shared goals.

Bounded by the classroom

When students discussed their first experiences with faculty at PSU, students all discussed relationships as confined within the physical walls of the classroom or within the bounds of the course material. The majority of student's experiences with faculty were during their scheduled classes in the form of lectures. Students recounted minimal to no individual interactions with faculty at first. Jenny, a recent graduate, reflected that faculty "were just there to teach me." Similarly, first-year student Mike recounted, "I never had any one-on-one interaction with [faculty]." An invisible barrier existed between students and faculty that held students back from interacting with their professors. Shelby remembers believing that "if I was having problems with something, I had to read the text again. Faculty were there to deal with questions that couldn't be answered from the text and were still attendant to the subject." Furthermore, while Shelby had many questions that were sparked from the texts, she expressed that they were only tangentially related to the course material and so felt it was inappropriate to waste the time of her professors going down a path that was different than the narrowly defined nature of the class material.

When students did recall their first few one-on-one interactions with faculty, they described them as very short, sporadic, and directly related to specific course material. "Usually I'll just have a quick question before class, that kind of thing" (Leah, first-year). Just as Shelby described earlier, students only interacted with faculty around subjects directly related to their understanding of the class material. Cooper, a first-year student, described only reaching out to professors after taking his midterms "if I felt like I wasn't feeling something correctly on it or if I didn't feel confident is most of the time I would

approach them." Cooper's initial interactions with faculty all resulted from his perceptions of unsuccessful academic performance. Like many other students, Cooper would not have interacted with his faculty if he had had no issues grasping the course material. As a result, students largely they avoided one-on-one interactions unless they were struggling.

> I never really had a problem understanding lectures. I never really had questions that I needed to stay after class to talk to them about. I never had any problems with assignments needing to e-mail them about. So, you know… I never really interact much with the professors. (Molly, first-year)

Seeking Mentorship

The way in which students spoke about their interactions with their professors shifted as students became more comfortable approaching faculty. With the exception of three first-year students, all of the students interviewed began to approach faculty more as mentors than teachers. Rather than only valuing the knowledge that professors shared with students, students also valued professor's experiences as well. Professors became people that students went to for advice like "this is how you go from Point A to Point B; here are some people in this department that you should talk to; here is a book that you should read" (Ashley, recent graduate). Students spoke about faculty challenging their thoughts and opinions in ways that students found constructive and beneficial for their learning goals. Students valued this feedback as being more specific to their individual situations. Cooper, a first-year student, explained,

> It was extremely helpful 'cause it was just, like they knew exactly kind of what I was talking about. So that way they could give me really detailed advice on what to do. So it wasn't just vague descriptions of things. It was actually like more input. They took the time to give constructive feedback.

These changes began with slight changes to the way that students communicated with their professors in the classroom. Rather than focusing on understandings of class material and assignments, students began to explore discussing broader topics with their professors before, during, and after class. The broad topics still focused largely on the substance of the material discussed in class, but shifted to potential applications or implications of the material on issues outside the classroom. Hollis recounted his interactions with one professor he connected with at the end of his first year:

> She always gave us personal examples from her own life. She asked examples from our lives when it came to the books we were reading and how it correlates to certain aspects of political science and I loved it. And I would talk to her on her free time and ask her questions or we would just have conversations and it was just, it was really great.

Students spoke about feeling drawn to connect with their professors over their engagement with the class material. They were eager to go further than class discussions would allow. Students largely attributed this to teaching style. While Haley had not yet established any close connections with faculty at the time of her interview, she reflected on how one particular professor's teaching style and his expectations for his students was particularly engaging for her. "He's a really, really smart public health guy, you know. He's got a long history of policy, so hearing him talk about things that I'm really interested in makes me want to pick his brain about things that I'm interested in." Haley talked about exchanging updated research with her professor through e-mail and how they once engaged in a short discussion that was unfortunately cut short due to the beginning of class.

Sharing interests with professors provided the impetus for many students to seek out more in-depth interactions with their professors. While not all students were able to do that by the time they ended their first-year, most students recognized that as a major

contributor to establishing close connections with their professors. Leah, a first-year student who intentionally had not make any connections, attributes her lack of connection to the fact that "I'm still working on trying to figure out what I really want to do… but [I'm] not really clear what pathway and so I don't really want to waste their time if I'm not committed to what they're doing." Students like Leah clearly expressed that they desired more mentor-like relationships with their professors in the future, but were still in the period of discovery with regards to their own academic engagement.

Becoming Colleagues

Occasionally, students would develop a relationship with their professors that extended beyond a mentor relationship and more as colleagues. For the six students who spoke about developing social and professional relationships with faculty, this shift would usually occur after students had discovered their own academic interests and connected with faculty who shared similar interests. At this point, students often took opportunities to enroll in courses with the same faculty and begin engaging with faculty research. Andrea, a student approaching graduation, developed a close relationship with one of her professors during her second year. As a result, she began assisting on research projects for not only this professor, but also other professors in her department as well. Andrea reflected that,

> As I took more and more of her classes, that's when she started inviting me to take the graduate seminar, when she invited me to be her TA next term… She talks about [me] with other teachers so they know who I am, so now I'm working with [professor name] next term.

Andrea also discussed her goal of attending graduate school. Andrea felt that her professors were collaborating with her more than other students in order to help her reach that goal, a personal goal that became a shared goal between her and her professors. At

the time of the interview, Andrea looked forward to pursuing her own research interest and collaborating with her professors rather than just assisting professors with their own research. In this way, students began to think of their faculty more as collaborators or colleagues than mentors.

When students discussed faculty relationships in terms that extended beyond mentorship, students described relationships with faculty as both personal and professional. Brooke commented that trust was the foundation for these relationships: "I feel like they respect me and I respect them and, you know, that's good, relationships have mutual respect." Other students, such as Jenny, mentioned feeling like their professors cared for the whole of their person rather than just their academic interests.

> I think it's more of a wanting to see someone do well with both professionally and personally. So, it got to the point where it wasn't just 'how're your classes doing?' it was, 'what's new in your life? What're you doing?'… and they wanted to know more about me and less about just making sure that things were okay at school, So, it was a stronger personal relationship.

As these students developed personal relationships with professors, they perceived themselves more as more equals in the relationship rather than student-teacher. Mike, a first-year student who is close to achieving this type of relationship with one of his professors, expressed that "I don't look at instructors as being such a level above me these days… I feel that I'm at somewhat of the same playing field as them."

Classmates

While all students in this study spoke less about their interactions with classmates than their interactions with faculty, interactions with classmates also played an important role in student experiences of connection at PSU. Just as students developed relationships with their faculty, students developed relationships with their classmates as they

progressed towards their degree. Similar to the progress of student-faculty relationships, student interactions with classmates largely arose through their classroom-based interactions before transforming into building more intentional classmate networks. This would eventually lead to the establishment of close, professional friendships that bordered on social relationships.

Interactions Confined to the Classroom

When the students in this study first enrolled at PSU, more than half of the students expressed that they were not concerned with developing social relationships or a community of their peers. Instead, students focused on connecting with their academics in order to earn their degrees. As a result, the majority of students' interactions with their classmates was restricted entirely to very limited in-class exchanges. While thinking about her first-quarter, Haley reflected that because she was solely focused on getting her degree,

> I didn't talk to anyone. I don't really make friends because I'm not really striving to do that, you know… like if I have to work with someone on something I can work with someone on something, but I'm not looking for a student group. I'm not, like, trying to do that.

Haley was more outspoken about her intentional lack of interaction with classmates than other students were, although many students adopted the same mentality. "There was very little interaction from student to student in the classroom" (Leah, first-year). For students like Haley and Leah, often the extent of their initial interactions with classmates was sitting next to classmates while in class.

When students first began interacting with their classmates on an individual level, these exchanges primarily focused on classroom material and assignments or were the

result of required in-class discussions or group projects. Andrea recalled that during her first quarter,

> The only way I was interacting with people was based on who I was sitting with and then in group activities. So, I remember in Psychology of Women, we had a group project that we did and that's the only way that I was interacting with people in the class. (approaching graduation)

Required group projects or in-class small group discussions were sometimes the first experience that students had interacting closely with their classmates. Initially, these interactions revolved around required assignments. Haley described her interactions with her groupmates during one group project as follows:

> It was professional. It was mostly like, okay, let's do as much as we can via things like Gchat and then get together… I think we met once right after class to divide up who was going to do what and then once again right before the assignment was due and just talked about finally putting things together and final touches and things like that. I mean, in total we probably met for like an hour and a half in real time.

Students recalled conversations during group meetings sometimes becoming more social in nature, but students reflected that the majority of their interactions did not deviate beyond what was required to complete their work. As such, students' initial interactions with their classmates were frequently bound by the requirements of the project or in-class assignment.

Developing Networks

As students continued attending classes at PSU and became more familiar with their classmates, students discussed establishing more intentional connections with classmates outside of required interactions for class assignments. For the most part, these connections still focused around class assignments and materials. However, students were beginning to initiate contact in situations where they would have previously kept to themselves. "I overhead them talking about an assignment, or it was a chapter or

something like that, and I asked them their opinions and stuff" (Cooper, first-year). Throughout his interview, Cooper identified these types of classmate interactions as participating in the act of "networking." For Cooper, the act of networking was like building a directory of students on campus that he could reach out to as study partners and peer advisors. Similarly, Ashley, a recent graduate, described networking experiences. For Ashley, this was the result of a complete shift in how she approached her classmates during her last year compared to her first year. During her first year, Ashley had intentionally disconnected from other students. She did not want to get involved and develop relationships. That all changed when Ashley returned for her last year at PSU.

> It was, like, the first day of class, exchanging like e-mails and finding, and in some of my classes finding my allies, because some of my classes were debate, very heavy debate classes and finding people that I felt comfortable studying with and really just, like, spending that time with them studying. And I had never done that before. I was always on my own. And, this time, I was like, nope, I am going to have to utilize other people because I really want to understand and I want to, I want to understand what they're understanding that I'm not understanding. I want them, I want my fellow students to teach me.

As Ashley demonstrated, the shift from thoughtful disconnection to intentional networking coincided with an increased understanding by students about the role their classmates play in reaching students' educational goals. Students like Ashley and Cooper understood that classmates' connections could enhance their own learning experience. As a result, students discussed initiating contact with their classmates in order to create an academic support system comprised of their classmates. This support system was intentionally built and instrumental in nature, driven by students' commitment to reaching their educational goals.

Students saw networking as the feeling out process, where students began to understand which classmates they might be able to rely on in the future for academic support. Recent graduate Jenny discussed how as she became more familiar with the students in her classes, "we knew who was capable of what abilities in getting things done, so you start picking who you worked best with." Networking played a key role in helping students successfully complete required group projects. Students discussed utilizing the knowledge that they gained through networking in order to establish groups that would work well together for projects. As a part of her research methods course, Shelby recalled that, "I knew I was going to do a project, so I started hunting a group down like day one." Similarly, Andrea expressed

> By the time I got to methodology, it's like we were able to create these groups and form and do better groups and like, 'cause we had similar backgrounds and past. And so, I was creating familiarity with students on campus and not necessarily that I was continuing those relationships, but there was familiarity there as far as the sociology community, I guess.

Networking was not necessarily about establishing lasting connections and friendships with classmates. Instead, networking was more the way in which students established familiarity with other students. This familiarity enabled students to successfully complete larger educational requirements, like working in groups for class assignments.

Networking also facilitated student academic connection by giving students access to additional resources to use in order to develop a more thorough comprehension of the subjects they are studying beyond just class material. First-year student Mike spoke about how during his third quarter, he would hang out in an empty classroom before his class to work on his homework and "about six other people from class ended up coming into that same classroom and we'd go over stuff together and we'd talk about some of the different methodologies of programming, stuff like that. That was really nice." By

discussing material not only directly related to the homework, but larger topics related to their major, Mike was able to leverage knowledge given to him by his classmates in order to delve deeper into his understanding of his own academic interests. In this way, connections established through networking, although often still based around class activities, helped students to expand their understanding of classmates as people who can support them in their academic endeavors.

Establishing Professional Friendships

Networking was an on-going endeavor for many students throughout their time at PSU. For students approaching graduation, networking allowed to students to meet classmates that they could connect with beyond the classroom. Students who experienced this expressed a transformative relationship with their classmates. Rather than just being familiar faces, students began to get to know each other on an individual basis.

> I call them professional friendships. It's great to actually have friends in academia because you need that support… when you have friends that don't go to college, it's hard to be able to connect with them on the level that you need 'cause they're very, there comes this need where you as an academic person, you're interested in, you have all these questions and it's nice to have friends that you can be intellectual with in the academic setting. And you kind of share, you kind of share this world sitting here, this institution. Most of the, well my close friends or professional friendships here are based on mutual respect and trust and really supporting one another and sincerely like being excited for another person when they achieve something or they get awarded something or for any accomplishment that they have. And I think that's really important. (Crystal, approaching graduation)

While students networked with the intention of furthering their own academic goals, students who developed professional friendships describe connections that were equally social and academic. Professional friendships provided students with a hybrid of social and academic support that addressed the unique challenges students faced between balancing home and school. Many students did receive the majority of their social

support from their home social networks, however professional friendships provided an additional and unique type of support in that the support was coming from classmates who were experiencing similar challenges that other friends and family may not understand.

Jenny, a recent graduate, illustrated the transformation from classmates to professional friendships when she said "In the beginning, it was more of a friendly, 'let's just talk, we're going to be around each other', to actually starting to care about families and how they're doing and making sure that they're not falling behind and kind of help out each other." Students who developed professional friendships became invested not only in their own academic success, but the academic success of their peers as well. Ashley recalls one classmate relationships where

> He was really smart, he was on it. He was in student government, but we were in such different places. He was like 'I just want to get out of here, like I just want a C or above and I'm out of it.' And I was like 'no, you don't understand, transcripts are important,' and it was so funny because I was pushing him to do better but at the same time, it made me do better.

Ashley was at a different stage regarding how she approached education than her classmate. At this point, she approached all of her classmate relationships as professional friendships. As a result, sometimes she was more invested in other students' success than even they were. She understood, though, that by being invested in her classmates' education, she was also investing in her own educational and goals.

Similarly, other students described connections where they felt pushed further academically as a result of professional friendships. Brooke recalled that once she got into her 400 level biology courses, students began to develop their own specialized interests within biology that they would bring with them to class.

> It's really nice to be with other undergrads who I really admired a lot. And to work, like I worked in a lab with this young woman and she's a molecular biologist… and [she] taught me all this crazy molecular biology stuff. It's been really different just to be like, the people in my classes didn't feel as much like classmates as they did like colleagues, which was great.

Students also spoke about classmates referring students to courses that were by invite only. As a result of their relationships, these students were able to take classes that they would not have known about except that they developed close, supportive relationships where students and their classmates were equally invested in the other's academic success.

Overall, as students developed academic connections with their faculty and classmates, students found themselves investing in relationships that not only supported their academic connection but also provided students with social connection as well.

IMPACT OF HOME SOCIAL SYSTEM ON CONNECTION

While all of the students in this study formed some sort of connection to PSU, students' living situations impacted the ways in which students established connection. Living off-campus meant that the students in this study were all still immersed in the home social systems that they were a part of prior to beginning school. In fact, when students spoke about their decisions to go back to school, their home social systems were a large factor in their commitment to earning a degree. The final section of this chapter will discuss the impact of students' home social systems on their experiences of connection.

Improving their circumstances

For many of the students in this study, the decision to return to school was directly impacted by their current home social systems. Of the fourteen students

interviewed, nine students expressed the sentiment that they had reached the ceiling on their current career path and in order to progress further or improve their current financial circumstances they would need to return to school. “I was tired of living paycheck to paycheck.” Shelby, a recent graduate, worked night shifts at a big box store and felt like she was wasting her abilities in a dead-end job with little pay and was more interested in reading than pursuing a career in retail. Haley, a student in her first year at PSU after transferring, described experiences where her ability to do her job was questioned due to her lack of education. Earning her degree would allow her to gain more credibility with her colleagues. Haley explained, “My career is important to me and it’s more important than my education because the only reason I’m getting an education is to continue my career.”

Whether students enrolled in PSU seeking a career change or intended to use their education to progress in their current career, students were motivated to improve their home social system. As a result, students devoted a significant amount of time and energy towards their academics. Mike, a first-year student, returned to school after receiving a lay-off notice, deciding that he wanted a career that would allow him to retire and live a better life than he had been living while working his old job. Mike took all the energy and time that he had previously devoted to his job and began working toward earning his degree. “I’m just concentrated on my school-work. I go there, I take my classes, I go home, and I do my work.” Students often discussed their commitment to academics as being their singular focus. As another first-year student, Hollis asserted, “I’m just here to go to school and get it done.” In this way, students’ focus on improving their home lives meant that they were very invested in their own academic success. As a result, students

were not interested in developing social connections within the institution since their sole purpose for attending college was in order to gain an education that would help them improve their current circumstances.

"My Community"

Students spoke about looking for an education at PSU, not social connections. Students entered PSU with strong social networks, which they drew in order to satisfy most of their need for social connection. Brooke, a recent graduate, explained this well when she said,

> I came into the university having a huge support network in my community and having a lot of friends and not feeling like I have time for new friends. And I know a lot of people go to college and, like, make these lifelong friends and I never really – that's never really been what I'm there for.

Students perceived enough social connection and encouragement from their relationships outside of school that they were not seeking that type of support from anyone else, including classmates. When talking about their social networks, students often identified them as "my community" and clarified that they were not relying upon their experiences at PSU in order to feel like a part of a community like is often the assumption about students who enter college directly out of high school. Haley went so far as to say, "I'm not looking for my college experience to create a community for me. I have one of those. I'm a grown up." Students recognized that their college experience was not going to replicate the dominant vision of what college is, a vision portrayed in cultural movies where students build lifelong social connections. Instead, the students saw college as a stepping stone towards their goals.

For the students in this study, having a strong community that they could rely upon when needed allowed students the ability to find balance between their priorities as

they worked towards their goals. This was especially true for students like Andrea, a student approaching graduation, who had relocated to Portland in order to attend PSU. Coming from a small town in rural Oregon, Andrea remembers not wanting to become connected to PSU because she was still overwhelmed by her new environment.

> I think I was just trying to be like, find balance in my own life and school [community] wasn't that important for me at that moment because I also had my boyfriend and I have some family up here… I'd rather get to know the city then get connected to the school.

Students reflected that they drew a lot of support from their spouses when they first started at PSU. Jenny, a recent graduate, identified her husband as providing all of her support during her first year. Having earned his own undergraduate degree at PSU, Jenny's husband provided her with a lot of encouragement and assistance with administrative processes like planning her schedule, registering for classes, and applying for internships even before she became a PSU student. Feeling the support of spouses, family, and friends helped students feel more at ease during their initial transition from community college to a four-year institution. As a result, students did not perceive the need to become socially connected to PSU. Students perceived that they already had all of their social needs met by their home communities. With their needs for social connection satisfied by, students' primary focus was on building academic connection.

Thoughtful Disconnection

As a result of students' already well-established social connections within their communities, students drew clear boundaries around their time at school and their personal lives. "I kind of look at school like a job where it's none of anyone else's business what my personal life is about." Throughout her interview, Haley maintained a stance of separation between her school, work, and personal lives. Her primary goal was

to obtain her degree and continue onto graduate school. This was a sentiment shared by many students when asked about perceptions of connection over the course of their first years at PSU. First-year student Molly, reflected, "I would be perfectly happy just attending class, doing my homework, doing my assignments, going home, taking tests, over and over and not making any friends and just graduating." Molly lived outside of downtown Portland and believed that mixing her professional and personal lives would become too complicated since she would be unable to devote the time necessary for relationships with other students who may live in other areas of the city. "I just kept my life separate, basically."

Students like Haley and Molly felt that by intentionally disconnecting from social interactions with other members of the PSU community that it would allow them the necessary time needed to balance between the demands of their work schedules, school requirements, and home social systems. Balancing between many competing priorities was a learning process for many students. Ashley, a recent graduate, spoke about being very involved in student organizations at her community college, involvement that continued well after she had earned her associate's degree. Due to her commitment to clubs and social organizations at her community college, along with her work schedule, Ashley had not been intentional about the courses she took in community college. When she transferred to PSU, Ashley was adamant about not falling into the same patterns and was intentional about managing her connections in a way that she believed would help her succeed academically. Looking back at her first year, Ashley reflected,

> I knew how to get involved. I just didn't want to. I'd already done it and I didn't want to do it again because I knew it would get me sucked in. I knew I would be more involved with student programs than I would with my education and I didn't think that was a smart idea.

In and Out Mentality

The majority of students in this study spent as little time on campus as possible, especially during their first quarter. Leah, a first-year student, spent as little time as possible on campus during her first quarter. "I'm going to school, I'm going to class, and then I'd go home… there was no overlap." This was a similar statement made by students when asked to describe their first quarter at PSU. Haley described her daily ritual as follows: "I walk from my bus stop to my classroom, from my classroom to my job, from my job to my classroom to my bus stop. And done… I don't really spend a lot of time hanging out on campus." For many students, long commutes from home or work onto campus meant that campus was not a place that students chose to spend time. Especially during their first quarter, students did not perceive how spending time on campus could positively influence their academic success. As Molly described, "I do my classes, I go home, work on work or whatever I need to do next. So, I never really gave any thought to spending time, to do anything like that."

Students perceived this to be a pretty common practice at PSU. Elijah, a recent graduate, summed up his first experience at PSU simply when he said, "It's a commuter school and people just come to go to class and leave, you know." When asked about whether she felt as involved as other students during her first year, Leah stated

> I think there's a lot of students like me who are kind of in and out of school for the most part. I don't really see Portland State University as, like, the kind of university that has like, everyone goes to football games and everybody knows like the school song or whatever. It seems more like a commuter school where there's a very diverse with the type of students that are going there.

Portland State was a school that students attended in order to earn a degree. The students in this study were not there searching for belonging within the school community and

saw their own experiences reflected in their classmates. Students were there to learn, not to socialize, and students perceived that only students who were in search of a community spent their time on campus. When students were asked if they would change anything about their living situations in order to improve their connection to PSU, none of the students indicated that they would have lived on-campus.

Overall Impact of Living Off-Campus

Overall, living off-campus allowed students to focus more on their academic connection than satisfying a need for social connection. Students in this study already had their social needs met outside of school in their home communities. This allowed students to be intentional with how they scheduled their time on-campus so that it benefited their academic connection they needed in order to obtain their degrees.

CONCLUSION

Developing a sense of connection was not a priority for students when they first enrolled at PSU. Students initially transferred to the institution with one goal in mind: obtain their degree in order to improve their current living circumstances by either advancing along their current career path or pursuing a more fulfilling career path. In this way, students approached their education much as they would approach their jobs. They created rigid schedules for themselves. Students scheduled their classes and study time around work and home responsibilities. In order to balance these competing responsibilities, students spent as little time on-campus as possible, while at the same

time devoting significant portions of their time outside of work and classes studying with the intent of fully comprehending the material they were learning.

Students did not enroll at PSU with a desire to build relationships with their classmates or to find a community of like-minded peers. Instead, students remained intentionally disconnected from their classmates in order to prioritize academic connections with faculty. Even faculty academic connections were a lower priority when students first begin. At the earliest, students began to approach their professors towards the end of their first quarter. For most students it took the better part of a year for students to begin seeking academic connection with their faculty. The connections that developed initially took the form of mentorship before sometimes expanding over a period of many quarters into relationships resembling work colleagues that were forms of both academic and social connection.

Student connections with classmates progressed in much the same manner as student connections with faculty, although they progressed much slower than student-faculty connections. Only once students developed a sense of comfort with one of their professors and began to enroll in smaller classes did they begin to explore classmate connections. Much like with faculty, initial connections were focused around classroom material and homework assignments. Classmate connections often began as the result of required group projects or class discussions.

As students developed connections with their faculty and classmates, their experiences of connection to PSU began to change. Students first experienced connection at PSU as their own solitary connection to their academic pursuit of earning their degree. As students began to connect with faculty, they began to participate more in class

discussions and through increased interactions with classmates began to experience a form of academic connection that looked like an interactive exchange of ideas as opposed to solitary work. For those students who eventually developed strong connections with both their professors and their classmates found themselves a part of a larger community where faculty were learning alongside students and their classmates. As students' experiences of academic connection changed over the course of the education, students reaffirmed their desire to complete their degrees.

CHAPTER VI: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

As presented and discussed earlier, this study will use the currently accepted models of student persistence developed by Tinto (1975, 1987) and Astin (1984) to explore how commuter community college transfer students experience connection after transferring to a four-year institution. Typically used to study persistence of students entering four-year institutions directly out of high school, applying this model to nontraditional students such as community college transfer students expands the definition of connection to include the experiences of the nontraditional student populations, a growing population among four-year institutions. By expanding the definition of connection to include these populations, institutions can identify the structures that facilitate the many forms of connection experienced by their students. In order to expand the definition of connection, this study aimed to answer the following questions:

3. *How do commuter community college transfer students experience connection to PSU?*
4. *How do commuter community college transfer student connection experiences change over time?*

In the following sections, I will focus on the two research questions by summarizing how connection for commuter community college transfer students at Portland State University changes over time and describing what connection looks like for commuter community college transfer students. I will also examine how these findings align with Tinto and Astin's models of student persistence. Next, I present an argument about how findings from this study and other current research can be used to

expand Tinto's Model of Student Departure. Finally, I will address the limitations of this study and suggestions for future research.

EXPERIENCES OF CONNECTION

Connection plays an important role for both of the current accepted models of student persistence: Tinto's Student Departure Model (1975, 1988) and Astin's Theory of Student Involvement (1984). Previous literature has supported these theories, finding that students who are more connected to the social and academic systems within their institutions are more like to persist than students who are less connected (Dixon Rayle et al 2006; Nicpon et al 2006; Lanaan 2007). That being said, students in this study did not transfer to PSU with intentions of developing a strong sense of connection to the university community. When students spoke about connection, they understood it to be a purely social concept and did not see the value of connection in relationship to their pursuit of their bachelor's degree. As Hollis best describes, "I'm just here to go to school and get it done." As a result, some students deliberately avoided forming connections during their first few quarters at PSU. When asked whether she felt connected during her first quarter, Haley dismissed the question and asserted that "I wasn't trying to be." Haley's response was common for students describing their first-quarter feelings of connection. Despite this, all students established some form of connection, be it academic, social, or a physical connection to PSU's campus as they progressed towards their chosen degree. As a result, certain aspects of the current theories of student persistence may be less relevant to commuter community college transfer students than others.

As mentioned earlier, Tinto's Stages of Student Departure (1988) theory suggests

that connection to academic and social systems within an institution is a longitudinal process that students experience in three stages: *separation, transition,* and *incorporation.* This study sought to identify the stages of connection for commuter community college transfer students at PSU. While the students in this study all came to experience some form of connection, students experienced these stages differently than the stages proposed in Tinto's model. Instead, commuter community college transfer students at PSU initially enrolled at the university disconnected from the university systems themselves and spent their initial time after transferring acclimating themselves with their new environment and first developing academic and physical connection to the campus. As these students became acclimated, they entered a transition period where students strengthened existing academic connections and established new forms of academic connection. In the final stage, acceptance, the students in this study established physical, academic, and social connection with the institution and saw themselves as part of the college community.

Acclimation vs. Separation

Tinto's (1988) first stage of connection focuses on separation from past communities, yet this was not the experience for any of the commuter community college transfer students in this study. Students came to PSU with no intentions of separating from their communities. The majority of students referenced having already established "my community" from which they had drawn support from their home communities while attending community college and would continue to call upon those communities after transferring. This supports critiques of Tinto's theory that students do not need to separate from their home environments in order to succeed (Guiffrida 2006). As a result,

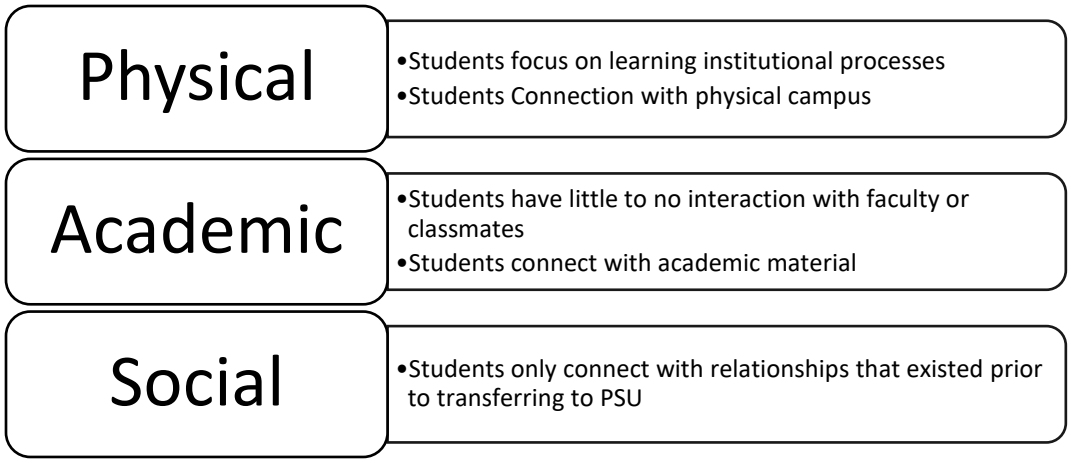

Figure 4: Stage 1
Acclimation

the first stage of connection for students more closely resembles other theories around the process of transition for transfer students than Tinto's first stage of separation. For example, Flaga's (2006) process of transition for transfer students suggests that student transition involves learning to navigate academic, social, and physical environments. For Tinto (1988), this process of acquiring institutional norms and learning appropriate patterns of behaviors begins only once students have separated from their past communities. However, this study supports previous literature that suggests that rather than separating from their previous communities as Tinto (1988) argues, students at PSU first acclimated to the various new environments before beginning to establish academic or social connection to the institution (Flaga 2006). In the acclimation stage (see Fig. 4), students primarily focus on elements identified in other theories like learning resources and developing familiarity with their new institution in order to lay the groundwork for successful completion of the degrees they aspired to earn (Flaga 2006).

Physical Connection. The first area that students in this study became involved with was the physical environment. The physical environment includes not only the physical campus, but also the institution's structural processes (Flaga 2006). While

Tinto's Student Departure Model (1975) does not consider physical connection as an impact on student connection, Astin's Theory of Student Involvement (1984) suggests less specifically that an element of student connection is the amount of time students spend on-campus. Previous literature has also suggested that students become connected to the physical environment just as they become connected to academic and social systems within the universities (Flaga 2006). This study found that students do develop a physical connection to the institution. One way that students in this study connected with the physical environment during the acclimation stage was through learning about the physical campus and developing familiarity with where important buildings are located across campus. When asked about their feelings of connection to campus during their first quarter, students often spoke about feeling lost on campus as a reason for not feeling connected. As such, students described spending a lot of time between their first and third quarters learning about the layout of campus buildings and finding out where different resources were located.

Students also connected to the institution's physical environment during the acclimation stage through institutional structures involved with academic planning, including registration and course scheduling. Tinto's Stages of Student Departure (1988) does not identify institutional processes such as these as having an impact on connection, although previous studies have suggested that transfer students experience issues with transferring credits from the community college to the four-year institution that impact their adjustment (Gard et al 2012; Davis & Casey 1998; Dougherty 1992). Similar to Townsend and Wilson (2006), students in this study did not experience issues with transferring credits. In fact, no students in this study brought up having difficulty

transferring credits earned at the community college to Portland State. This may be due to articulation agreements between Oregon's community colleges and public four-year institutions that facilitate an easier transition between the two and four-year institutions. However, students did mention issues understanding the process for class registration. For all of the students in this study, their first introduction to the norms and appropriate patterns of behaviors for registration occurred during orientation. This was an issue for some students because, as Owens (2010) also found, students in this study who attended later orientation dates found themselves with few to no seats available in courses required for their degrees and that worked with their work schedule. As a result, students learned to be proactive about registering for classes in future quarters. As students acclimated to the registration process over their first few quarters, students also learned who to contact in order to have registration holds removed.

Students also developed an understanding about planning their courses during this stage, another form of physical connection. As students attended PSU, they became familiar with what courses were required for their degrees and which courses fit around their work schedules. During the acclimation period, students often experienced difficulties understanding how the university structures its general education courses using interdisciplinary "cluster" classes. As a result, four students mentioned enrolling in classes that would not count towards requirements for either their major or general education classes, resulting in students using up valuable elective credits that could have been used for specialized courses within their major. This confirms findings from previous studies suggesting that transfer students may experience difficulties scheduling classes (Gard et al 2012; Owens 2010).

Academic Connection. During the acclimation stage, students experience a very limited amount of academic connection with faculty and class. The majority of students' exposure to faculty occurred within the classroom environment. Even then, students limited their interactions with faculty to the minimum required for students to earn their desired grade. While current models of student persistence suggest that students who have more interactions with faculty will feel a greater sense of connection to the institution (Tinto 1975, 1993; Astin 1984), other studies suggest that students who interact more often with their university faculty experience greater challenges adjusting academically to their transfer institution (Jackson & Laanan 2015). Findings from this study suggest that students limit their interactions with faculty during their first quarter when students are learning the norms surrounding how to appropriately interact with faculty. That being said, students mentioned feeling dissatisfied at the beginning of their time at PSU with the lack of meaningful interactions with their faculty. At this stage, students felt university faculty to be less approachable than their community college faculty. While the majority of students in this study had developed strong connections with their community college faculty, students found themselves unsure of how to approach faculty at the university. This supports other existing research that suggests that students may struggle to establish connections with university faculty (Townsend and Wilson 2006). For students at PSU, this may be the result of larger class sizes at the four-year compared to their community college. Students attribute their lack of interactions with faculty to feeling like they were "in this giant sea of people" or "lost in the masses" of large classes and that other students were more in need of assistance than they are. As a result, the first stage for most students before establishing academic connection with

faculty is learning the norms around student-faculty interactions and how those interactions differ from students' experiences at the community college.

Students experience a similar process with their classmates during the acclimation stage. However, while the students in this study limited their interactions with classmates while acquiring the norms of student interactions at PSU, this was secondary to their initial perceptions that building social relationships with classmates would not positively affect their education. Only three students interacted with classmates as they were acclimating to the university, and those interactions were only as required for participation in lab classes and group projects. For the majority students, the lack of interaction with classmates was not a concern for students. While this supports previous findings that academic connection is more important than social connection for transfer students (D'Amico et al 2014), this does not support Tinto's (1988) and Astin's (1984) arguments that social involvement is an important component for student persistence. Instead, as Guiffrida's (2006) revision of Tinto's (1975) model suggests, this could be the result of students in this study drawing the majority of their social support from their home communities during the acclimation stage.

Instead of connection academically with faculty and classmates during their first couple of quarters after transferring, students in this study described connecting with their academic material on an individual level through attending class lectures and completing required readings and assignments. Additionally, as indicated in previous research, students in the acclimation stage felt less involved than other students they saw on campus and did not feel to be a part of the university's community (Cherniack and Mock 1968; Andersen and Peterson 1973; Anstett 1997; Ose 1997; Woosley and Johnson

2006). While students are not separating from their past communities as Tinto (1988) argues, the acclimation stage is still a time of change for community college transfer students who are acquiring the new norms of their new institution and learning how to act in various situations at their new campus. Therefore, initial connection for commuter community college transfer students at PSU consists of a substantial investment of time and resources into their academic experience and learning about the university's norms through observation. As a result, student connection during begins first with feeling a sense of connection to the physical environment of the campus itself before establishing academic connections with faculty and classmates. Students in this study did not develop any social connection with classmates or other students during acclimation beyond the occasional existing relationship that students had previously established through their community college experiences or within their home communities.

Transition

Similar to Tinto's (1988) theory, students in this study experienced a transitory period after their initial first quarter or two. Students experienced a change with how they interacted with institutional systems during this stage. By this point, students had invested a significant amount of time and energy learning the norms and appropriate behaviors on campus. Now, students in this study were beginning to take what they had learned and apply it to their interactions on campus. Unlike Tinto's (1988) transition phase, students still felt socially connected to their home communities during this stage and therefore did not experience the loss and bewilderment about the future associated with not feeling attached to any community that Tinto describes in his theory of student connection. Instead, student descriptions of this stage focused more on how they were

beginning to connect academically to the institution and how they prioritized their academic connections. In this way, as students in this study moved through the transition phase, they experienced varying levels of physical and academic connection to the different institutional systems (see Fig. 5).

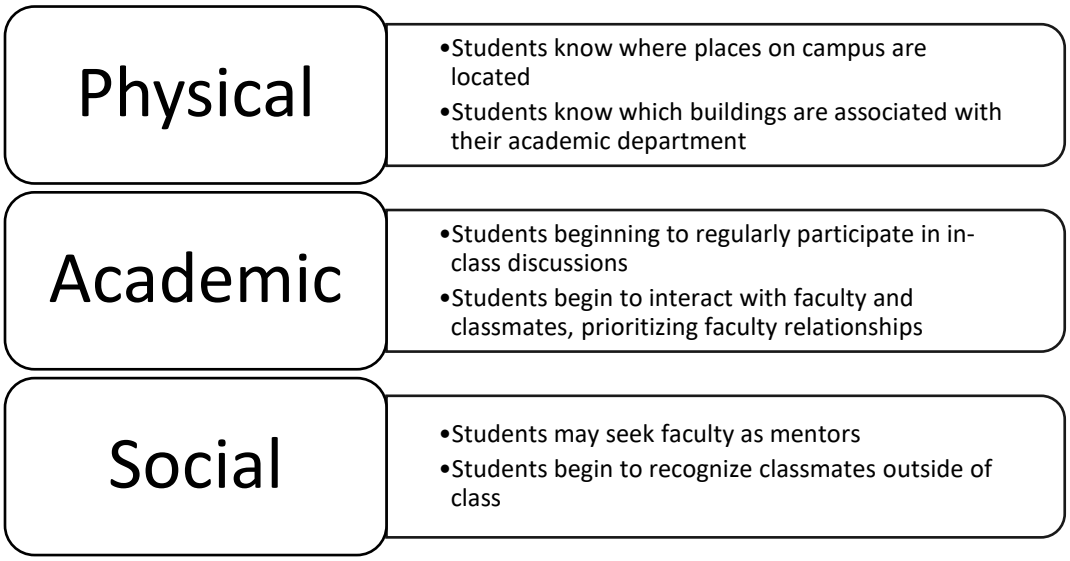

Figure 5 Stage 2 Transition

Physical Connection. By this stage, students felt more comfortable navigating the physical campus. Students knew which buildings the majority of their classrooms were held in. Students were spending more time on campus between classes, discovering their favorite places to eat, the best computer labs and other places to study. Astin (1984) suggests that as students spend more time on campus, they become more involved in the institution. This study's findings confirm this theory. Students who felt more connected to the institution at the end of their first year identified their increased comfort with the physical campus as one of the main contributing factors.

Academic Connection. Once students in this study felt acclimated to Portland State, they began to focus on establishing academic connections. Students first entering the transition phase prioritized relationships with faculty above all other institutional

representatives. Astin's (1984) theory and other studies on student connection have suggested that as students interact more with their faculty as they begin to feel a greater sense of belonging and are more likely to persist (Jackson and Laanan 2015; Engstrom and Tinto 2008; Laanan 2007). This study suggests that interactions with faculty may play a larger role in student perceptions of belonging after students have completed their first quarter at their new institution. While students did not actively seek out faculty the first quarter after transferring, all of the students in this study described increased interactions both in and outside of class during subsequent quarters. As York and Fernandez (2018) found, students began to seek out specific faculty who students felt could give them valuable feedback and advice and faculty that students felt were interest in students on a more personal level. As a result, while student interactions with faculty during the transition stage were primarily based on academic connection, some academic interactions also included aspects of early social connection as well. This suggests that while attending office hours and speaking with faculty before and after class matters, the quality of those interactions has a larger effect on student connection to faculty than the interactions themselves. This confirms Astin's (1984) theory that involvement is both qualitative and quantitative.

Students in this study began establishing academic connections with their classmates only after they had begun to connect with their faculty. By their third quarter, students recognized faces of previous classmates when walking around campus and found themselves enrolling in the same classes as classmates from previous quarters. Connections with classmates were initially more instrumental in nature. All of the students in this student described their initial interactions with classmates as revolving

around their academics and mainly occurring directly before, during, and after class or as a part of required group projects. As found in previous studies, spending more time working on group projects positive influenced feelings of belonging for transfer students (Laanan 2007). However, even though students in this study described classmate interactions as contributing to their sense of belonging, classmate relationships in the transition stage were often temporary and not perceived as important as students' academic connection with faculty.

As students navigated the transition stage, students began to change their perceptions of the institution. During their first few quarters after transferring, students felt less involved than other students on campus. As students begin to interact more with their institution, those perceptions begin to shift and students begin feeling more like a part of the community (Ose 1997).

In this study, students in the transition stage are beginning to undergo this shift in perception. Students are beginning to feel more as members of their community due to their sense of academic connection. When students become more academically connected to both faculty and classmates, they begin to describe their education as more of an interactive experience than something they are undertaking by themselves. While students still valued their relationships with faculty, as students moved through the transition phase they began to value the input that their classmates provided during in-class discussions and other classwork. These findings confirm both Tinto's (1988) and Astin's (1984) theories that student connection is longitudinal and changes over time. As a result, connection for students in the transition stage consisted of having developed an understanding of the physical campus and beginning to interact with faculty and

classmates in academic environments like the classroom. Similarly, while student interactions with faculty and classmates serve mainly as a source of academic connection, the transition phase also sees the beginning of social connection as students seek out faculty for advice and begin to recognize other students on-campus.

Acceptance vs Incorporation

The final stage of student connection is acceptance. During the acceptance stage, students have established connection to the institution and feel as though they are members of a community within the institution (Tinto 1988). This shift often occurred during the students second year at the institution, when students had spent enough time there to understand the institutional structure and how to interact with its various systems. After students built an understanding of the larger institutional landscape, they once again narrowed their focus to their academics and their smaller departmental communities. Students in this stage identified as members of their departments and participated in activities like attending departmental lectures, involved in departmental clubs, and working with faculty on their research or in labs. All of students in this study who had either graduated or were close to graduation spoke about feeling like a member of their department and described participating in some sort of activity within their department outside of class time. Students in this stage differ from Tinto's (1988) stage of incorporation in that while many students feel like integral members of their departmental communities, they may not feel like they are full-fledged members of the larger institutional community. As shown in Figure 6, students are still primarily focused on

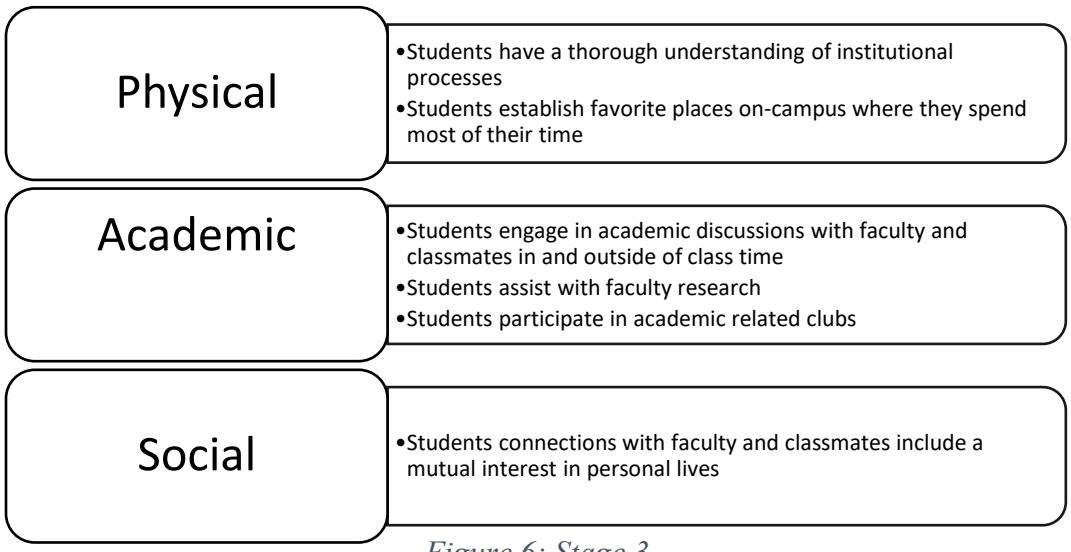

Figure 6: Stage 3 Acceptance

their academics. Students prioritize feeling accepted within the smaller department community over needing to feel like a larger sense of institutional pride.

Physical Connection. When students spoke about feeling like a member of their community they also brought up their physical connection to campus. Despite spending time in only a few places on-campus, students reflected that they spent a lot of time in those places. Students all figured out where they felt comfortable and where other members of their smaller communities tended to congregate, including the department offices, specific computer labs, and classrooms. Previous research suggests that students employ negotiation strategies when adjusting to campus, such as changing behaviors and surroundings in order to become more comfortable in an environment (Flaga 2006; Ose 1997). Findings from this study support this theory. Students sought out places where they felt a deeper sense of connection and began to frequent those places on a more regular basis until they began to view themselves as a part of the communities who also frequented those locations.

Academic and Social Connection. In the acceptance stage, student's connections with faculty are more complex and contain aspects of both academic and social connection. Previous connections with faculty that had primarily focused purely on academic connection in earlier stages transformed into deeper relationships that provided students with both academic and social connection. Supporting Tinto's (1975, 1988) and Astin's (1984) theories and Laanan's (2007) findings that students who attended office hours experienced greater sense of belonging, students in this study described interactions with their faculty where they felt comfortable approaching the office of any faculty member within their department and feeling secure that they would be welcomed. As Andrea best describes, "I'm completely 100% comfortable going and just talking to whoever I need to go to talk at any given time, even if I've never taken a class with a professor." These findings also confirm the positive effect of student-faculty relationships where students feel faculty are invested in their individual success and give helpful advice (York & Fernandez, 2018).

Student connections with classmates also look different in the acceptance stage. Students' interactions with classmates in this stage are both academic and social in nature. Students begin to invest as much in the success of their classmates as they would their own successes. While still primarily based on academic connection, students described establishing a handful of deeper social connections with their classmates that extended beyond their shared academic interests. While only three students formed connections that they saw as lasting outside of their education, students, such as Brooke, described relationships where they would "see people on campus and we'll stop and chat for a little while." As Ose (1997) and Laanan (2007) suggest, having a solid group of

friends at the institution and regularly interacting with classmates as part of group projects or through participation in department activities positively affects student feelings of belonging to the institution.

When students enter acceptance, they feel like members of smaller learning communities made up of faculty and classmates with similar shared goals. As mentioned earlier, student connection experiences during this stage still primarily revolve around academic connection and their focus on completing their bachelor's degrees. However, students in acceptance understand that social connections with both faculty and classmates are important influences and help to support students achieve that goal. Students in this study drew both social and academic support through their participation in academic-related clubs and assisting with faculty research. As a result, while students become very involved both academically and socially within their academic departments. So, while they do not talk about ever feeling like full-fledged members of the university community, students do feel like members of individual sub-communities within the larger university community. As such, this study confirms previous research that identifies connection occurring through both social and academic interactions (Flaga 2006; Astin 1984; Tinto 1988, 1975).

In sum, students establish connection physical, academic, and social connection within each stage of connection. As shown in Table 2 on the next page, students begin to establish physical connection to the institution during the acclimation stage when they learn begin to learn the institutional processes, become familiar with campus building, and first begin to learn where administrative offices are located. During acclimation students also connect academically to their classes through reading materials and class

Type of Connection	Acclimation Stage		Transition Stage	Acceptance Stage
	Orientation	**First Quarter**	**End of First Year**	**Senior Year**
Physical	- **Administrative processes:** Learning processes for advising and class registration - **Campus:** Initial tour	- **Administrative Processes:** Learning where administrative offices located - **Campus:** Building familiarity	**Campus:** Know where to find resources on campus (food, study areas, hang-out spots) **Campus:** Know buildings associated with academic department	- **Administrative Processes:** Understand most processes and know who to contact with questions - **Campus:** Know where most buildings on campus are located, have favorite spots on-campus
Academic		- **Classes:** Engaging individually with class lectures and lectures - **Classmates:** class-based interactions - **Faculty:** Class-based interactions	**Classes:** Participating in in-class discussions **Classmates:** class-based interactions via group work or study groups **Faculty:** Interactions both in and out of class time about academic material	- **Classes:** Bring in material from other classes as related to class material - **Classmates:** Engaging in academic discussions in and outside of class time - **Faculty:** Interactions both in and out of class time about academic material, assist with faculty research - **Clubs/Student Organizations:** Participation in organizations and activities related to academic interests
Social	- **Home Social System:** Friends & Family provide needed support	- **Home Social System:** Friends & Family provide needed support - **Existing relationships**: Interactions with other PSU students with whom they had established relationships with prior to transferring	**Faculty:** Developing mentorship relationships **Classmates:** Recognize classmates outside of class **Home Social System:** Friends & Family provide needed support	- **Faculty & Classmates:** Developed mutual interest in personal lives - **Home Social System:** Friends & Family provide needed support

Table 2: Timeline of Student Connection

assignments. In the second stage, Transition, students strengthen their physical connection to the campus as they learn more about where services are located and figure out which buildings are associated with their academic department. Students also begin to establish both academic and social connections with faculty both as a part of class and through interactions outside of class. Similarly, the transition stage is where students begin to connect academically with their classmates during class. Finally, during the acceptance stage students have a strong connection with the physical campus through their understanding of the institutional processes, their knowledge of the layout of campus, and having established their favorite places to spend time on-campus. Students also have developed a strong sense of academic connection through the relationships with faculty and classmates and their participation in department activities like clubs and assisting with faculty research. Lastly, the acceptance stage is the where students finally begin to establish a sense of social connection to both their faculty and classmates when students experience a sense of mutual interest in each other's personal lives.

STUDY CONTRIBUTIONS

Expanding Tinto and Astin's Theories

One of the motivations for this study was to determine whether commuter students who have transferred to a four-year institution after attending a community college experience connection similarly to or different from the connection experiences suggested by Tinto (1988) and Astin's (1985) theories of student persistence This study also sought to describe the process of connection for these students as they aligned with Tinto's and Astin's theories. Previous studies have shown the importance of connection and feelings of belonging on persistence (Ose 1997; Jacoby and Garland 2004; Flaga

2006; Winter and Morgan 2009; Owens 2010; Davies and Casey 2011; Jackson and Laanan 2015; York and Fernandez 2018). Previous research has also identified the importance of establishing connection within the first one or two terms after transferring (Kirk-Kuwaye and Kirk-Kuwaye 2007; Laanan et al 2010; Mayhew et al 2011). While other studies have found the importance of connection, few studies have identified how students become connected to their new institution (Flaga 2006; Owens 2010). This study's findings contribute further insights on how students establish connection, the longitudinal nature of developing connection, and the changing nature of student connection through graduation in order to expand the understanding of Tinto's and Astin's theories of student persistence as they apply to transfer students. Specifically, this study found that commuter community college transfer students experience connection primarily as academic connection. Only once students have established academic connection do they begin to form social connections.

Commuter community college transfer students do not enroll in four-year institutions in order to establish a sense of connection to the college or university or to form social relationships. Students primary focus upon transferring to the four-year institution is, instead, on their academics. Students initially see their academics as being entirely separate from connection, which they initially understand to focus primarily on social relationships. As a result, students' first experiences with the four-year institution are typically limited to their experiences within the classroom and walking on-campus between classes. Without realizing it, students are beginning to develop a sense of physical connection to their new campus. Furthermore, while students have very few interactions with other members of the institution at this time students devote many hours

to completing the assigned readings and homework for their classes. Therefore, students can be considered to have established academic connection based on Astin's (1984) definition of involvement, where involvement is measured by degree to which students are physically and psychologically invested in their education. For community college transfer students, connection begins foremost with the psychological energy that students invest into their education at the transfer institution and previously invested at their community college.

As students progress through their first year, the nature of their connection changes as they interact more with other people on-campus. This shift first appears when students begin to engage with their faculty. These interactions serve to provide students with a sense of academic connection since interactions are directly related to their classes. As students establish greater comfort with faculty, they begin to go to faculty for mentorship and advice. Only once students have established academic connections with their faculty do they begin to explore connections with their classmates. Similar to their interactions with faculty, student interaction with classmates focuses on class related material, often as a part of required group work. This further supports Astin's (1984) theory that student involvement takes place along a continuum and the ways in which students are involved varies over time. Student involvement begins as isolated individuals focusing on academics with only fleeting social interactions with either other students, faculty, or other institutional representatives, before shifting to include interactions with faculty and classmates around their classroom.

Finally, connection for community college transfer students culminates when students become actively involved in their academic departments. This increase in

involvement occurs during students second year at the new institution as students strengthen their academic (and sometimes social) connections with individual faculty and classmates. Through these relationships, students begin to participate in departmental clubs, attend department events, and often collaborate with faculty on current research. In her study of community college students, Diel-Amen (2011) suggests that while previous research has focused on student participation in clubs and working on-campus as being social in nature, that for community college students connections are more academic (Diel-Amen 2011). The findings here confirm that this experience of primarily academic connection persists for community college students after transferring to a four-year institution. While students develop friend and colleague-like relationships with faculty and classmates, students discuss their connections as they relate to their academic goals first and secondarily as providing a form of social support.

"*Socio-Academic Integrative Moments"*

Another insight of this study is the interrelatedness of Tinto's (1975) concepts of social and academic connection. Diel-Amen (2011) argued that the way in which social and academic connection are conceptualized sets up a false dichotomy that obscures the complex nature of many connection experiences for students. Diel-Amen (2011) proposed the concept of "socio-academic integrative moments" to include interactions where both social and academic connection occur simultaneously. Such moments can occur during short interactions, activities or events, and within relationships. Findings from this study support the adoption of this concept as a part of Tinto's (1975) and Astin's (1984) theoretical frameworks. Students were motivated to connect with faculty

and classmates as a strategy for obtaining as much information and developing skillsets that students perceived as necessary for completing their degrees.

This is best demonstrated when looking at student-faculty connections. Students prioritized their relationships with faculty as being essential in order to be successful within their program, a primarily academic motivation. Over time, students began to value the advice and support that faculty provided for students as well. Faculty provided students with mentorship about their academic pathways as well as showing interest in student's lives outside of school. For Jenny, this happened when faculty touched base with her not only about academics, but began to ask questions about her personal life such as "'how's the house search going' and they wanted to know more about me and less about um, just making sure that things were okay at school." Establishing connections that were both social and academic in nature contributed to students' perceptions of overall connection to their academic departments. Students who experienced both social and academic support from faculty discussed attending more departmental lectures, other events, and collaborating with faculty on research.

Students also experienced socio-academic integrative moments with their classmates. As with faculty, students discussed interacting with classmates as it related to their academic endeavors while also drawing a sense of social support. While students drew the majority of their support from their home communities, talking with other students about subjects like classwork and group-projects created a sense of comradery amongst classmates. Students felt that others were going through similar experiences as themselves, something that may not have gotten from others within their home communities. Students described these relationships as "professional friendships." As

Crystal explained, they "are based on mutual respect and trust and really supporting one another and sincerely being excited for another person when they achieve something." While students did not expect these relationships to exist beyond the walls of the classroom, they sometimes extended into interactions outside of class as they related to students' participation in other academic activities within the institution.

Physical Environment

Additionally, this study found that commuter community college transfer students also connect to the physical campus, an insight that Tinto's (1975, 1988) model does not account for while Astin (1984) only suggests that the amount of time students spend on campus influences their connection. When students in this study transferred to PSU, they found a much different environment from what they had experienced at their community colleges. Students found themselves walking on a large campus, both in its physical size and the sheer number of students enrolled. While Tinto's (1975) framework incorporates both academic and social systems, Flaga (2006) argued that a third environment also exists within institutions: the physical environment. Flaga argues that "the physical environment encompasses not only the bricks and mortar of the university, but also the structure in which campus services and departments are organized, campus logistics, overall campus culture, student finances, and parking" (2006:6). This study confirms the importance of the physical environment when evaluating student connection. All of the students in this study talked about being concerned with navigating campus during their first few weeks after transferring. Students were more concerned about this than they were about the classes themselves or interacting with faculty or classmates. Knowing where classes were located, where to find food, and where to study or spend time

between classes all affected student feelings of connection to the institution. As students learned which buildings the majority of their classes were held in and which areas of campus to avoid due to protesters, they became more comfortable with their new campus environment.

Similar to Tinto's (1988) theory that students must acquire the new norms of their institution, students must also develop an understanding of the institutional processes and overall campus culture in order to establish a sense of connection to the institution itself. This includes understanding the structure of processes such as advising and the differences between general advisors and departmental advisors or how instructors teach large classes using a different teaching style than they use when teaching smaller classes. Learning how to best navigate the various organizational structures on-campus and developing a feeling for the campus culture allows students to more easily understand what is and is not appropriate behavior when interacting with institutional representatives and other classmates. As a result, students often became connected to the campus's physical environment well before they established other forms of connection to the institution. While Tinto's (1975) model does not discuss the influence of learning institutional processes on connection, incorporating Flaga's (2006) physical environment as an additional social system could allow for further understanding to Tinto's theory about the connection process.

Goal commitment

This study also provides further insight into the role of goal commitment in student persistence, addressing a gap in the literature testing Tinto's (1975) theory. Students transferred to PSU with one goal in mind: complete their four-year degree.

Before students partook in any interaction or activity, students carefully assessed the impact that their participation would have on reaching that goal, positive and negative. This included building relationships with faculty and classmates, as well as student participation within their academic department. Initially, students saw the impact of participation in campus activities and connections with classmates and (to a lesser extent) faculty as negligible to earning their degree. All of the students in the study at one point or another explained their lack of participation in any extracurricular activities through almost all their time at PSU because of academics being their "main focus," regardless of whether the extracurricular activities were connected to their academics or not. As students progressed towards their degree, they developed greater understandings of the positive impacts of those types of involvement. Tinto (1975, 1993) suggested that students who focused too much on form of connection (academic or social) were less likely to persist. Findings from this study suggest otherwise. All students in this study who established strong connections based upon the academic system became more dedicated to completing their degree and many reassessed their end goals to include graduate school. Tinto's theory also suggests that connection leads to new levels of commitment to student goals. While this study finds that this is true for academic connection, findings from this study suggest that social connections played a much smaller role in student goal commitments and that any social connection that students experienced after transferring was the direct result of their academic connections.

Guiffrida (2006) asserted that adding the concept of *motivational orientation* would strengthen Tinto's theory. This study's findings support this addition to Tinto's model. Enrolling in college was not something that students did because it was expected

of them. Rather, students were all motivated to attend college in order to address their salient intrinsic needs for autonomy and competence and their salient extrinsic need for rewards in the form of increased opportunities for higher paying positions or personal recognition within current positions. As Guiffrida (2006) argues, the attributes and experiences that students bring with them to college directly affect their motivations and the motivational orientation affects their commitment to their goals. Community college transfer students chose degrees that they felt were aligned with their interests and values, while also allowing students the opportunities for self-improvement competence) that they desired. Students were not interested in learning enough to pass the classes they were required to take in order to graduate. Instead, students sought to fully comprehend not only the material required to pass their classes, but also any additional supplemental material or understandings that may serve them in them in future classes or career goals. As Ashley explained, "Any tiny little bit of information that I could have come out of that class, or any suggested reading, it was done. Because I was like, 'I'm going to learn everything I can possibly learn'". As a result of these choices, students met their salient intrinsic needs for autonomy and competence which served to reaffirm their original commitment to their goals of earning a degree.

Students also enrolled in school because they perceived it as integral to meet the salient extrinsic need for better paying careers that students hoped to fulfill once they completed their degree. Students spoke about their desire to come to college in order to change their current circumstances, which for many students meant living paycheck-to-paycheck or working unfulfilling jobs. All the students in this study internalized the external societal pressures that equate completing college with earning a good paying job.

As a result, their extrinsic motivational orientations took the form of identified regulation (Guiffrida 2006). This form of extrinsic motivation helped students overcome their dissatisfaction with their large, weed out classes during their first few quarters after transferring.

Overall, students' motivational orientations influenced students' intense commitment to their goals. This strong goal commitment ultimately drove many students to push beyond initial feelings of disconnection and dissatisfaction with their new institution and ultimately facilitated both academic and therefore social connection.

Transfer Students and Home Social System

Finally, one of the sub-questions of this study examined the impact of living off-campus on community college transfer students. As discussed earlier, a critical assumption of Tinto's theory is that students must first separate themselves from their past communities and leave behind old norms and ways of behaving in order to be successful within their new institution. Furthermore, Tinto (1987) argues that students living off-campus may experience external forces that prevent them from connecting to the institution. The findings from this study do not support this theory. While students do spend their first few quarters learning the new norms of their institution, supporting part of Tinto's theory, students do not separate from their home communities or lose their old norms. Instead, students acquire the norms of their institution while maintaining their old norms when they are within their home communities.

Students spoke often about having already established their own communities from which they drew social support. As Guiffrida's (2006) updated version of Tinto's model suggested, home social systems provided students with continued support after

they begin college, therefore meeting the students' salient intrinsic needs for relatedness. In this study, this was especially true during students first two quarters after transferring, when students experienced fewer of Deil-Amen's (2011) "*socio-academic integrative moments*" than they experienced in later quarters. As a result, students felt that living off-campus positively impacted their feelings of connection to the institution. Living off-campus provided students with the continued opportunity to draw support from their communities, while students thought that living on-campus would separate them from those communities since the demographics of students living on-campus, who tend to be younger, are very different from the demographics of students' home social systems.

Furthermore, living off-campus served to reaffirm student the motivational orientations discussed in the previous section. Students' connection to their home social system reinforced students' salient extrinsic need to obtain the reward of a higher paying job that would improve their circumstances. Students commitment to earning a degree is in part due to the impact that they perceive it will have on their familial relationships. By changing careers to something that is less physically demanding, allows students to work more regular hours, or is generally more fulfilling, students believe that they will have more time and resources to devote to family and friends in the future. This external motivation contributed to student's commitment to both school and their work outside of school. While previous literature found that working more hours had a negative impact on student engagement (Mamisheishvili 2010; Crisp & Nora 2010), the findings from this study contradict those findings. Instead, this study found that students who worked off-campus were very still involved in the academic system. Although they did not initially participate in on-campus events or participate in student clubs or organizations, students

invested a great deal of time and energy into completing their schoolwork (cf. Astin 1984). Students treated their academics as a second job, following strict study schedules and viewed their relationships with faculty and classmates similar to colleagues at work. As a result, students developed strong connections with faculty and classmates who were supportive of students' responsibilities and connections to their home social systems.

STUDY LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Similar to all qualitative studies, the generalizability of this study is limited by the number of participants, potential sample bias, and the context of the institution being studied. When evaluating the findings of this study, it is important to account for the potential for sample-bias due to self-selection. Commuter community college transfer student decisions regarding whether or not to participate in this study may have been influenced by a few different reasons. Students who chose not to respond to the e-mail request for participation may have experienced less connection to the Portland State than students who chose to participate. Furthermore, students who had decided not to return to Portland State after they completed their third term may have chosen not to participate. It is likely that students who did not persist at Portland State after their first year had different experiences of connection at Portland State than the connection experiences shared by the participants in this study.

Another important factor to consider is the institutional context of this study. Portland State is an urban university where more than 60% of all incoming students each year are transfer students, most of whom transfer from local community colleges and do not live on-campus. Despite the limitations of generalizable findings, the findings from this study may be transferable to other urban commuter campuses and may be

transferable to a lesser degree to smaller, residential institutions. Studies conducted at large, rural environments may produce different results. Future comparative studies of urban commuter campuses and rural residential campuses are important to understand how the composition of the student body may influence student connection.

Findings from this study also suggest the need for additional research on the transition points that students experience when establishing connection to an institution. Out of necessity, this study utilized a design where two similar groups were interviewed regarding different points in their transfer experience to understand how transfers experience connect as they progress through their degree programs. However, an ideal approach would be a longitudinal, mixed methods study where a consistent sample of students are followed from their initial orientation through graduation. A study of this design could provide additional information regarding transition points, the influence of student home social systems on connection, and how student experiences of connection change as they progress through their degrees.

Future research on transfer students should also explore the influence of goal commitments on academic connection and persistence. Tinto's (1975, 1988) theory suggests that students with strong goal commitments are more likely to establish connection within the academic and social systems of the institution and, therefore, persist. However, there is a lack of existing literature on the effect of goal commitments on connection and persistence. All of the students in this study were very committed to their goal of earning a four-year degree, but their experiences may vary from students who chose to not to participate or withdrew from the university at some point before reaching graduation. As a result, students in this study may reflect a higher commitment

to their goals than other students. Again, future research that follows students from orientation to graduation may help illuminate the influence of student goal commitments to persistence.

Additionally, this study points to the importance of additional research on Deil-Amen's (2011) concept of "*socio-academic integrative moments."* While this was originally identified during a study of students enrolled at a community college, this concept may be relevant to students attending a four-year institution as well. Findings from this study suggest that academic connection facilitates social connection for commuter community college transfer students. However, it is unclear if this a phenomenon only experienced by students who have previously attended a community college or if this is also experienced by other students on four-year campuses.

Finally, findings from this study indicate the need for future research on the influence of home social systems and living situations in order to further understand their influence on connection. Future comparative studies of students living on-campus (or within a walking distance) and students living off-campus are important to understand differences in connection experiences between students based on varying commute times. Additional studies may also identify how students with long commutes establish connection and whether their experiences of connection different from students living closer to or on-campus.

CONCLUSION

This study provides insights into how a group of community college transfer students who commute experience connection and how that connection develops over time. Previous studies have shown that student connection positively impacts student

persistence, however few studies have defined what connection looks like for students who transfer from community colleges. This study suggests that students enroll at four-year universities with no intention of connecting to the institution, a concept students associate purely as it relates to developing social relationships. Instead, students initially focus on their academic progress and devote most of their energy to completing classwork and learning the processes of their new institution. As students develop a greater understanding of institutional processes and the institutional climate, students establish instrumental relationships with faculty and classmates as needed in order to complete course material or progress in their academic understanding. As Jenny describes, faculty "were just there to teach me." Only once students establish strong connections with faculty and classmates do they begin to establish social relationships that provide students with an additional form of social support outside of the support they receive from their home social systems.

Research testing Tinto and Astin's models of student persistence often focuses on the relationship between connection and persistence (e.g. D'Amico et al 2013; Ishitani & McKitrick 2010; Schudde 2011; Crisp & Nora 2010; Ose 1997). While this is an effective strategy to study individual components of these theories, this does not explain the longitudinal nature of connection or the relationship between goal commitment and connection, both important components in Tinto's model of student departure. The students in this study enrolled in school with clear goals and ideas about how completing their degrees would influence their lives both financially and personally. As Haley explains, "the only reason I'm getting an education is to continue in my career." A student's goal of earning their degrees helps them persist even when they initially

encounter challenges connecting to their academics due to large class sizes and other difficulties with adjusting to new environments. This commitment to their goals further provides students with a reason to connect to the institution. Students seek not only to earn a degree but also to develop a thorough basis of knowledge of their area of study, which students understand as necessary for success in future classes and career endeavors. This goal of comprehension motivates students to discuss class material with faculty and classmates in order to ensure they have acquired a thorough understanding of the subject matter, therefore establishing academic-based connections. Although potentially short and sporadic in nature, these academic interactions provide students with a form of academic support and sense of connection that affirms student commitment to their goals.

Academic connections accounted for the majority of supportive relationships that students established on-campus. Deil-Amen found that community college students who did not live on-campus valued their interactions with both faculty and classmates "not for the depth or length of contact, but for their contribution to a sense of connection from shared experiences and challenges" (2011:83). Students do not expect to establish long-term friendships or relationships with other people on-campus. Instead, students understand the time and energy they spend on their education to be another form of work. As a result, students compartmentalize their lives at school and home as separate experiences with little intersection between them. Students utilize their faculty and classmates as colleagues who are working towards shared goals, describing those relationships as "mentor relationships" or "professional friendships". Students understand the academic support they receive from faculty and classmate connections as being

important in feeling connected to their academics and the institution but look to their family and friends to satisfy their need for social connection. As best described by Molly, "I just kept my life separate, basically."

Overall, connection for commuter community college transfer students looks different from the commonly understood definition of connection for college students. Instead of attending social events such as sporting events or extracurricular activities aimed at building a social connection, transfer students build connection through their academics. Students rely upon engaged faculty and curriculum that supports student involvement in on-campus research and other experiences that promote academic involvement.

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APPENDIX: INTERVIEW GUIDE

- How do you typically get to school?

- Tell me some of the reasons you decided to transfer to PSU?
  Probes:

  - *Tell me more about…*
    - *People*
    - *Factors*
    - *Location*

  "*I am interested in how students become connected after transferring to PSU. I'd like to ask you some questions about your transfer experience and how connected you felt at a couple different points during your time at PSU, starting with when you first enrolled and continuing up until your most recent quarter.*

FIRST QUARTER

- Looking back on your experience at PSU, what stands out most when you remember your first quarter?
  - *Probes – For all probes: ask how it was different from community college*
    - Tell me about your classes.
    - Tell me about your day-to-day experiences with classmates.
    - Tell me about your day-to-day experiences with faculty.
    - Tell me about any student-run clubs or organizations you were involved with that quarter.
    - Tell me about any experiences with academic services or advisors at this time.
    - Tell me about your experience navigating campus that first quarter.

- How did you feel during your first quarter at PSU?
  - *Probes*
    - *How comfortable did you feel walking around campus?*
    - *How did you feel about talking in class?*
    - *How did you feel about approaching faculty?*

- At this point in your time at PSU, did you feel like a part of the PSU community?
  - If Yes – Tell me about what made you feel like a part of the PSU community.
    - *Probe: Tell me about someone or something that helped you feel like you belonged.*
  - If No – Tell me about what made you feel like you weren't a part of the PSU community.
    - *Probe: What would have made you feel more connected?*

    - *Walking around campus, did you feel as involved or connected as other students?*
    - *What challenges did you experience with regards to feeling connected at this time?*
- Is there anything else about your first quarter that you'd like to add?

END OF FIRST YEAR AT PSU

ONLY FOR GRADUATING TRANSFER STUDENTS

- Looking back on your experience at PSU, what stands out most when you remember your first quarter?
    - *Probes – for all probes – what seems different from the first quarter, if no difference ask why not*
        - Tell me about your classes.
        - Tell me about your day-to-day experiences with classmates,
        - Tell me about your day-to-day experiences with faculty
        - Tell me about any student-run clubs or organizations you've joined since the end of your first quarter.
        - Tell me about any experiences with academic services or advisors.
        - Tell me about your experience navigating campus.

- How did you feel during the end of your first year at PSU?
    - *Probes – for all, ask how feelings changed since first quarter*
        - *How comfortable did you feel walking around campus?*
        - *How did you feel about talking in class?*
        - *How did you feel about approaching faculty?*

- After being at PSU for a year, did you feel like a part of the PSU community?
    - If Yes – Tell me about what made you feel like a part of the PSU community.
        - *Probe: Tell me about someone or something that helped you feel like you belonged at the end of your first year.*
    - If No – Tell me about what made you feel like you weren't a part of the PSU community?
        - *Probe: Did you expect to feel more connected to campus by the end of your first year?*
    - *What challenges did you experience with regards to feeling connected at this time?*
- Is there anything else about this time that you'd like to add?

MOST RECENT QUARTER

- Now, looking back on this last quarter, what stands out most to you?
    - *Probes – ask how all were different compared to the first year*
        - Tell me about your classes.

        - Tell me about your day-to-day experiences with classmates.
        - Tell me about your day-to-day experiences with faculty.
        - Tell me about any student-run clubs or organizations you've joined since the end of your first year.
        - Tell me about any experiences with academic services or advisors.
        - Tell me about your experience navigating campus.
- How do you feel about Portland State now?
    - *Probes – for all probes: ask how they have changed since end of first year*
        - *How comfortable do you feel walking around campus?*
        - *How do you feel about talking in class?*
        - *How do you feel about approach faculty?*
- At this point in your time at PSU, do you feel like a part of the PSU community?
    - If Yes – Tell me about how you feel like a part of the PSU community.
        - *Probe: Tell me about someone or something that helps you feel like you belong.*
    - If No – Tell me about what makes you feel like you aren't a part of the PSU community.
        - *Probe: Had you expected to feel like a part of the community by now?*
    - *What challenges do you still experience with regards to feeling connected?*
- Is there anything else about your current experiences that you'd like to add?

WRAP-UP

- Looking back on your experience at PSU, is there anything you might have done differently to improve your experience at PSU?
    - *Probes – What about…*
        - Living off-campus
        - Relationships with faculty
        -
- Can you think of anything that faculty, instructors, or advisors could have done differently to give you a richer experience?
    - *Probe: If they'd done that, would you feel more connected to campus?*

- Can you think of anything that the university could have done differently to give you a richer experience?
    - *Probe: If they'd done that, would you feel more connected to campus?*

- If you could give one piece of advice to a new transfer student with similar issues to you about making the most out of their PSU experience, what would you say?
    - *Probe: Any advice about feeling connected?*

- Is there anything else that you would to share with me that we have not covered, regarding your connection to PSU?