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### Transitioning into College During a Pandemic and Civil Unrest

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**Transitioning into College During a Pandemic and Civil Unrest**

by

Hillary J. Gokey

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of St. Cloud State University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

In Higher Education Administration

December, 2021

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Steven McCullar, Chairperson  
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Rachel Friedensen  
Erin Heath

## **Abstract**

This qualitative constructivist case study examines how the graduating class of 2020 navigated the transition into college during a pandemic and civil unrest. The semi-structured interviews allowed for emic language and exploration of personal experiences of the emotional, social, and cultural impacts on this unique year of transitioning into higher education. The participants graduated from a large suburban high school and attend a large urban university in the Midwest. This research provided the opportunity for students to share their thoughts and feelings as they traversed this new landscape. The result of the research identified themes that supported the successful transition during this unprecedented time. Themes included Schlossberg's four S's: support, self, situation, and strategy. Motivation was also a very clear theme to aid in the transition process. The completion of this research provided evidence that more studies would provide knowledge and applicable suggestions for students transitioning into college during precarious times.

*Keywords:* Transition, Pandemic, Civil Unrest, Schlossberg's Transition Theory

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

In early 2020 a pandemic began to sweep through the world, taking lives, destroying economies, and changing the day-to-day rituals of many populations (WHO, 2020). To slow the dramatic spread of COVID-19, states in the United States suddenly shut down economies and asked their residents to stay home. People lost their employment, loved ones were not able to attend funerals or weddings, and individuals suffering from addiction and mental health crises struggled to find help. A survey done by *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report* found nearly forty-one percent of respondents who responded stated that they suffered from mental or behavioral health issues as a direct result of the pandemic during April 2020 through June 2020 (Czeisler et. al, 2020). Accordingly, Czeisler et al. (2020) stated that mental health issues were much higher in comparison to the number of people struggling during the same time period in 2019. The increase in suicides and suicide ideation among youth during the pandemic was distressing (Green, 2021). Though there was not a direct link of this increase to the pandemic, as national data on suicides in 2020 was yet to be compiled, emergency room visits for mental health reasons had risen. Green provided disturbing evidence that the change in platforms for education, the loss of activities, and the isolation had a profound effect on our youth.

Life for most people changed quickly and dramatically, especially for high school students. Without notice, students were told not to return to school the following Monday. Proms were not going to happen, spring sports and activities were canceled, and students would not have the opportunity to wear the jersey from their school of choice on Decision Day (Ditota, 2020; Gengler, personal communication, June 11, 2020). It soon followed that graduation ceremonies would be postponed or canceled (Associated Press, 2020). Along with changing the Monday through Friday routine of waking up and going to school, students had to learn how to

navigate a new world. This new world included isolation from the normal routines of activities, work, and most social gatherings.

Despite the pandemic, the high school graduating class of 2020 continued to pursue plans of attending college. As the pandemic stretched through the summer, the start of the fall semester was in constant flux. Institutions changed in-face orientations to online seminars and virtual orientations. Leaders in higher education tried to plan for an uncertain future while knowing that everything could change without notice. Colleges and universities pivoted their communication to prospective students, quickly realizing the need for authentic and consistent engagement (Education Dynamics, 2021). Nothing was certain at the time, so students did not have the blueprint normally in place for college freshmen. The uncertainty of in-person classes, dorm room capacity or availability, start dates, and how classes would be conducted obscured the excitement of what is expected in a normal year for incoming college freshmen (Diep & Zahneis, 2020). Yet, while students faced uncertainty, they were given an opportunity to pave the way for future students preparing to go to college during uncertain times, which felt tumultuous and exciting, and sometimes both at the same time (Redden, 2020). Colleges and universities worked with flexibility as they offered different ways to provide safe classroom instruction and on-campus living. Administrators and personnel in higher education institutions creatively discovered new ways to connect students to one another as well as their schools (Redden, 2020).

Adding to the uncertainty, loss of life, and economic downturn caused by this pandemic, civil unrest over racial injustice escalated throughout the United States and the world (ACLED, 2020). In May 2020, George Floyd, an African American man, was killed by a police officer in Minneapolis. His death highlighted the realities of racial inequity and captured the attention of people around the country and the world. For many students, it was the first time they were faced

with the reality of an unfair and unjust world (Associated Press, 2020). They saw people fighting for basic human rights, facing homelessness, joblessness, and food insecurities. Many students realized that their disappointments with high school opportunities and activities being lost or canceled were not comparable to what was happening in the world outside of their high school experience.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The anticipation of a person's senior year of high school with plans of transitioning into college can be an anxious time full of ambiguity and excitement during ordinary years (Downing, 2014). The global pandemic and international civil unrest made this situation exponentially more uncertain for students graduating from high school in Spring 2020. Because the students could not interact at school, engage with their school counselors live, or attend face-to-face orientations on college campuses, the traditional transition into college did not happen (Wayzata Schools, n.d.). Students could no longer attend school in-person, they were forced to stay away from their friends, and on-campus college visits and orientations were suspended indefinitely. High school counselors who work to prepare seniors for this transition and college counselors who formulate stimulating activities to energize the incoming students were forced to quickly reimagine strategies to guide students virtually.

One of the first significant changes was that higher education institutions moved their on-campus orientations to virtual platforms, sent schedules to students via email, and posted pertinent information on their websites (Johnson, 2020). The University of Minnesota provides a good example of what the new online orientation looked like for many students across the United States. On the day of the virtual orientation, The University of Minnesota (n.d.) kept students engaged via digital platforms from 9:00 am until 6:00 pm. The day started with meeting an

orientation leader (virtually) and other new students (virtually) and learning how to navigate the online experience for their first year at The University of Minnesota (U of M). Throughout the day students planned their course registrations and participated in various meetings. The orientation concluded with a variety of online activities, online community building with peers, and opportunities to ask questions. The office of Orientation and Transition Experiences (OTE) at the University of Minnesota placed pertinent and useful information for students and families to access on their website, further demonstrating The U of M's commitment to the ever-changing needs of their newest students.

Another significant change that incoming students faced was the transition from largely seated classes to mostly virtual classes, social distancing, and other health and safety mandates. In the United States, out of approximately three thousand colleges and universities, only one hundred and fourteen planned to be fully in person for the Fall 2020 semester, and eighty-six were still "to be determined" as of September 9, 2020 (C2i, 2020). Data is currently being collected for Spring 2021 courses. This is a clear testament to the uncertain and shifting college environment in the present time. Institutions are working tirelessly to give students confidence and assuredness in their systems despite not having a clear path for what is to come in the next semester.

The literature strongly supports the importance of the freshmen year in college, as in this year a student begins to identify with the school, has a sense of belonging, and increases the likelihood of completing a degree (DeVilbiss, 2014; Downing, 2014; Gardner, 2001; Pritchard et al., 2007; Upcraft & Gardner, 1989). The significant changes to the typical transition from high school graduate to college freshman may result in issues of increased attrition rates for colleges and lower persistence rates toward graduation. The quality of life for students and mental health

matters might be affected. There could also be a shift in the reasons a student chooses college or chooses not to attend college. Fear of uncertain times could have a dramatic impact on college decisions. The tendency to choose colleges and universities close to home had been increasing, and 2020 proved to follow this trend for public institutions (Education Dynamics, 2021). The information provided from this study could aid in guiding this group of students as well as others who face precarious times during transitions. The possibilities for empathy and understanding, as well as leadership and activism, could be qualities harnessed during this time.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this case study is to investigate the social, emotional, and cultural impact that a global pandemic and national civil unrest had on the transition of high school seniors graduating in 2020 from a large, suburban high school to a large urban university in the Midwest.

The devastating consequences of the pandemic and the civil unrest significantly changed the landscape of transitioning into college for this group of students. Studying these students' experiences can give a lens into the process of transition into college during uncertain times. To complete this study, semi-structured interviews, documentation, websites, and communication to students will be used to collect data from current freshmen who are attending an urban, Midwest, four-year university and were part of the high school graduating class of 2020. This case study will provide a lens into the world of young adults and aid in the understanding of transition during a time of a worldwide pandemic and national civil unrest.

Transition programs have exploded in popularity in the past decade to prepare students for college with the hoped outcome being increased completion rates (Tinto, 2012). The high school graduating class of 2020 was not afforded this assistance in the traditional setting. The study highlights how uncertainty and disruption impacted students as they transitioned into the

next phase of their lives. The study provides information to colleges on the importance of these students identifying as the graduating class of 2020. Student affairs offices will benefit from this study as they will hear the voices of this unique class of students. The current study gave this class of students a platform to share their experiences during this unprecedented time.

### **Research Question**

1. How do college freshmen of the graduating high school class of 2020 view their experience transitioning into a four-year university?

### **Conceptual Framework**

I designed a qualitative constructivist case study to research how the graduating class of 2020 navigated the transition to their first year of college. The circumstances surrounding this group of students transitioning to college are bound by the pandemic and civil unrest due to the fight for racial justice. I applied the case study method because I was interested in how the students viewed their experiences where they had little or no control over events, and because the study is contemporary in nature (Yin, 2018). The case study is an explanatory study that allowed the participants an opportunity to explore their experiences of transitioning into college. As a researcher, I relied on my direct observation of the events (pandemic and civil unrest) and the interviews with the participants, along with other data points, including institutions' communications and websites (Yin, 2018).

The constructivist researcher views the situation from an interpretive lens (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The belief is that there can be multiple realities within the same situation. Each individual faces their reality and constructs knowledge or makes meaning with their perception and thoughts. The participants in this study have varying realities based on their perception of the events and how they experienced the transition.

Through the framework of Schlossberg's Transition Theory, I examined how the high school graduating class of 2020, from a Midwest high school navigated this time of uncertainty and disruption, transitioning into a Midwest university. Schlossberg et al. (1995) defined a transition as "any event or non-event that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles" (p. 27). The participants of this study were students from a large suburban high school who transitioned into a Midwest urban university. The study focused on how these students perceived their transition into college in a time when their expectations for the transition were greatly different than what had become known as a traditional next step into college. Schlossberg's Transition Theory fits in the constructivist framework because it reflects the experiences of people facing uncertainty and working through unpredictable situations at different rates and with different personal perspectives (Schlossberg et al., 1995).

Disruption of normalcy and unmet expectations became the new norm for this group of students. The chaos theory of transition focuses on the ever-changing and questionable future that humans face (Bussolari & Goodell, 2009). The 2020 high school graduates did not experience a normal transition; instead, they faced uncertainty from mid-way through their final year of high school through their first year of college. The chaos theory encircles this transition with the precarious nature of the situation. Though this theory will not be applied to the research and framework, it might be called upon to aid the discussion and follow-up.

### **Assumptions of the Study**

As the researcher, I assume that transitioning into college during a pandemic and civil unrest increases anxiety and feelings of anguish for the incoming class. Many of these students experienced feelings of grief over the opportunities that were lost (Sloat, 2020). The graduating class of 2020 was forced to perform a quick pivot in the way they celebrated the completion of



their first twelve years of education. These students experienced unprecedented change from in-person classrooms, in-person graduations and parties and end of season banquets, and other key events that have traditionally signified and celebrated the end of one era and the beginning of another. Using Schlossberg's Transition Theory, I hope to find themes that highlight the uniqueness of this situation and how these students navigated the uncertainty.

It is also my assumption that the identity of the 2020 graduating class will be of importance. It is assumed that these students are aware that their situation is historical, and they recognize that they are at the forefront of monumental change. A quick web search for "how colleges changed orientation during COVID-19" pulled up 222,000,000 results. The way students completed high school, prepared for college, and then entered college was different from anything they had been taught to expect. Institutions worked tirelessly to adapt the way they communicated with and reached incoming students. Now, these students have started their college experiences where the social and educational components are different from any population before them. I believe that recognition for being part of this group of students will become an important piece of their identities.

As the researcher, I believe that this group of students recognizes how the civil unrest throughout the country and world is a result of systemic racism and equity issues and are much bigger problems than what they faced in the transition from high school to college. If these students have opportunities to become activists, whether on campus or online, to fight for change, it could be a positive characteristic of their collective identity. If they find the positive in virtual learning, they could become leaders in the online platform.

My hope is that this research will offer insight into the emotions and experiences the participants felt during their transition from high school graduation to their first year in college.

Their expectations and realizations can provide awareness for how to work with students in the future, utilizing the positive changes that were made and learning from the mistakes that occurred.

### **Positionality**

Investigating the transition from high school to college in 2020 will provide a platform for students to share their experiences, feelings, and thoughts during an unprecedented time. I am the mother of a class of 2020 graduate, so I have a vested interest in this group of students. I am particularly interested in my daughter's and her classmates' responses to the pandemic and civil unrest during this time of transition.

As a psychology faculty member, my passion is learning how students persevere and overcome adversity. During times of stress and change, people persevere and fight, and sometimes shut down, adjusting to change. Having a counseling background, I am interested in hearing how these students adapted during this time.

As a doctoral student in higher education administration, I find this topic of great interest because it is pertinent to the continued success of our colleges and universities. As a human, I am saddened by what so many people have lost during this time.

The positions listed above could impact the study because of bias. The emotional involvement will be a challenge that I will pay close attention to as I conduct this research.

### **Delimitations**

This case study focused on students from a larger suburban high school who graduated in the spring of 2020 and who are now first-year college students. Delimitations exist due to researching students from one suburban high school who are attending a specific urban university in the Midwest. The results of this study do not necessarily generalize to other

populations who did not have similar high school and first year of college experiences due to unprecedented circumstances. Spring 2020 high school graduates are the focus of this study. The transition out of high school and into college changed dramatically in a short period of time. This study is a snapshot of time, diving into the experience of one group of people.

### **Definition of the Terms**

*Civil Unrest.* Civil unrest refers to a set of public, disruptive actions initiated by citizens to manifest their unhappiness over some socio-political matter. Some of these activities involve nonviolent protests such as political speeches, symbolic actions, mass demonstrations, and strikes; others include politically motivated violent attacks, including suicide bombings, assassinations, shootings, and destruction (Nardulli et. al, 2015).

*Generational Years.* Due to the approximation of birth years, the years for each generation are taken from Elmore (2010) and Seemiller and Grace (2017). An overlap of two to five years can occur with generations, blurring the lines of identifying with one generation or another.

*The Greatest Generation:* Born 1900-1928

*The Silent Generation:* Born 1929-1945

*The Baby Boomers (Boomers):* Born 1946-1964

*Generation X:* Born 1965-1983

*Generation Y (iY; Millennials):* Born 1984-2002

*Generation Z (iGen; Centennials):* Born 1990-2010

*Transition.* According to Schlossberg et al. (1995), a transition, broadly speaking, is any event, or non-event, that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles.

## Summary

By mid-March 2020, life as a senior in high school changed dramatically. Initially, students were told they would have an extended spring break, but it was soon followed by an announcement that they would not step foot back into their school buildings. The rest of their senior year would be held online with students expected to log in from their homes. All sports and activities were canceled. Graduation ceremonies and award ceremonies were moved online or postponed to later dates. There was a lot of uncertainty. The official order of shelter in place limited these high school seniors to see their closest friends online and not having the opportunity for the traditional closure to their years of secondary education. The transition from high school to college for the class of 2020 proved to be different than any other in U.S. history.

Violent and peaceful protests followed the death of George Floyd continued throughout the summer. Some groups of people, not associated with the peaceful protests, turned to rioting and looting, and Minneapolis became nationally-known as Ground Zero. The realization of systemic racism and the impacts of the pandemic overshadowed everything.

The current study was designed to give the 2020 high school seniors a voice to share the experiences they faced completing high school and how they transitioned into a four-year institution during the COVID-19 pandemic and civil unrest. Though many studies have been conducted focusing on the transition into college, there is virtually no literature regarding the thoughts, feelings, fears, and excitement of the Spring 2020 graduating class. The goals of this dissertation are to provide a window into the experiences these students endured, to inform best practices and guidelines for helping students transition in the case of a potential future pandemic, and to give some of the high school seniors of the class of 2020 a platform to share their stories.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

Transitioning from high school to college is a fun, exciting, and anxious time for many students (Kerr et al., 2004). It is a time filled with ceremonies and celebrations as students wrap up their secondary education years and turn their focus to the next phase of life. Senior traditions include senior skip day, decision day, senior parent's day for sports and activities, graduation, all-night parties, and banquets celebrating their many accomplishments (Wayzata Schools, n.d.). Not all states in the U.S. shut schools down the same way, but undoubtedly, the graduating seniors of 2020 faced this milestone of completing their K-12 school years differently than their predecessors. Now the 2020 seniors have paved the way to transition into college without the traditional steps that we have been accustomed to experiencing.

In many states, students were told in mid- March that school would be canceled until after spring break, then the cancellation was extended for a few more weeks until eventually students were given notice that they would not be returning to the school building for the remainder of the year (Associated Press, 2020). Students completed high school through a new online format, learning to navigate online education while facing a world of uncertainty about their future college transitions. Colleges began moving orientations online, and some even announced mid-summer that Fall 2020 classes were moved to an online platform. The senior class of 2020 was now facing the uncertainty of how they would be moving into the residence halls and meeting their new classmates (Johnson, 2020). Deans and student affairs personnel worked endless hours to fulfill students' expectations while heroically trying to be transparent with the reality that college would be different.

This literature review examines previous studies on Schlossberg's Transition Theory as the 2020 seniors transitioned into college during a time of uncertainty and disruption. This

review also highlights previous research that studied transitioning during precarious times, adolescent identity formation, and activism on campuses.

## **COVID -19**

SARS-coV-2 is the most recently discovered coronavirus, commonly referred to as COVID-19 (World Health Organization, 2020). The virus was first identified in Wuhan, China on January 2, 2020, and professionals from the World Health Organization (WHO) started working on containing and researching this coronavirus that was presenting itself as pneumonia (World Health Organization, 2020). At that time, WHO did not foresee this virus would be a concern to the world, but by March 11, 2020, COVID-19 was officially deemed a pandemic (World Health Organization, 2020).

At the time of writing this dissertation, the information pertaining to the pandemic and COVID-19 is still in constant flux. The entire world has been and continues to be impacted by this virus. It has closed down entire cities, states, and countries. In March 2020, most states in the United States ordered the closure of nearly everything, only allowing essential businesses to continue operating. In Minnesota, on March 13, 2020, Governor Walz declared a peacetime emergency and on March 15, 2020, he issued an Executive Order, temporarily closing all public schools (Office of Governor, 2020). The next day, March 16, 2020, Governor Walz closed all bars, restaurants, and other places of public accommodation (Office of Governor, 2020). This trend continued, and on March 27, 2020, the governor of Minnesota issued a “stay at home” policy until April 10, 2020. This order was extended until May 4, 2020. While May 1, 2020 was the first transition back to normalcy, the order only allowed businesses that had no contact with customers to go back to work. According to Governor Walz, essential business included healthcare and public health workers, law enforcement and first responders, food and agriculture,

energy workers, water and wastewater workers, transportation and logistics, public works, communications and information technology, and a few others that were deemed critically essential (Office of Governor, 2020).

Along with being asked to stay home and shelter in place, people were asked to practice “social distancing.” Social distancing is keeping six feet between yourself and other people, not gathering in groups of ten or more people, and avoiding mass gatherings. Face masks in public spaces were also encouraged and even mandated in some states (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020b). These precautions were put in place to “slow the curve.” According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2020b), this was necessary to give hospitals time to prepare for the influx of people who would need ventilators to aid in breathing. By now it had become clear that Covid-19 could settle in the lungs, causing immense difficulty in breathing and possibly even cause death (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020b).

Colleges and universities struggled with how to open their doors safely for students to return to campus, live on campus, and learn in their classrooms. In California, most of the higher education institutions transitioned all online or moved the majority of courses online through Fall 2020 (Smith et al., 2020). Brown University delayed the start date for all first-year freshmen until Spring Semester 2021 with few online exceptions (Brown University, n.d.). The University of Minnesota, Twin Cities, delayed move-in dates by two weeks for all students living on campus. The University of Minnesota also moved nearly all courses online, enforced strict mask-wearing ordinances on campus, and established a curfew for on-campus residents (University of Minnesota, 2020a). The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention released an extensive and detailed list of considerations for colleges and universities to follow for reopening (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020a). Most institutions posted COVID-19 information and

updates on their websites, including how they would keep students safe so they could continue to engage and learn. They also posted information about how to get tested and what to do when one tested positive, including procedures for quarantining and isolation.

Institutions began to rely on live-streaming for classes, meetings, advising, and other interactions in an attempt to build connections and form bonds with students while still keeping them safe (Johnson, 2020). With information on COVID-19 changing daily, schools scrambled to keep up in providing the safest environment for students, faculty, and staff, while remaining open to house and educate their scholars.

### **Civil Unrest**

Adding to the tension and instability of the nation, the death of an African American man while in the custody of a White police officer was taped and shared with the world. On May 25, 2020, George Floyd was taken into custody in Minneapolis for allegedly purchasing items with a counterfeit twenty-dollar bill (Jany, 2020). The officer who handcuffed Floyd put him on the ground and kneeled on his neck until he died. This incident led to nationwide protests, riots, and looting throughout the United States, with Minneapolis being the epicenter (Taylor, 2021). Peaceful protests were often disrupted by criminal activity that turned into riots and looting (MPR News Staff, 2020). The police chief of Minneapolis, Medaria Arradondo, stated that the vast majority of people were peaceful, but the activities were hijacked by protestors who were engaged in criminal activity (MPR News Staff, 2020).

Protests are a constitutional right in the United States, protected under the First Amendment (*First Amendment*, 2020). The First Amendment protects the fundamental right for people to peaceably assemble. Peaceful protests began immediately after the death of George Floyd. Protesters called for racial justice and demonstrated that people wanted change in the



handling of police procedures (Taylor, 2021). At the same time as these peaceful protests asking for racial justice, chaos was erupting that would cause much destruction in the city. By the end of the day on May 25, the peace had turned to rioting and looting and continued into the night and over the next several days. After the fourth night, the mayor enforced an 8:00 p.m. curfew for the people of Minneapolis. The uncertainty and changes in the world put a hold on some of the day-to-day activities that people have become accustomed to.

People from all over participated in protests for change that supported systemic racism. High school students from a variety of schools in Minnesota hosted a “Sit to Breathe” protest at the State Capitol (Littlefield, 2020). Thousands of students and adults showed up at this peaceful protest. Students appeared to understand the significance of the situation. Participating in a protest was one way for students to demonstrate their desire to make a stand for change, to support those who have been oppressed. The transition from high school to college was different for these students, but they appeared to be understanding that missing some of the traditional milestones did not compare to what was happening in their world. Traditional advice for what to expect as a transition into college was no longer relevant. Living during this time was reason enough for this group to understand that even the best intentions of providing guidance and certainty could be changed within days or hours.

### **Schlossberg’s Theory of Transition**

Many factors impact an individual’s adaptation to change. These factors might include (a) the way they view the world, (b) if the change is moving to something exciting or frightening, and (c) what kind of support they have. The certainty or uncertainty of a situation is all part of the adaptation process. Schlossberg (1981) believed that the transition itself was not of primary importance but that the other factors about the individual, their expectations, and their specific

situations all had a great impact.

Adaptation to transition is the process in which a person moves from being completely engrossed in the transition to living with the changes of the transition (Schlossberg, 1981). Three factors appear to influence adaptation to transition: (a) if the role is positive or negative, a gain or loss, internal or external, (b) the characteristics of support, before and after the transition, and (c) the characteristics of the individual, including psychosocial competence, gender, age, health, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, and previous experience (Schlossberg, 2008).

Schlossberg's Transition Theory was originally used to explain transitions later in life, from employment to retirement; however, it has since been applied to many studies involving younger people transitioning to different parts of their lives. Schlossberg's theory has three components: (a) approaching change, (b) taking stock, and (c) taking charge (Schlossberg et al., 1995).

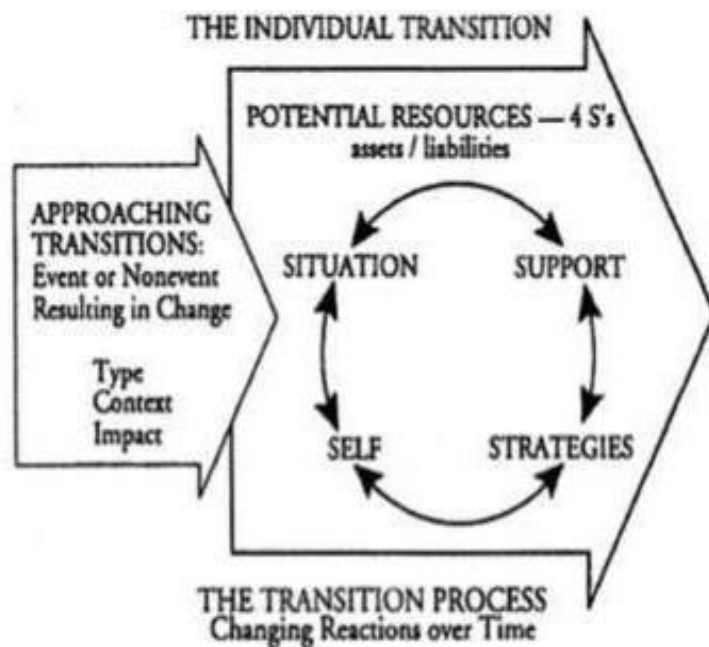
The realization that change is about to occur is the beginning of a transition (Schlossberg et al., 1995). Transitions have unique characteristics, based on the circumstance and the individual involved. Anticipated transitions such as college, marriage, or the birth of a child are often predictable and expected. Unanticipated events that are not predicted or expected can be viewed as disruptive in the life cycle. Non-event transitions are events that were expected but failed to occur. Examples of non-event transitions could include a high school graduation ceremony not occurring, a marriage that did not happen, or a child who was not born. The realization that an event will not occur alters the view in which an individual anticipates life and may alter their beliefs and behaviors (Schlossberg et al., 1995). The individual's appraisal of the situation, transition, or non-event can have a large impact on how one copes. What one person views as negative, another could view as positive, and another could simply view it as benign.

Perception of the transition is a determining factor in the feelings of individuals throughout the process (Schlossberg, 1981). Schlossberg et al. (1995) emphasized the meaning of the transition to the individual.

The family unit, friends, psycho-social competence, institutional supports, socioeconomic status, race/ethnicity, state of health, and physical settings have an effect on an individual during a time of transition (Schlossberg, 1981). Transitions are a time when relationships, expectations, routines, roles, and assumptions change. A person will begin to adapt to the new situation in the taking charge stage, by finding tactics that align with this environment. Schlossberg (1981) used Four S's: Situation, self, support, and strategies to explain the personal transition in the transition process. Figure 1 shows the Transition Framework.

### Figure 1

*The Transition Framework: The Individual Transition*



*Note.* From *Counseling Adults in Transition* by Schlossberg et al., 1995 p. 27.

Situation refers to how a person assesses the amount of control they have over the

transition. If a person feels that they have more control over the situation, the result will more likely be positive. In *Counseling Adults in Transition*, Schlossberg et al. (1995) list certain characteristics to evaluate when exploring the transition, which includes trigger, timing, control, role change, previous experience, duration, and concurrent stress. Each of these factors will have an impact on the transition into college. Generally, a student has control over when to begin college, unless unforeseen circumstances prevent a student from starting. A student may experience internal control (having control over the transition), or external control (being forced upon or having lack of control), during the transition to college, depending upon the situation.

Self includes the psychological resources and personal characteristics. Psychological resources include a person's internal ability to manage transitions and conflict (Schlossberg et al., 1995). An individual's personal and demographic characteristics-socioeconomic status, gender, age, stage of life, and stage of health-bear directly on how he/she perceives life (Schlossberg et al., 1995, p. 58). Optimism, self-efficacy, resilience, and values play an important role in the transition process and are encompassed in Schlossberg's Self (Bauman, 2009).

Support refers to a person's support system and how it impacts the transition process. This includes if a person feels loved, respected, and heard (Schlossberg, 2008). People receive support from their intimate relationships, family units, network of friends, and institutions through faculty, student personnel services professionals, peers, or administrators (Chickering & Schlossberg, 2002).

Schlossberg (2008) stated that strategy is how an individual will modify, control, find meaning, or do nothing during the transition. The last major part of the transition process is when the individual utilizes new strategies (Schlossberg et al., 1995). Individuals who want to change their situation or reduce their distress, can choose from among four coping modes: information

seeking, direct action, inhibition of action, and intrapsychic behavior. The first three seem self-explanatory; the last one (intrapsychic) refers to the mindsets individuals employ to resolve problems that arise. These mind sets, which include denial, wishful thinking, and distortion, enable people to carry on. (Schlossberg et al., 1995, p. 74).

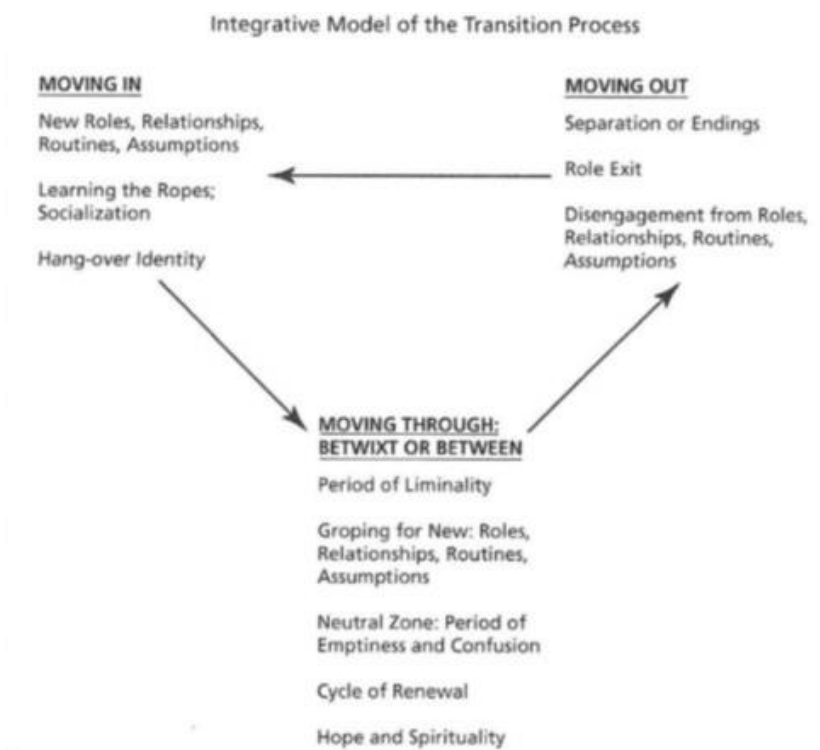
The Four S's in Schlossberg's theory can be placed into different schemes. How a student interprets support can have a major influence on the student throughout the college experience (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015; Workman, 2015). Parental influence has an impact on the student's experience. Other support systems, such as services provided through the college, also impact students. Feelings of support or lack of support have a large impact on transitioning into college and whether the student perceives the support as positive or negative. The student's internal drive to reach out for support (self) will impact their experience. Karmelita (2018) found in a study conducted with adult learners that support can have a direct relationship with a positive shift in self-perception. Providing a variety of opportunities to seek assistance allows students to strategize in a way that suits their situation.

Schlossberg explained the transition process by using the terms "moving in" and "moving through" and "moving out" as shown in Figure 2 (Schlossberg et al., 1995). The first phase could be conceptualized as either moving in or moving out. For example, a student graduating from high school and attending college will be moving into the college experience and moving out of the high school experience. The individual will be leaving behind roles and identities as a high school student and learning new roles and identities as a college student. The moving through phase is a time of uncertainty and sometimes confusion. When adults in transition receive the support they need, they are able to explore the questions in more depth and understand the underlying meaning, resulting in their capability to create a plan, cope with, and resolve any

hurdles more effectively (Anderson et al., 2012; Goodman et al., 2006). It behooves institutions to spend time and efforts on making this transition positive and informative to reduce turnover or attrition (Schlossberg et al., 1995). These strategies will have an impact on the stress level of the transition.

## Figure 2

### *Integrated Model of the Transition Process*



*Note.* From *Counseling Adults in Transition* by Schlossberg et al., 1995 p. 27.

A 2016 study provided an understanding of the challenges faced by low-income minority students planning to attend college, during their transition summer between high school and college (Rall, 2016). Rall utilized Schlossberg's Transition Theory as a framework to understand the barriers this population tackled as they pushed forward towards college. The results indicate that there is a need for continued support during the summer before college as well as during the

first year on campus. The question for the current study is to analyze how the senior class of 2020 transitioned from high school to college during a time of uncertainty and civil unrest. Though the population in Rall's (2016) study differs from the population of the current study, it is clear that Schlossberg's Transition Theory provides a solid framework that supports the current study's research and purpose.

### **College Transition**

Transitions and adaptations have been studied in many arenas and situations, but this group of high school seniors transitioning into college have not had the opportunity to share their stories. According to Schlossberg (2008), transition occurs when there is change in assumptions about oneself and a response to the world requires a change in relationship or behavior. Like generations of graduating classes before them, the graduating class of 2020 faced new environments, met new people, and developed new day-to-day schedules when they entered college in the fall. Social distancing requirements, restrictions in residence halls, lowered classroom capacities, and the move to offering more online classes in their first semester of college, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, undoubtedly gave these students unique viewpoints that reflect the disrupted, dynamic and uncertain social and physical environments they transitioned into (Diep & Zahneis, 2020).

Numerous studies support that student success academically, socially, and emotionally hinges on their transition into college (Arthur, 1998; Brissette et al., 2002; Jones et al., 2014; Leong et al., 1997). Creating a supportive environment by developing and implementing programs that are equitable for all students is the responsibility of the college (Gardner & Jewler, 2000). Student diversity includes race, ethnicity, socio-economic levels, remedial students, and other invisible differences. The success of students falls heavily on the institutions' ability to

provide support and to empower all students.

Tinto (1975) offered a theoretical model designed to measure the individual interactions with the institution and the characteristics related to dropout behavior. His research design provided a basis for explaining, rather than merely describing “definably different forms of dropout behavior” (p. 90). Tinto (1993) stressed the importance of social adjustment as a key indicator of perseverance. According to Tinto (1993), the key factor to promoting student persistence and academic accomplishment is the ability to successfully integrate students into the college environment. Tinto’s model borrowed from disciplines of social psychology and educational economics to build and understand the relationship between individual background characteristics (high school GPA, socioeconomic status, gender, and ethnicity) and individual emotional characteristics (motivation and expectations of academic achievement). He hoped future research would execute similar theoretical frameworks of distinct variables using the dependent variables of persistence or dropout. To this date, much research has been conducted related to student success and lack of success in higher education.

Significant professionals in the field of student affairs, including Astin, Tinto, Pascarella and Terenzini, and Chickering and Reisser have researched what contributes to student attrition and graduation rates. Gardner and Upcraft have provided research about the first-year success of students that includes retention through graduation. The First-Year Experience has become a high priority for many colleges and universities (Gardner & Upcraft, 1989). According to research, the importance of this priority is not only for the betterment of the students but also for the reputation and financial stability of the institution (Palmer et al., 2009).

According to Quaye and Harper (2015), one of the most important early predictors to college success is goal realization. Goal realization is the ability to express, in one’s own words,



what they want to and are getting out of the college experience. The student must be able to explain why they are attending college (not simply because their parents told them to), the explanation must be personal and meaningful, and be able to articulate the importance of what they are doing and the value of college in the present and future (Quaye & Harper, 2015).

Engagement and persistence are also well-documented outcomes for student success in higher education (Braxton et al., 2000; Bridges et al., 2005; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 1993).

Researchers have learned that the freshman year can be a determining factor in the retention rate and success of students. Determination of student attrition often occurs during the first year and that adjustment to college has both short-term and long-term ramifications for student performance, persistence in college, and academic success (Ishitani, 2006). Studies have given evidence that the first six weeks of the semester have been associated with persistence, academic performance, and increased probability of graduation (Kuh, 1995; Tinto, 1993; Woosley, 2003; Woosley & Miller, 2009). Becoming active, responsible learners produces a significant reduction in attrition and increases persistence (Downing, 2014). Students who immerse themselves into college, find connections to other students and organizations, engage in their courses, and with their professors have lower attrition rates. Students thrive in an environment where they feel they belong and are supported (Wolcott, 2006; Gardner, 2001; Upcraft & Gardner, 1989). Kerr et al. (2004) found that by the second (spring) semester adjustment was explained better by the students' perception of stress and level of psychological symptoms. Providing skills and support during the first semester can offset these negative perceptions in the second semester. Mentor programs can produce positive outcomes in study skills, knowledge, and psychological literacies (Chester et al., 2013). Educators must facilitate structured opportunities for dialogue and connections to be made. Meaningful strategies are

imperative to maintain students' interests and motivation (Quaye & Harper, 2015). When an institution successfully engages students, learning opportunities and knowledge will reinforce development (Gardner, 2001).

A recent study conducted by the Student Experience in the Research University (SERU) Consortium survey of 2020, researched the impact of COVID-19 on college students. When asked if they “somewhat agree to strongly agree that I feel valued as an individual at my university” 66% of students with emotional or mental health concerns agreed, and 81% of students without emotional or mental health concerns agreed. When asked if they “somewhat agree or strongly agree that they belong at my university” 78% of students with emotional or mental health concerns agreed, and 90% of students who did not have emotional or mental health concerns agreed. When asked if they “somewhat agree or strongly agree that my university supported me during the COVID-19 pandemic” 62% of students who did have emotional concerns and 76% of students who did not have emotional concerns agreed (Horgos et al., 2020). This study highlights the importance of feeling supported by the university, friends, and family. Struggling with mental health concerns exemplifies this need.

One of the principal indicators of attrition is loneliness and social isolation (Martin et al., 1999). Tinto (1993) theorized that students entered college with preconceived notions that were validated or not, based on their academic and social interactions, impacting their commitment to the institution. Students appear to be more successful academically and socially when they possess the skills necessary to immerse themselves in the social aspects of college (Martin et al., 1999; Komives & Woodard, 2003; Tinto, 2006). Thus, coping skills are another resource that can protect students from this potential risk and promote success in already successful people (Masten et al., 2004). Several researchers have noted that the more academically and socially

involved students are, the more likely they are to interact with other students, become active learners and achieve their personal and academic goals (Astin, 1984; Mallette & Cabrera, 1991; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980; Terenzini & Pascarella, 1977). Students who feel a connection to other students and the campus community have a greater likelihood to persist and graduate (Astin, 1993). These connections must occur early in a student's college career (Tinto, 1993) so the student has a feeling of belonging to the community. Colleges can use this knowledge to support students and educate them in coping skills and avenues to be successful in college.

Ryan and Deci (2000) studied motivation within a framework of self-perceived competence, security in supportive relationships (relatedness), and self-driven purpose (autonomy). These three basic needs are required to experience social and emotional growth. Measures to differentiate intrinsic (internal) from extrinsic (external) bases of motivation were developed to explore the impact of the differences that might be found. Intrinsic motivation occurs when people complete tasks for internal reasons, not related to external rewards such as feelings of accomplishment or success. Extrinsic motivation is divulged when people complete tasks for reasons others have established, such as money or grades. When competence, relatedness, and autonomy were supported, both intrinsic and extrinsic motivations were heightened. When the three needs of competence, relatedness, and autonomy were not supported, motivations were weakened. When people (students included) were involved in social contexts that were supportive of these three major needs, they attained positive motivation for improved performance and well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

A study conducted by students at the University of Colorado, Boulder, attempted to reach college students across the country to understand motivation during the pandemic (Nell et al., 2020). The researchers concluded that academic motivation dropped during the pandemic

because online courses did not satisfy the connection to campus or foster the positive motivation that a college campus environment typically creates (Nell et al., 2020). They said it was vital for students to search for motivation as the natural energy from campus life did not occur during the 2020-2021 school year.

A conference full of practices and suggestions to improve how institutions connect with students has proven to be a platform to share practices and gain insight from professionals in the field (National Resource Center for the First Year Experience and Students in Transition, 2021). In 2021, the First-Year-Experience was held online for the first time. This 40<sup>th</sup> annual convention is evidence to the importance of reaching students during the transition into college. This conference provided more than 185 workshops over one week. Topics varied from transitioning during a pandemic to bringing debates into the classroom. The goal of this conference is to support educators and administrators in the preparation, implementing, and refining of programs designed to advance the first-year experience constructively.

The critical importance of the first-year experience continues to be studied. Researching the graduating class of 2020 will give a glimpse into their experiences as they navigated a world of uncertainty. Higher education has been diligent in making the transition into college as smooth a process as possible, hoping to reduce attrition rates and provide a rewarding experience despite the toll of the pandemic on the students' daily lives. The pandemic of 2020 took many of those comforts away from college freshmen.

### **Identity and Transition**

Van Gennep (1960) studied the rites of passage of adolescence into adulthood in various cultures. Tinto (1975) adopted Van Gennep's concept of tribal "rites of passage" and equated it to the process of transitioning from high school to college. As part of that transition, Tinto

suggested the need of individuals to disconnect from the society to which they belong (one's high school, neighborhood, family, friends, religion, etc.) to connect with a new one (college institution and related milieu) and tied this disconnect from one society to another into his concept of social integration.

Tinto's model of student departure integrates notions of cost-benefit analysis and social psychologist Durkheim's (1961) theory of suicide (Tinto, 1975). Cost-benefit analysis, as it relates to the economics of education, addresses the costs of attending college (financial, emotional, mental, time away from family, conflicts with employment, etc.) versus the benefits (extra earning potential, prestige) (Tinto, 1975). Durkheim studied the relationship between students who drop out of college and suicide (Durkheim, 1961). The transition into college starts to form the identity of being a college student.

Multiple studies have shown that perception of stress is a good indicator of how the transition into college will go (Arthur, 1998; Brissette et al., 2002; Leong et al., 1997). Anxiety, depression, and other psychological hurdles will inhibit a healthy transition into college (Kerr et al., 2004). Seligman (2018) introduced a framework focusing on individual well-being resulting from positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishments representing a holistic approach. Seligman suggests that well-being is personal to the individual, but also encompasses the environment, interactions, and external influences that the individual experiences, relating to the support and development of well-being and resilience. Resilience represents the ability to adapt and thrive while in the face of adversity (Connor & Davidson, 2003). Hoopes (2017) described resilience as the capacity to deal with high levels of challenge while maintaining or regaining high levels of effectiveness and well-being. Hoopes identified seven characteristics of personal resilience (positivity, confidence, priorities, creativity,

connection, structure, and experimenting) that she refers to as muscles. These muscles and individual strengths and weaknesses contribute to overall personal resilience.

Individuals with higher levels of resilience generally rely on family, social and external support systems to cope more effectively with stress, and lower stress levels (Friborg et al., 2003). Resilience can be modified and improved, making it a central target in the action against depression, anxiety, and stress (Connor & Davidson, 2003). Resilience can have a positive impact on the transition into college. Research conducted on student adaptation to higher education found resilience as the strongest predictor identified, with 64% of the variance in adaptation to college predicted by this factor alone (House, 2010). Personal resilience is constructed upon the basis of a growth mindset. Mindset refers to the two contrasting frameworks that classify people by how they see and understand intelligence. At either end of the spectrum are entity theories of intelligence (fixed mindset) and the incremental theory of intelligence (growth mindset) (Dweck, 2006). Growth mindset is the credence that abilities can be developed through dedication and hard work. This belief leads to the motivation to learn (Dweck, 2006). Implicit beliefs can influence people's inferences, judgments, and reactions, especially when faced with negative situations (Dweck et al., 1995). Grit is determination, passion, and perseverance people possess as they work toward long-term goals when faced with hurdles that hinder their progress (Duckworth & Gross, 2014). Growth mindset and grit are important in the development and success of students (Fitzgerald & Lauren-Fitzgerald, 2016). It was found that the development of a growth mindset and grit in students is best achieved with a two-step process. Step one is creating an encouraging and supporting environment for students to learn. Step two is helping students find their interests and develop their passions (Fitzgerald & Lauren-Fitzgerald, 2016).

A successful transition into college heavily influences how a student succeeds academically, socially, and emotionally. Early college experiences appear to have an incredible influence on students' academic self-efficacy. Self-efficacy can be defined as the belief in one's capabilities to organize and execute successfully, a course of action required to complete an objective (Bandura, 1986). Pajares (2003) found that self-efficacy can help determine how much effort students will devote to an activity, how long they will persist when faced with obstacles, and how resilient they will be in adverse situations. Gerdes and Mallinckrodt (1994) found the transition period to college as a time that can create anxiety and feelings of insufficient self-worth. Failure to assimilate successfully into the university environment can cause psychological difficulties, depression, and low self-efficacy (Gerdes & Mallinckrodt, 1994). Being able to recognize and assess the psychological well-being of college freshmen can improve success rates and lower attrition rates. Additionally, self-confidence and a belief that they will have the resources needed during this transition are also indicative of how students will adapt (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Being in a supportive environment aids in the transition into new situations of life, including the move from high school to college. In reviewing studies of people who were transitioning into college, believing that the college had plans in place and rules to follow, lessened the feelings of anxiety (Kerr et al., 2004).

The transition from high school is an important developmental milestone, one where people grow behaviorally and psychologically. They are on the fringe of adulthood, feeling the freedom from high school. This is also a time when risky behavior increases. There is less adult supervision during this time of life, leaving more opportunities for experimenting (Fromme et al., 2008). The use of marijuana, alcohol, e-cigs, and engaging in sex all increase from the end of high school through the first year of college (Fromme et al., 2008; Lindgren et al., 2013). These

behaviors can lead to devastating consequences. Young adults who engage in risky or illegal behavior might find it difficult to complete a bachelor's degree (Schwartz et al., 2015). Situation, self, support, and strategy all influence this time of life (Schlossberg, 2008). A healthy transition into college could be finding a group of other peers, having self-efficacy, knowing their plan, or feeling in control of the situation.

The time of exploration in a college setting, especially at residential colleges, is a natural place for students to explore new world views, love, work, and the responsibilities of an emerging adult (Arnett, 2016). Identity formation is part of the college experience. The theory of self-authorship as elucidated by Kegan (1994) and Baxter-Magolda (2008) illustrates the relationship between transition, context, and identity development. Self-authorship highlights elements of transition by explaining that individuals develop over time, especially in situations of possible dissonance (Baxter-Magolda, 2008; Kegan, 1994). Kegan (1994) coined the term "self-authorship" when describing how individuals change from an externally influenced understanding of the world to an internally influenced understanding of the world.

The number of young adults attending college has risen greatly over the century. In 1900 only 4% of 18 to 21-year-olds attended college; this number rose to about 16% in 1940 (Arnett, 2015). Today, approximately 70% of students attend higher education the year after they conclude high school (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2018). High school students form an identity and begin to explore what they will be doing after graduation and possibly make plans to set them up for the rest of their lives (Skorikov & Vondracek, 2011). Once students enter college they begin to rebalance and evaluate their existing frameworks and expectations. Many life changes, friendships, and choices can lead to changes in identity and self-esteem (Montgomery & Côté, 2003). Exposure to different ways of life, differing values, new attitudes,



and contrary choices can lead to changes in students' identity (Klimstra et al., 2010).

Maintaining a positive self-image during this time of life is an important resource (Luyckx et al., 2013).

### **Social Media and Freshmen Identity**

Colleges and universities have long recognized that support for students during the first year of higher education has a positive impact on retention. Having positive self-worth facilitates an internal frame of reference for people, aiding in identity commitment (Erikson, 1968; Luyckx et al., 2013). Facilitating and strengthening positive self-esteem during this time is one way to encourage student identity-related work (Luyckx et al., 2013). Courses such as first-year seminars have become a common resource for college freshmen. These classes often cover content about stress management, self-care, time management, making choices, study tips, and other pertinent topics that help students succeed in college (Downing, 2014). Chemers et al. (2001) showed a strong connection between self-efficacy (self-confidence in one's abilities), academic expectations (how one expects to perform in education), and academic performance. They argued that the attitudes students brought with them to academia were significant. Students who brought positive world views and attitudes with them to the university could use those attitudes to assist in their transition to college life (Chemers et al., 2001). Peer mentoring is another strategy that colleges utilize. Peers guide students with learning approaches, resources, and learning the culture of the college. These strategies have all been found to increase the confidence and overall success of students (Chester et al., 2013).

Social media is a relatively new phenomenon that has been shown to have a tremendous impact on student identity. Social media has become the foremost way for adolescents and young adults to communicate with one another (O'Keeffe & Clark-Pearson, 2011). Adolescents look to

people around them for guidance and comparison as they search for who they want to be. Social media has increased access for people to explore different identities, and they might identify with a variety of personality types. For example, they might feel they are an athlete, but eventually find they identify more with people in theater, only to change once again to an academic. Erik Erikson has termed this time of exploration and discovery Identity versus Role Confusion (McLeod, 2018).

The darker side of social media and identity development emerges when comparing oneself online in a world where filters and information can make others appear perfect causes distress. As a person is transitioning from high school to college, comparing themselves to an unattainable persona can lead to maladaptive forms of anxiety and angst. People adapt and change as they judge and feel judged, sometimes even viewing the individuals in comparison as competitors (Park & Baek, 2017). The restrictions enforced by the pandemic and civil unrest pushed many students to rely heavily on social media for connections. During this time, students have utilized social media as their main source of information and connection despite studies that have provided evidence of the identity distress that social media causes.

In the year 2020 when orientations were virtual, seated courses were non-existent, or at best, limited, and social interaction was frowned upon, college freshmen face a steep uphill battle in their identity development. Globalization and economic downturns have also extended this time of exploration (Arnett, 2002; Sica et al., 2014). The 2020 college transition was not as comforted, directed, and cushy as it has been in recent history. However, students who are in college, will identify as a college student. This part of their identity could have a large impact on the motivation to stay in higher education. Student affairs personnel can use this information to help guide practical ways to approach incoming freshmen who have been comparing and

adjusting their self-image according to what they see online (Yang et al., 2018). The data gathered will give some insight into if and how these students will push through and continue with their education.

### **Studies Applying Schlossberg's Transition Theory in Higher Education**

Schlossberg's Transition Theory has been applied widely through studies focusing on an individual's experience through transitions. The theory gives an appreciation to what transpires through the transitional experience (Byrd, 2017). Some experts in the field have stated that collegiate staff members should consider this theory as it may help work with students and even suggested its use in assessment to help identify resources and accountabilities (Evans et al, 2010).

Tovar and Simon (2006) found that using Schlossberg's Transition Theory gave a better understanding of students on academic probation because it allowed for individualization and variety in adapting to college life. DeVilbiss (2014) studied conditionally admitted students using the lens of Schlossberg's Transition Theory. The investigator found that students who brought their coping mechanisms and assets to college and who were given adequate time to adjust found themselves comfortable at their institutions of choice. By utilizing the Four S's (support, self, situation, and strategy) DeVilbiss (2014) was able to categorize the needs of these students. Lazarowicz (2015) studied how community college students transition into a four-year college. The themes that arose were funding (paying for college), taking time to transition, support is critical, maturity, and personal responsibility (Lazarowicz, 2015). These themes fit well into Schlossberg's Transition Theory of moving in, moving through, and moving out, as well as the Four S's.

A study conducted by Wall et al. (2018) to understand the journey of Enrolled Nurses

(EN) enrolling in higher education to complete their Registered Nursing (RN) license used Schlossberg's Transition Theory to explain this transition. The researchers used the phases of moving in, moving through, and moving out to develop a four-stage EN to RN Transition model. The researchers were confident of the generalizability of the results from their study to other student populations.

Schlossberg's theory incorporates mattering and marginality (Goodman et al., 2006). Mattering is related to the individual's feeling that they are valued in the community, and marginality occurs when a person feels isolated and not part of the community (Schlossberg et al., 1989). There are five dimensions of mattering, according to Schlossberg (1989), that can pave the way for communication and connectedness with students: (a) Attention is the feeling that one is noticed; (b) importance is when a person believes that they are cared about; (c) ego extension is feeling that someone is proud of what they have done or accomplished; (d) dependence is the feeling of being needed; and (e) appreciation is when a person believes their efforts are appreciated. These dimensions reach the student at a personalized and thoughtful level. This can be of assistance for admissions offices as they continue to explore ways to connect with students (Cohen, 2019). If a student feels that they matter, this could impact their successful transition to and through their freshmen year. The field of student affairs can also benefit from this theory as Schlossberg's Transition Theory is highly integrative of other theoretical contributions (Evans et al., 2010). It is a practical resource for assisting college students in dealing with change. During this time of change, Schlossberg's theory of transition can be a guide to help students feel comfortable and thrive on the college campus. Transitioning into college is a time when many emotions, both positive and negative can be elevated as students learn how to navigate the environment.

## **Generation Z**

Each generation has unique values and characteristics that have been shaped through experiences (Twenge et al., 2010; Schullery, 2013). Historical, social, and cultural events have an impact on attitudes and motivations. Understanding that there are generational differences can be an asset to personnel working with the cohorts (Mahmoud et al., 2020). Generation Y was deemed the iY because of their intertwined relationship with the internet (Elmore, 2010). Generation Y also disrupted the workplace because their values and beliefs about work-life balance often clashed with older generations in the workplace (Elmore 2010; Sladek, 2014). The high school graduating class of 2020 is part of Generation Z (Seemiller & Grace, 2017). This cohort has also grown up in the era of online technology, iPhones, and social media, but they have their own unique perspectives, motivations, and beliefs (Seemiller & Grace, 2017). Generation Z has never known a time without technology, volatile economies, and social justice movements. This generation of students is aware that a person could act violently at any time. Generation Z also has a strong desire to make a change in the world.

A brief look at how each cohort views the future indicates how Generation Z processes information differently. The Greatest Generation viewed the world as uncertain; the Silent generation sought to stabilize the world; Boomers wanted to create the world; Generation X viewed the world as hopeless; Generation Y was optimistic in their view of the world (Elmore, 2010). Generation Z seems to have moved the pendulum closer to the middle as they view the world with a realistic lens (Jenkins, 2017). Generation Z is looking for hands-on experiences where they can apply knowledge to their world as they learn. They show signs of being more internally motivated than their close cohorts of Generation X and Y (Mahmoud et al., 2020). This group of students does not mind learning online and even enjoys some of the aspects of it

such as self-pacing and independent learning (Jenkins, 2017; Roseberry-McKibbin, 2017; Seemiller & Grace, 2017; Sparks & Honey, 2014). This does not mean that virtual transitioning is welcomed. This generation values collaborative learning once they have had time to process information. They view their peers and mentors as resources. They also prefer face-to-face conversations over online, such as texting, facetime, or other internet sources (Roseberry-McKibbin, 2017; Jenkins, 2017).

Understanding that Generation Z has unique aspirations and expectations from the students who entered into college before them allows colleges to empower this cohort. As this generation is faced with the uncertainty of the pandemic and civil unrest, they will be challenged to see their future as different than they had anticipated. Opportunities to lead and persevere in a new landscape will transpire.

### **Activism on College Campus**

Activism is described as an effort by individuals or groups of people to stand up to injustice or stand for a cause with the ultimate goal of provoking social change (Sherrod, 2006). Activism includes a sense of purpose with the desire to achieve goals that contribute to others or make a difference in society (Damon et al., 2010). Justice can be explained as the right use of power, and injustice as the abuse of power. Social justice grapples with questions about power systems within society and the impact they have on people (Cannon, 2009). Research about campus-based activism reveals that students engage in activism related to their experiences with marginalization and oppression (Rhoads, 1997).

Students have protested over issues as simple as food options in the cafeteria to much more dire matters like equal rights for African Americans, disabilities, women's rights, and political views (Gordon, 1986). Throughout the 1800s protests were primarily due to inflexible

university policies, including restrictions against drinking alcohol, low-quality meals served on campus, and little student influence in institutional policy-making (Boren, 2001). Research indicates that there was a decline in student activism in the United States through the 1940s and 1950s, however, protests still occurred, some of which began the slow movements against racism and sexism. Activism began to explode in the 1960s with protests against the Vietnam War, civil rights, student representation, social revolutions, and gender rights (Boren, 2001).

Activism has included a new approach since the onset of the internet and social media. Generation Xers were raised in a time in which negativity of systems and people of power were being confronted. They grew up witnessing the failure of protection and support from traditional schools, families, and churches (Levine & Cureton, 1998). Unlike previous generations, Generation X students sought out the media for public exposure of their issue. Consumer tactics like petitions, demonstrations, and litigation emerged on campus as a viable method of public protest (Levine & Cureton, 1998). Millennials and Generation Z students have increased student community service and social engagement followed by student unrest. These students are participating in democracy and engaging in voting, connecting with political leaders, community service, and activism (Levine & Hirsch, 1991; Longo & Meyer, 2006; Sax, 2004).

At the time when universities were referred to as informal fraternities of scholars and students, institutions did not have collective bargaining for protection against threats from the towns in which students resided. Students and administrators soon realized that if they worked together, they had much more negotiating power for rent, and other financial burdens (Boren, 2001). This could be considered the first glimpse of activism. Student discontent was apparent in a serious confrontation in 1768 between students and administrators. Students fought against administrative oppression and what they viewed as a university government that failed to treat

them as adults with decision-making abilities (Boren, 2001).

Campus culture has been shown to have a large influence on student activism (Van Dyke, 1998). Dyke's quantitative study of 423 colleges investigating student activism in the 1960s found that a history of student activism is strongly correlated with incidents of student protest. The study exposed campuses with a single protest incident generally had multiple incidents of protest, due to activist subcultures present at the university. Institutional culture appears to have a great influence on the occurrence of student activism on a campus community.

Protesting is the image that comes to mind for most people when envisioning activism on college campuses, but this is not the only form of activism. Covert forms of support from administration and staff are found frequently on campuses, including cultural centers, *artivism* (a term coined by presenters at the ACPA 2021 conference), marches, and scholar activism. For marginalized students, the act of attending college - showing up, being themselves, and asking for what they need - are significant forms of activism (Linder et al., 2019).

Though many activists shed blood, lives, and tears, this literature review focuses on only a few of the populations who have had a profound impact and continue to fight for change that has impacted college campuses. It will be interesting to hear how the graduating high school seniors of 2020 show activism on their campus. Having the opportunity to fight for social justice during a pandemic could impact the occasions when protests occur. In a time when universities would show support by organizing rallies, the pandemic might not allow for in-person events.

## **Disabilities Movement**

Throughout history, students have fought for the rights of people with disabilities (Lebrecht & Newnham, 2020). In 1977 a group of advocates throughout the United States came



together to fight the government in what was later called 504 Sit-Ins. These protestors “sat in” for days, and even up to a month in San Francisco, peacefully demanding equal rights for people with disabilities. It was not until 1990 that President George Bush signed the Americans with Disabilities Act (Lebrecht & Newnham, 2020).

Kimball et al. (2016) conducted a study on students with disabilities. They found these student activists manifested their desire for change in a range of behaviors. They bucketed these actions into three overarching themes. The first of these themes indicate that students learn advocacy skills from their parents. These skills were learned and practiced early in life through college. The second theme is broken down into three subthemes: (a) doing, role modeling, and teaching self-advocacy as activism; (b) reducing stigma through education and storytelling; and (c) collective action through formal organizations. The third theme that emerged was that students are more than their disability; these students engaged in a variety of activism actions on other topics (Kimball et al., 2016).

### **Women’s Rights**

The Women’s Rights movement started in July 1848 with a gathering of women in Seneca Falls, New York (United States House of Representatives, n.d.). In the wake of the Civil War, women-focused initially on the right to vote. Wyoming was the first state to grant women the right to vote in 1869. Colorado followed in 1893, and in 1896 both Idaho and Utah allowed women to vote. It was not until 1920, however, that the ratification and approval of the 19<sup>th</sup> amendment sealed the right for all women (however, in practice many women of color were excluded) in the United States to vote (United States House of Representatives, n.d.). Between 1848 and 1920 women also fought for basic civil rights, family responsibilities, access to education, and the breakdown of institutional barriers. Today, women continue to band together

to change policies on and off campuses. On a systemic level, activists have stated that university policies, procedures, and practices have left them feeling demoralized, mistreated, and alone (Linder & Myers, 2017). This is particularly relevant in how institutions have failed to prevent and protect women from sexual assaults (Smith & Freyd, 2014).

### **Racial Justice**

In 1868 the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment of the Constitution granted equal protection under the law to Black people, and in 1870, the 15<sup>th</sup> Amendment gave Black people the right to vote (History.com, 2021). Hurdles were constantly being placed in the way for Black people to take advantage of these rights. It was not until 1957 that the Civil Rights Act of 1957 was signed and put into place, allowing for federal prosecution of anyone who attempted to stop someone from voting (History.com, 2021). Protests and marches continued through the 1960s, Martin Luther King Jr. gave his “I Have a Dream” speech, and the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was signed. This act guaranteed equal employment for all, limited the use of voter literacy tests, and ensured public facilities were integrated (History.com, 2021). Equity continues to be a battle for African Americans, as evidenced in the current state of civil unrest.

Came and Griffith (2018) compiled numerous sources defining racism as follows. Racism is a “wicked” problem. “Wicked” problems are complex problems that are highly resistant to solutions and that are characterized by high difficulty and disagreement about the nature and cause of the problem and their potential solutions. Racism also may be considered a fundamental determinant of health because it is a dynamic process that endures and adapts over time, and because it influences multiple mechanisms, policies, practices, and pathways that ultimately affect health. There is a long history of research on racism, colonization, and white supremacy across the globe describing the scope and depth of the problem. Racism, as a legacy of

colonization and slavery, has had profound intergenerational effects on health, social and economic outcomes (Came & Griffith, 2018, p. 182). Throughout history, African Americans have protested and asked for equal rights. Currently, activists are protesting against police brutality toward Black Americans and institutional racism. Institutional racism, according to Hayles (2015), is a public policy or practice designed for all but one that ends up discriminating against members of a specific racial group.

On college campuses, there has been an uptick in activism for racial diversity (Ndemanu, 2017). Students are asking for an increase in minority representation in faculty, cultural sensitivity training, increase in enrollment of students of color, racial/social justice course in the core curriculum, and test-blind or test-optional policy (Ndemanu, 2017). Students have organized peaceful sit-ins, walk-outs, campus rallies, and petitioning. Some university leaders have been forced to leave, and students have successfully demanded the removal of names of historical figures tied to slavery and racism on college campuses (Ndemanu, 2017).

### **Social Activism**

Massive student action was devoted to the Civil Rights Movement, protest against the Vietnam War, for student representation, and general social revolution protests of 1968, or what is known in the United States as the “Year of the Student” (Boren, 2001). Much has been studied about these student movements, particularly on the issues and activist strategies during this unbridled period in history.

In 2020, many institutions limited or eliminated seated courses from their campuses (Whitford, 2020). This impacted all activities on college campuses, including in-person activism. However, research has provided evidence that information technology can be used for social activism (Castells, 2012). Over the last decade, social media has been used to share information,

express concerns, feelings, and sometimes create organized resistance by organizing people into action (Bennett & Segerberg, 2011; Ottaway & Hamzawy, 2011). Online activism can organize collective actions but can also evoke internet filtering and surveillance, which can lead to the ultimate decline of activism over time (Ghobadi & Clegg, 2015). Throughout 2020, with fewer classes in-person, and more interaction online, the question remains if student activists will continue to move from in-person to online engagement. The current study encompasses students who lived in and around Ground Zero of the peaceful protests and rioting during the summer of 2020. The impact of the driving force for racial justice could lead these students towards being part of the movement and making a better world.

### **Summary**

The transition from high school to college can be a time of anxiety. The purpose of the current study is to investigate the thoughts and feelings of 2020 high school seniors from a large, suburban high school transitioning into a large urban university in the Midwest during a time of a pandemic (COVID-19) and civil unrest due to the death of an African American at the hands of a White police officer. This literary review provided evidence that transition with disruption and transition during a loss can amplify these feelings of anxiety. Limited research has been conducted on the graduating class of 2020 transitioning into college. I hope to find themes that apply to this unique group of people using Schlossberg's Transition Theory. This research can be used by guidance counselors, student affairs personnel, and anyone who works closely with young adults in transition.

### **Chapter 3: Methodology**

The purpose of this chapter is to introduce the research methodology for this qualitative constructivist case study. Through the framework of Schlossberg's Transition Theory, as the researcher, I will demonstrate how the high school graduating class of 2020 navigated this time of uncertainty and disruption. This transition pivoted in expectation during a time of a pandemic and civil unrest. These unexpected events changed the velocity and anticipation of the transition into college.

A qualitative research design asks the question of "why" or "how" (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). It looks at a situation through a lens that takes into consideration the various parts, as well as the situation as a whole. Qualitative research embraces the understanding of the circumstance, situation, context, and environment. This type of research allows for a deep investigation into the social and individual realm of the research participants. A qualitative approach was most appropriate for this study because it encourages a better understanding of the lived experiences of the participants and their understandings of how they navigated the transition into college during this historical time. As a qualitative researcher, I was interested in how people interpret their situation or experience, how they interpret or construct their vocabulary, and the meaning they attribute to their experience (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I applied the guidelines for a qualitative case study and incorporated the use of semi-structured interviews to collect data. The qualitative research design lends itself to the collection of rich descriptive data, specific recollection of activities, and participant perceptions during the interviews. The participant interviews and the researcher reflections and narratives allowed for a meaningful understanding of each participant's story. Each participant had the opportunity to share memories of the personal connections that impacted their transition into college.

This study is a snapshot of a specific timeframe during two historical events (a pandemic and the fight for racial justice), investigating the experience of one group of 2020 high school seniors transitioning into a large urban Midwest university. The bounded system allowed for rich and in-depth descriptions using emic language. This case study allowed for a holistic and real-world perspective on how these students experienced their transitions (Yin, 2018). I chose a case study design to provide a boundary that permitted thoughtful reflection focused specifically on the social, emotional, and cultural impact of transitioning into college during a pandemic and civil unrest. I found that the participants had multiple socially constructed realities during this time in history and their lives.

The case study approach enabled the participants to explore their individual experiences while utilizing triangulation to compare the findings with other populations during this time. The phenomenon under investigation was 2020 high school graduates transitioning into college during a pandemic and civil unrest. Case study researchers collect detailed information using a variety of data collection procedures over a specified period of time. For this study, I collected data through in-depth interviews and additionally reviewed documents provided to me by the university, as well as online resources. Specifically, I conducted and recorded the interviews, transcribed them into word documents, reviewed the documents, and data coded them for emergent themes. Another component of case studies is the unit of analysis, defined as the area of focus of the study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The unit of analysis for this study was determined by the number of participants who could be interviewed (students graduating from Wayzata High School transitioning into The University of Minnesota during the summer of 2020).

The case study design is flexible, allowing for the expansion of ideas and themes that

may arise. Flyvbjerg (2006) warned researchers to be mindful of the five greatest misunderstandings of case study research: (a) theoretical knowledge is more valuable than practical knowledge; (b) one cannot generalize from a single case; therefore, the single-case study cannot contribute to scientific development; (c) the case study is most useful for generating hypotheses, whereas other methods are more suitable for hypotheses testing and theory building; (d) the case study contains a bias toward verification; and (e) it is often difficult to summarize specific case studies. Yin (2018) stated the three components of a case study are “how” or “why” questions, a contemporary set of events, and the researcher has little or no control over the event. From these scholars’ sentiments, this research was suited for a case study.

The constructivist paradigm pursues the research with an open range and variation of findings, diving into the crux of the topic (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). This real-world situation of a pandemic and civil unrest, still occurring at the time of this writing, falls into the category of which constructivist research occurs, permitting for flexibility and creativity. The case study design, with a small group of participants, allowed for a rich analysis utilizing emic language. This design is flexible and involves a naturalistic and interpretive approach.

As COVID-19 and protests for racial justice continued to have an impact on the transition into college, a qualitative constructivist case study allowed for modifications when necessary. The exploration of new events and situations occurred during this study, as the uncertainty of daily living continued, and the trial for one of the police officers involved in George Floyd’s death occurred in March 2021, in Minneapolis. The perception of each participants’ circumstance was paramount in this study, as multiple realities were revealed.

As the researcher, I desired to understand the meaning of transitioning into college during this time. The constructivist, case study design allowed for deep analysis of a bounded system

(2020 high school graduates from a large suburban high school transitioning into a large Midwest university during a pandemic and civil unrest). I acknowledged my own biases and experiences during this time and did my best to keep my bias at bay. Utilizing emic language, my goal was to allow the insider (participant) voice to be heard. This valuable research is a snapshot of an experience during a time in history that is currently taking place. The research design, research question, the study participants, analysis method, and ethical concerns were the primary components of this chapter.

### **Research Question**

To discover and explore how the graduating high school class of 2020 perceived their experience, focusing on the social, emotional, and cultural impression transitioning into college during a pandemic and civil unrest, the following question was designed to guide the research.

1. How do college freshmen of the graduating high school class of 2020 view their experience transitioning into a four-year university?

### **Participants and Setting**

#### ***Participants***

The participants for this study are 2020 graduates from a large suburban high school who are attending a large urban Midwest university as full-time students. This group of students was a unique case, transitioning into college during a pandemic and civil unrest. The total number of participants for this study was nine. The participants identified as male and female, approximately 18 years of age, and ethnicity was not specified. I chose to eliminate the question of ethnicity because I was interested in the identity of a graduate transitioning into college during these unprecedented times, rather than the focus on ethnicity. These participants were chosen using snowball sampling, to ensure the participants were from the high school graduating class



of 2020 and attending the university of interest. The large suburban high school is vastly white in population. Approximately 70% of students identify as White, 16% identify as Asian, and 6% identify as African American (Wayzata Schools, n.d.).

### ***Setting***

The large suburban high school from which the participants graduated is within an expanding district. The students came from cities and towns that are located within the district. The district boundaries include eight municipalities (Wayzata High School, 2020). The high school that these participants attended is located ten miles west of Minneapolis, Minnesota. Eighty-one percent of students graduating from this school planned to attend a four-year college. Nine percent planned to attend a two-year college, and 2% had other education plans. Ninety-six percent of the students completed the ACT, and 12% completed the SAT.

The University of Minnesota is a large Midwest university in an urban institution, located in Minneapolis, Minnesota. The undergraduate student enrollment is approximately 32,000 students, and the freshmen enrollment for Fall 2020 was 5,238 students (University of Minnesota, n.d.). Fall 2019 (Fall 2020 not available) data displayed 68% percent of students identified as white or unknown, 25% identified as a student of color, and 7% identified as international. Students attending this university have an average SAT score of 1330-1420 or an average ACT score of 26-32. (University of Minnesota, n.d.).

### ***Participant Profile***

The participants for this case study were recruited through snowball sampling. I identified the names of two students who attended the large suburban high school and continued to the University of Minnesota in Fall 2020. From there I asked the subjects for names of other students who graduated from their school and are currently attending the University of

Minnesota. I gathered the names and emails of fifteen students, however, only ten responded to my request.

Nine participants, four who identify as female and five who identify as male, were interviewed for approximately one hour, utilizing semi-structured interview questions, allowing for individual stories and elaboration. The participants were selected through snowball sampling via an email that was distributed explaining the study. Two students responded and provided the names of other students who were willing to participate in the study. Fifteen students were contacted and nine completed the interviews as well as continued communication throughout the study. All of the participants graduated from Wayzata High School and attend the University of Minnesota (U of M). The following are descriptions from each of the participants, based on the interview questions and conversation. Pseudonyms have been used to protect the identity of the participants.

Anna is a female student who was very involved in activities throughout high school. She participated in lacrosse, alpine, yearbook, student council, honor society, clubs, volunteering, and worked at a local restaurant. She was and continues to be a high achiever, becoming a member of the rowing team at the University of Minnesota, while maintaining a full class schedule. Much of Anna's time is spent with her boyfriend, who is on the swim team at the U of M, and her teammates. She has a twin sister who attends a local university and two younger siblings. Anna moved into the residence halls (dorms) with a roommate she met on social media. The roommate decided to move home after three weeks, then Anna found a different roommate and moved into a new dorm. This proved to be beneficial from a connection standpoint, even though it was a difficult time when her roommate decided to move home. Anna chose to live in the residence halls for the spring semester.

Rob is a male student who was involved in lacrosse throughout his high school years. He was not very social with his classmates. He attended Post-Secondary Education Opportunity (PSEO) courses along with his high school courses, his junior and senior years. Rob is not involved in extra-curricular activities at the U of M, however, he has a full course load with difficult classes. Rob has two siblings, one at a local university and one still in high school. He moved into the residence halls for his first semester, with a roommate he knew from high school. Rob suffered from substance abuse and decided it was best for him to move home for the spring semester. However, he plans to move to an apartment near the university in the fall.

Bell is a female student who was very active throughout high school. She was on the soccer team, track team, participated in many clubs, including clubs that focused on volunteering and helping others. Bell coached youth soccer and assisted with Sunday School classes. She continues to stay active by running a half marathon and paying attention to her nutrition. Bell joined a sorority as a way to connect with other students at the U of M, as she assumed meeting other students would be exceptionally difficult during COVID-19. She has one younger brother, who is in middle school. Bell decided to move into the dorm even though she knew it would not be the experience she hoped for. Though glad to have the opportunity, she moved out of the residence halls and into an apartment for the spring semester. She stated that it would be less expensive and there would not be as many rules.

Bo is a male student who was the vice president of the student council, participated in activities and clubs, band, and took many honors courses, as well as being inducted into the National Honor Society. Bo has one older brother who is in college and one younger brother who is in high school. Though not participating in extra-curricular activities at the time, he has a full course load. Bo was friends with the person he planned to room with at the U of M, and

together they decided it would be a better financial decision to stay at their own homes for the first semester. This decision was made after the school pushed back the move-in date by two weeks. Bo and his roommate moved back into the residence halls for the spring semester, however, plan to move into an apartment in the fall.

Steve is a male student who was involved with Youth in Government and was hopeful to go to Nationals when COVID-19 started. He volunteered during high school and worked for the elementary-aged summer program through the school. Steve continues to pursue his interest in politics as a Student Senator at the U of M. He has one younger sister who is in high school. Steve did not plan on moving into the residence halls, even before the pandemic. By living at home, he can save a lot of money and he lives close enough to the university that can drive there any time. Though he lives close to the U of M, the first time Steve stepped on campus was the Saturday before the interview (March, 2021).

Pam is a female student who took a lot of AP (advanced placement) courses in high school. She was part of the alpine ski team which ended right before the pandemic. Pam was well into the senior slide by March of 2020, so she did not feel as much of an impact as she would have if the school had closed during ski season. She did work at a local store and remembers being at work when Governor Walz declared the stay-at-home orders. Pam has four younger siblings at home. When COVID-19 started to spread and the economy shut down, Pam's dad lost his business. Her dream school was no longer an option, devastating her, but deciding that the U of M was still a great school. Realizing that meeting other students during the lock-down was going to be difficult, she decided to join a sorority- something she said she would never do. Pam talked about this being a great choice as she was able to find other students with similar interests. She scrambled to find a dorm roommate, but was successful and continued to live in the dorm

for the spring semester. Next year, Pam plans to move into the sorority house so she will no longer be living with her roommate.

Jason is a male student who played football and baseball. He participated in clubs and also took some AP courses. The baseball season was canceled, so he joined a summer league, which was, in his words, better than nothing. Jason also worked, mowing lawns, to make money for college. He has an older brother in college and a younger brother in middle school. Originally, he planned to have a random roommate for the dorm, but when the U of M pushed back the move-in date by two weeks, his roommate decided to stay home and attend a community college. At this time, Jason asked a teammate from his high school football team to room together. It has worked out well. Next year, Jason will be living in the fraternity house.

Steff is a female student who was involved in dance team, DECA, National Honor Society and participated in clubs throughout high school. She had just completed her senior year of dance when COVID-19 started to spread. However, she had advanced in DECA and it was canceled. Steff has one older sister who is in college. Steff joined a sorority at the U of M and continues to work part-time. She lived in the residence halls with a roommate she met on social media. For the spring semester, Steff and her roommate moved to an apartment. She went home to see her boyfriend and work throughout the spring semester. Next year, she plans to move into a sorority house.

Alex is a male student who made a conscious effort to not have difficult courses at the end of his senior year. He was taking AP statistics, had a free hour, one gym class, and one class where he was a student assistant. At the U of M, he started with 17 credits but ended up dropping one course because it was difficult to maintain with all classes online. He stated that one of his college courses was more work than all of his second semester courses as a high school senior.

Alex has two younger siblings who live at home. Alex moved into the residence halls for the first semester. He had planned on living with a friend, but his friend decided to live at home because everything was online. Alex found another roommate for the semester, but they both decided to live at home for the second semester. With the restrictions still in place and courses online, it made sense to him to save the money.

### **Research Design**

This constructivist case study provides a lens into students from a large suburban high school transitioning into a large urban university in the Midwest. By utilizing the qualitative research design, I was able to illuminate and understand in depth the richness in the lives of young adults (Jones et al., 2014). Qualitative research also gives a new understanding of liberating practices. The semi-structured interviews allowed for emic language and gave the participants the opportunity to expand, with their language, on the experience and feelings they had during this transition. The constructivist viewpoint permitted for real world and holistic perspectives (Yin, 2018). Providing the opportunity for the participants to expand on their own feelings and experiences was paramount to this research. Triangulation and member checking were prevalent throughout the study, to safeguard against misunderstanding or researcher interpretation. Triangulation also provided corroborative evidence of the data obtained (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). Thorough transcription and coding aided in trustworthiness.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

#### ***Data Collection***

This study provided a platform for the students to share this experience in their voice. The information will help student affairs personnel, guidance counselors, faculty, and college administration navigate the needs of this unique group of students. Through semi-structured

interviews, documentation, websites, and communication to students, I collected and analyzed the data.

I conducted semi-structured interviews with the participants (see appendix A). This allowed for continued conversation and the addition of information participants wanted to share. I structured the interview questions to elicit rich emic language in an effort to capture nuanced perceptions, attitudes, and emotions of the participants (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). The interviews were utilized as a point of discovery versus a point of confirmation.

Participants shared their personal experiences from this unique time in history. The ability of the researcher to ask good questions guided by the critical questions of the study provided appropriate data received, different types of questions yielded different types of information. An interview guide allowed me to conduct semi-structured interviews easily and provided the freedom to ask probing questions as needed. The ability to ask probing questions allowed for in-depth descriptive answers and left opportunities for the expansion of ideas and clarification of the responses. To ask probing questions effectively, I needed a clear understanding of the purpose of the study and stayed aligned to the critical questions. Reflexivity and understanding researcher bias minimized conflict and provided me with untainted information. I maintained a professional relationship during the interviews and refrained from adding personal comments to the questions, taking a stance that was nonjudgmental, sensitive, and respectful (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I believe I achieved this goal.

### ***Data Analysis***

Coding of transcripts was completed throughout the interview process. Coding aided in the understanding of the different perspectives and experiences of the participants as well as assisted in the analysis of their combined experiences. This allowed for the development of

themes and categories that emerged from this case study (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). I conducted line-by-line coding on each interview transcription to identify the initial open codes within the data. The open codes were analyzed to create axial codes, emergent themes identified from open coding, and ultimately created categories and subcategories from the collected data. Axial coding refers to issues or themes identified from coding, which require significant additional investigation to answer newly identified questions for future research (Berg, 2007). I identified categories and subcategories to provide data needed to determine the impact of the pandemic and civil unrest during their transition into college. The analysis was conducted utilizing both deductive and inductive coding with the assistance of NVivo software. The initial coding helped manage the data with flexibility and an openness to change, refinement of the coding took place throughout the study. I synthesized the data by using constant comparative method. This continued until a sense of saturation was detected (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

The use of open and axial coding allowed for the emergence of themes from the semi-structured interviews. Once the interviews were complete and transcribed, I scrutinized each line looking for similarities in the participants' statements. I made note of the themes, however kept an open mind that these themes could change as the analysis continued. I utilized NVivo to keep my data organized throughout this process. This organization allowed me to systematically go through a line-by-line textual analysis to determine if they fit into themes that were supported by Schlossberg's Transition Theory. I went through this process multiple times, sometimes changing themes and adding data to the existing themes. I analyzed the open codes to create axial codes, which are emergent themes identified from open coding. These guided the development of categories and subcategories from the data collected. In this phase of the analysis, there was no set process for how to use the code, other than as a guide that something



was plausible and I needed to enact further discovery (Miles et al., 2020).

As the researcher, I identified plausible rival explanations to support the overall findings (Yin, 2018). Through rich, thick descriptions, researcher interpretation, conclusions, and personal reflections, I demonstrate an overall understanding of the case study (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). The information gathered will guide the understanding and knowledge of this specific group of people, in a real-world situation, in hopes of being applied to similar contexts or settings. For the safety of the participants (due to COVID-19), all of the interviews were conducted and recorded using Zoom and were transcribed using Zoom services. I meticulously reviewed each transcript for accuracy. Prior to the interview questions, each participant signed an informed consent form that notified them of their right to end the interview at any time. The consent also gave me permission to record and transcribe the interview. I also verbally went over the consent with the participants to ensure they understood that they could stop at any time, as well as understanding that the interview would be recorded. Once transcribed, I gave each participant the opportunity to review and change their answers to the questions. Member checks occurred allowing interview participants to read interview transcripts for clarification of researcher interpretations. The member checking process increases the accuracy and construct validity of the study (Yin, 2002). I was in contact with the participants by email to ensure my understanding of statements accurately represents their intent. Follow-up interviews also occurred if the participant or I felt the need for more clarification. Researcher analytical memos were added to the transcribed transcriptions and emergent themes in the transcriptions as they were identified. Triangulation was utilized throughout the analysis. Triangulation is the use of multiple data sources in an investigation to provide an understanding of the research question (Creswell, 2003; Denzin, 1978; Yin, 2002).

Triangulation plays an important part in research in that data triangulation can support and validate findings (Denzin, 1978). Denzin (1978) identified four basic types of triangulation that can occur in a study: (a) Data triangulation, which involves time, space, and persons; (b) Investigator triangulation, which involves multiple researchers; (c) Theory triangulation, which involves using more than one theoretical scheme in the interpretation of the phenomenon; and (d) Methodological triangulation, which involves using more than one method to gather data, such as interviews, observations, questionnaires, and documents.

For this study, I utilized methodological triangulation, as Yin (2002) posited that case studies should include multiple sources of data. This case study included individual interviews, online websites, news stories, and information provided by the university. Using these four different sources of data allowed for triangulation of the data to provide a more complete summary analysis (Yin, 2002).

Documentation from the University of Minnesota website, including the Office of Orientation and Transition Experiences (OTE), the 2020 academic profile, and the Safe Campus 2020, COVID-19 updates page were utilized for cross referencing. Wayzata high school provided emails, personal mailings that were sent to parents and students, and information on their counseling website. Along with this information, articles from the Department of Education, Inside Higher Ed, a local news station, and podcasts were used for cross-referencing as a means to gain insights into the experience of 2020 high school seniors transitioning into college (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). This data was collected by reviewing the Wayzata High School and The University of Minnesota's website. I also searched online for articles and podcasts that pertained to this group of students transitioning into college. Triangulation of the data collected from multiple sources allowed for a deeper understanding of the phenomenon. The

information gathered from the university, OTE, articles, and podcasts was extant documentation, as no direct contact occurred with the users of the platforms (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). This documentation provided real-time insights and language used by students who were undergoing the same transition experience. Images and text content were obtained from these sources to corroborate information obtained from the interviews. Thematic analysis provided understanding and knowledge that is practical and descriptive (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). Once the interviews were conducted, the constant interplay between the participants' experience and multiple sources was conducted in an attempt to seek a deep understanding. I continuously rotated from articles, websites, and podcasts, to the interviews, searching for commonalities and differences. Qualitative data analysis gives meaning to first impressions and final compilations, constantly pivoting between different platforms of data collected during the study. Categorical aggregation, direct interpretation, correspondence and patterns, and naturalistic observations were procedures conducted for data analysis (Stake, 1995). This data is an analysis that tells the story of 2020 high school graduates transitioning into college during a pandemic and civil unrest.

The goal of the current study was to use the participants' language. It was important to me that I had recorded it correctly. To safeguard confidentiality, I used pseudonyms and descriptive language.

### **Trustworthiness and Treatment of Data**

Credibility, dependability, and confirmability were the underlying principles throughout this research to safeguard trustworthiness (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). Evidence to support credibility is revealed by accurately representing the participants' portrayal of themselves. I documented the process of my research to ensure that it was logical and traceable. Each interview was transcribed in its entirety and coded to help ensure understanding of the interview

and the participants' intent. Strategies that were utilized for promoting validity and reliability were taken from Merriam and Tisdell (2016). They included member checking, triangulation, reflexivity (the researcher's position), peer review (through my advisor and committee), an audit trail, and rich descriptions.

Lastly, I developed descriptive context-relevant findings to illuminate the unique circumstances these participants experienced. The research strategies included prolonged engagement with the participants, triangulation, member checks, peer examination, thick description, and rich emic language. Member-checking and triangulation of data were used to ensure trustworthiness throughout this study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I utilized constant comparative analysis and wrote notes during and immediately after each interview. This was done in an effort to minimize bias throughout the design, implementation, and analysis of the study (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). I continuously checked back and forth between my data and my notes to confirm that my thoughts were in line with my data (Saldaña, 2016). Utilizing multiple sources of data, I was able to yield a fuller picture of the phenomenon as well as challenge my understanding and expectations of the findings (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). This process continued until saturation was demonstrated.

### **Human Subject Approval – IRB**

I went through the mandated channels for IRB approval. St. Cloud State IRB committee approved the study. The following information is what I submitted to the IRB committee: The purpose of this case study is to investigate the thoughts and feelings of 2020 high school seniors from a large, suburban high school transitioning into a large urban university, during a time of a pandemic and civil unrest. Semi-structured interviews will be used to collect data from current freshmen who are attending a Midwest four-year university and were part of the high school

graduating class of 2020. This case study will provide a lens into the world of young adults and aid in the understanding of transition during a time of a worldwide pandemic and civil unrest. The study will highlight what uncertainty and disruption felt like as they transitioned into the new phase of life. Student affairs offices will benefit from this study as they will hear the voice of the students and understand the importance of how these students identify as the graduating class of 2020. My hope is that this information will be used to guide and navigate students transitioning into college when life is disrupted. This unprecedented time for students has not been fully studied as it has only just emerged. As I write this proposal, the start of the spring semester is still in flux. Plans have been made to move forward with move-in dates and classes with the caveat that safety measures will be in place; there is also a message of hope and perseverance (Ohsterholm, personal communication, January 21, 2021). Leaders in higher education are trying to plan for an uncertain future, and as such, students are attempting to transition, knowing that everything could change with little to no notice. There is no blueprint for students to know how to proceed through these volatile times.

An email was sent to participants. This can be found in Appendix B. The participants also received a consent to participate letter as shown in Appendix C. Potential risks for participants while participating in this study are that participants could feel uncomfortable with some of the questions asked. They were reminded that they could stop the interview at any time. I did not anticipate the interviews to be anxiety-provoking. However, I provided contact information for the counseling center at the University of Minnesota. See Appendix D. To ensure the information is kept anonymous and confidential, I used pseudonyms. My computer was password protected. The safety and confidentiality of the identity of the participants was a top priority as I set up and completed the study.

## **Summary**

This chapter outlined the research plan, participants, data collection, and analysis. The case study method, using semi-structured interviews, allowed for thick description and rich data, through the lens of the participants. The 2020 high school graduates deserve a voice, as their transition into college is historical. This study provides a platform for the students to share their experiences in their voices. The information will help student affairs personnel, guidance counselors, faculty, and college administration navigate the needs of this unique group of students. Through rigorous constructivist case study interviews, the voices of these participants will contribute to the body of knowledge around how disruption during times of transition impacts individuals and groups.

## Chapter 4: Findings

Chapter 4 discusses the findings of the study, including the process of coding and discovering themes and how the themes correlate with Schlossberg's Transition Theory. This case study was designed to provide a descriptive narrative of the student experience of transitioning into college during a pandemic and civil unrest. The research question was: How do college freshmen of the graduating high school class of 2020 view their experience transitioning into a four-year university? The participants were asked to share their stories in the hopes of gathering data that would illuminate the social, emotional, and cultural impact these unprecedented times had on their transition into a four-year university.

As themes began to emerge, the information was easily organized into categories. These themes and their emerging categories and codes were completed regardless of when the responses occurred during the interviews. Many of the answers overlapped with multiple questions, requiring additional thought into which theme or subcategory to display them. After this process, themes, categories, and codes were tied back to the research question and Schlossberg's Transition Theory. This is significant for the reader to note as responses that were a result of an interview question may coincide with more than one theme.

### **Schlossberg's Transition Theory**

The following pages summarize the finding from this case study. The first themes align seamlessly with Schlossberg's Transition Theory, including support, self, situation, and strategy. I also report on the transition process of moving in, moving through, and moving out. Following these themes, I share the results of motivation, camouflaged feelings, and civil unrest.

### ***Support***

Support refers to a person's support system and how it impacts the transition process.

This perception of support includes if a person feels loved, respected, and heard (Schlossberg, 2008). Support from family and friends emerged as vital components to the transition. Some of the participants relied more heavily on friends and teammates than did others; however, having some type of support was evident. When these high school seniors realized that they would not be completing their final high school year the way they had envisioned, finding support through friends was the most evident. Discovering ways to see one another, either by keeping six feet apart in a home, by meeting in separate cars in a parking lot (what they called car-circles), and finding a park where they could all talk but keep their distance were the most prominent solutions. Differing views on the development of the pandemic and the ways to be safe had a negative impact on some of the friend groups. As Steff, Jason, Anna, and Bo explained, it was difficult to be together if some people bent rules when others did not; a separation often developed in these groups. For some of the participants this moral dilemma was frustrating. Steff stated, “We should be getting even closer before we go away to college.”

Support was apparent and well-received by all of the interviewees. As the participants moved through the phases of moving in, moving through, and moving out, where they searched for support changed, but it was common for all of the participants to continuously rely on family for support. For example, Alex stated, “None of them [upper classmen friends] transitioned with COVID-19, so there wasn't really a precedent for how to treat the transition. Mainly I focused on asking my parents.” Bell talked about how much her family supported her and elevated her confidence by letting her know how well she was handling the transition: “I did have a really good support system. My family was very supportive and understanding and they thought I was handling it much better than they thought I would.” Bell, Steff, and Anna talked in length about support from parents and siblings, relying on them on and off through the transition, even using



terms like, 'my rock,' and 'helping with anxiety'. There was a realization that their family unit relied on one another, supporting each other. Support between friends and families was also apparent. Bo talked about how his friend's mom made them shirts that said 'Quarantine Graduates'.

Schlossberg (2008) stressed that the characteristics of support before and after the transition would impact the overall success of the individual. At the beginning of the pandemic, the participants leaned on their teachers for answers. Eventually, the participants realized that the teachers did not know how to advise them through this unique situation. Pam even had a teacher ask her for help: "My philosophy teacher asked me to do a Zoom meeting with her to help figure it out. She said, 'We have got to figure this out because we're going to be using it for the next long while'." Pam appreciated that she was asked, and it gave her a sense of community as they worked through these tough times together. Though teachers and faculty did not always know how to advise the students during this time, their acknowledgement of the difficult situation gave students the feeling that they mattered. Steff shared that one of her teachers noticed the students were craving relationships and connection. She stated, "My teacher said that she recognized how much we were missing making connections." Pam discussed that her teachers recognized what the students were losing during the pandemic and referred to them as COVID seniors, showing more empathy and understanding. Steve said his teachers and professors appeared to understand the mental health impact on the students during quarantine. He stated, "The teachers and professors talked to us about mental health and isolation."

Friendship was interesting for this group of students. Throughout the transition, each participant relied on friends for support even as their friendship groups shifted and changed throughout the pandemic. Some families did not allow their children to socialize in person as

they adhered to CDC guidelines, while other families were more lenient with the regulations.

This dilemma between following guidelines or meeting up with friends, in person, put a strain on some friendships. One example that Steff shared was:

I did have a couple friends that could not see anyone. I was really close with one girl before the pandemic happened, and then she was not allowed to see anyone whatsoever, so I got close to another girl. Which is just crazy because me and my friends have talked about how if the pandemic wouldn't have happened, our lives would be so different. We have reached out to my one friend who couldn't see anyone, but I can tell she's a little bit anxious about going back into the world. Not only that, but she hasn't done anything for a year and over the summer I never saw her. So, I think she's just anxious about getting invited to things. Of course, we will include her, but like I can definitely see that it has caused problems.

Alex agreed and said, "Last summer, there was a big group of us are planning to go to someone's cabin and his parents wouldn't let him because of COVID." Bo said:

It was weird relating to my friends at that time because just meeting up and having socially distance walks or picnics where we were talking about college and everything was moving so fast and it all was changing so rapidly. That it didn't really feel like anything was really set in stone at that point.

It is clear that friends were a critical component for support, and if there was a disruption in the group, it did not mean that they were no longer friends. The friends the students relied on for support was significant. Anna said, "I have been very smart about who I hang out with. There are always tough conversations like, 'Okay, where have you been? I need to know this, otherwise we can't really hang out.'" All of the participants had respect for the comfort levels of others.

Once the participants moved from high school to college, there was a natural shift in friend groups, but there was also an apparent hesitation to move away from high school friends.

This reluctance could have been due to a fear of not meeting other students. Rob stated:

I think COVID had a big impact on the amount of people I could meet because I was really secluded on my floor. I mean on my floor I was literally the only room on my side of the hallway and like five or six other rooms on the floor.

Bell, Steff, and Pam joined sororities, which alleviated some of the hurdles in meeting other students. Beth stated:

I did join a sorority in the summer leading up and I kind of picked one where I knew a lot of my friends weren't going to be. It is really nice because it is a little bit of an escape because there is a lot of ways other people chose to go to The U. But I still was able to keep the connections with my [high school] friends. It has been really nice to have that balance and it has been nice to have my comfort people, because a lot of my friends went to The U. It has been nice to have that comfort when it has been harder to meet people.

Support systems were an important aspect of the transition into college during this time. Feeling heard, loved, and respected by parents, friends, new connections, and faculty influenced their experience (Schlossberg, 2008). Of the nine participants, seven talked about family support, eight mentioned faculty or school support, and all students talked about the importance of friends and connections.

In the Tell Us About Yourself survey conducted by the Orientation & Transition Experiences office at the University of Minnesota, 26.4% of incoming students were concerned about making friends and meeting people (University of Minnesota, 2020b). In the current study, making friends and meeting people in college was a concern as well. Rob stated that the main

reason he wanted to live in the dorm was to meet people. Jason, Steff, Pam, and Bell all joined Greek Life. Other participants, such as Bell and Steff were comforted by having friends from high school attending the same university.

Cross-referencing the data gained from the current study with the Student Experience in the Research University (SERU) Consortium survey of 2020 (found in chapter 2), on the impact of COVID-19 on college students, there were similarities in the findings. Though the current study did not specifically ask about mental health, one participant shared that she had been through counseling and another shared that he struggled with substance abuse. Based on the statements made during the interviews, the students felt supported by the university, friends, and family.

### *Self*

The psychological and personal characteristics of an individual have an impact on the transition process, in what Schlossberg refers to as Self. Hardiness, self-efficacy, resilience, values, and optimism are beneficial to a successful transition (Bauman, 2009). During the end of their senior year in high school, the participants did not necessarily focus on how they would be successful in the transition. All of the participants believed that once in college, life would return to normal, or at least there would be in-person classes, activities outside of the classroom, and a typical dorm life (though one participant, Steve, did not plan to move into a residency halls).

Despite believing things would normalize once they arrived at college, the participants in this case study were particularly self-aware. They understood the need to be proactive to have a successful transition into college during the pandemic and civil unrest. Pam talked about figuring herself out. She stated:

It took me a long time to figure out. I have depression and anxiety and it was a million

times worse during COVID. I use the power of the outdoors to help. I would go for walks between classes.

Rob enjoyed working-out and skateboarding. Bell and Jason ran a lot. Jason also mentioned doing abdominal workouts in his dorm room. Bell was proud of completing a half marathon and continues to run, recognizing the benefits not only for her body but her mental state as well. She talked a lot about her accomplishment, noting, “I look forward to running a full marathon someday. I recognized the importance of keeping my mind and body healthy.” The participants discussed being outside and exercise as important ways to adapt, but also recognized connection and self-care. Steff found it important to socialize. Greek life allowed her the opportunity to stay connected to other people and meet students with common aspirations. She also tried to utilize the treadmill every day. Alex played video games that allowed him to connect to friends virtually and he played basketball when he had time. He recognized the social aspect of the video games and embraced the connection he could make safely without worrying about social distancing. He stated, “I can connect with my friends while playing video games. This helps me relax but also lets me spend time with my friends in a safe way.” Anna was fortunate to be on the rowing team where there was a natural environment of socialization, connection, and exercise. She spoke about the importance of team mentality and making decisions based on the benefit of everyone on her crew [team]. “If one of us gets COVID-19, we will all lose, so we need to think of each other every time we see someone else.” Anna said while talking about her team.

This self-understanding included focusing on school-work even during difficult times, leaving the dorm room to exercise or clear their head, staying close to home for support and going home when needed, and leaving the residency halls to move back home when the

environment was unhealthy. When asked how they became so self-aware, Jason and Anna said years of sports. Jason discussed how his coaches were inspiring and having ‘two-a-days’ taught him the importance of teamwork and perseverance, “when we have to get up before school and save enough energy for after school practice, you think about the other people on the team as well.” Pam said counseling played an important role in becoming self-aware. She realized the importance of paying attention to her mind and her body. Pam said, “When I first started going to counseling for anxiety, my counselor helped me recognize how my mind and body work together.” Bell, Steve, and Bo said they gained self-awareness through their parents. Bell talked about her mom, saying, “My mom is my rock. She has taught me about taking care of myself.” Rob said the internal motivation to succeed is how he became self-aware.

As stated in the literature review, self-efficacy can help determine how much effort students will devote to an activity, how long they will persist when faced with obstacles, and how resilient they will be in adverse situations (Pajares, 2003). All of these participants appeared to have high self-efficacy. Regardless of the obstacles they faced during this transition, failing was not an option. They had a mindset of completing college, even if the experience was not how they had envisioned. Bell made the statement:

It was hard as I got closer to college realizing there is not really anything looking up COVID wise. I think it was hard for me because I had hope that college would be totally normal. So, it was definitely very challenging to put it in my head like nope, this is probably not going to be the experience that you hoped for. I think it did make me really sad, but I definitely tried to make it fun like trying to plan my dorm. I tried to make those things extra special to make up for the fact that it might not be exactly what you hoped for. But I definitely tried to make littler things more exciting for me no matter like what

was going to happen.

Well-being is personal to the individual but also encompasses environmental interactions (Seligman, 2018). Being able to adapt and thrive contributes to resilience and a high level of effectiveness (Hoopes, 2017).

All participants except one mentioned working-out in some form to keep themselves healthy. Students from a survey conducted by Inside Higher Ed and College Pulse criticized universities for shutting down gyms and classrooms along with decreasing physical activity and healthy food options (Ezarik, 2021). Despite noting the difficulty in utilizing the recreation centers, the participants in the current study did find ways to stay active, including walking, running, playing basketball, skateboarding, and even playing on a collegiate team. Finding the initiative to stay healthy was a hurdle held by students throughout the United States, but most students created or implemented their own exercise routines. A survey conducted by Inside Higher Ed and College Pulse reported that two-thirds of students felt they were in general or excellent overall physical health (Ezarik, 2021). The connection between mind and body appears to be an area of understanding that students appreciate.

### ***Situation***

The situation these participants lived through was not expected. During the first school shut down in March 2020, there was excitement for an extra two weeks of spring break. This quickly changed to the realization that they would not be participating in the expected end-of-the-year celebrations. Not all of the participants were upset about not being able to walk across the stage for graduation or going to prom, but they were all saddened by the reality that they would not be able to say goodbye to acquaintances, teachers, or staff. The sudden pivot from in-person instruction to all-virtual left an absence in this milestone of their lives. Anna and Bell

talked about watching the virtual graduation with their families. Steff watched it with extended family as they were on vacation at the time. She explained that it was fun as she could celebrate with her cousin who also graduated. Bo, Pam, and Rob did not watch the graduation, and Steve said he might watch it one day. Alex and Jason did not mention graduation. Anna and Bell said they still celebrated prom by getting together with a small group of friends, but no one else mentioned prom. It appears they switched their thinking and focus to college, rather than virtual high school.

The participants took some control of their situation by choosing where to live. Some moved into the residence halls then moved out at the end of the semester, either back home or to an apartment. Bo made the decision initially to stay home and then moved into the dorm for the spring semester. He quickly realized that moving in half-way through the freshman year was not ideal. His hope of meeting people and having a little bit of the traditional experience was still not going to happen. He talked about being glad he tried the dorm, but because of COVID-19 restrictions and students already in routines, it was not as he had hoped stating, "It was difficult when I realized that people had already met other students. Other people didn't seem to want to meet anyone." Pam stayed in the same dorm with the same roommate for the entire freshman year. She was glad to have the roommate she had and would miss her when she moved to the sorority house in the fall. She said, "It was hard at first, because we didn't know how either of us felt about COVID, but we figured it out and it is going really well." Steve said he never intended to move into the residence halls, so this part of the transition did not impact him, "I always planned to stay home because I can save money and drive to campus from home." Partly why Steff chose The University of Minnesota was to stay close to her friends from high school. Bell moved into an apartment where the rules were less restrictive and she could take control of her



own food, making it better and more nutritional. In the Tell Us About Yourself survey, 87.2% of students planned to live on campus in campus residence halls (University of Minnesota, 2020b). Seventy-eight percent of participants in the current study planned to live on campus; however, only 33% stayed on campus and one participant moved to campus living. Throughout the freshman year, there was a lot of change in the housing arrangements for the students in this case study.

There was a variety of answers as to how well prepared they felt for online courses when college started. The students who felt underprepared for online course instruction said it was mostly due to the “senior slide” and the awareness that they could do less work and still be successful until the end of their high school year. Alex, Pam, and Jason all acknowledged this and realized the lack of effort to finish high school hindered their understanding of online coursework in college. Taking control of course loads in college was another way the participants controlled the situation. Some took fewer credits or dropped a class if it was too difficult to manage the course load online. Alex dropped his chemistry class so he could give more attention to his other courses. He said, “Online learning is a lot more work. I have to figure things out by myself. Maybe I could have done it if it was in person.” He found online chemistry confusing and requiring a lot of his focus. He talked about this being a good decision as he was able to take that extra time and put it towards his other courses, rather than straining and stressing to simply complete the credits.

Schlossberg states that the more control an individual feels they have over a situation, the more likely the result of the transition will be positive (Schlossberg et al., 1995). The participants in this study demonstrated a variety of levels of control; however, they all appeared to take control of what they could. Rob realized that his use of marijuana was hindering his

education and was not healthy for him, so he moved home, where the temptation was not existent. Pam could not attend her dream school, as the family's income was halted due to the pandemic.

She made the statement:

My dad owns his own company and they suffered a lot from [the pandemic] and finances didn't line up and actually a year ago today, he told me that I couldn't go. To this day, I still struggle with that. You know I want to be there, more than anything, and it's no one's fault but I think that's probably the hardest thing for me. Not to say I don't want to be here and that I am not having fun, but I wish I was at the other school.

Pam continued to take control of the situation by adding, "College is college and a degree is a degree and I've come to terms with the fact that I don't want to be in debt." Anna also changed her perception of the situation, by giving it a positive outlook. She stated, "We didn't have a plan to follow but we can be leaders." The ability to take control of their feelings, when they could not change the situation was found throughout the study.

In a report produced by the Center for Community College Student Engagement, the researchers found that 68% of students did not change their plans to attend college part-time or full-time, and 75% of students did not change their plans about their program, major, or pathway, due to the pandemic (Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2021). In other words, most students' decisions on college were not impacted by COVID-19. In comparison to the participants in this study, only two out of nine participants changed their school of choice due to circumstances from the pandemic.

The SERU COVID-19 survey found that about 48% of students who responded had loss or reduction of family income, and approximately 46% faced their own loss in wages (Soria et al., 2020). Only one participant in this study shared the loss of wages; however, it was not a

direct question, so there could have been others as well. Six of the nine participants in this study lost their employment during this time.

### *Strategy*

The participants strategized in a variety of ways. One common strategy seemed to be positive self-talk. Pam, who was not able to attend her dream college, intentionally decided to make the most of her current school by joining a sorority and telling herself that the University of Minnesota is a great school. Bo, in which The U of M was his second choice as well, reminded himself that he was closer to home if he needed anything. He also stated that the U of M was a great university. Overlapping with some of the sentiments noted about situation, these participants realized the importance of changing their attitude or perception when they could not change the circumstances. Jason said it well:

The most important thing for moving into college is just put your head down and work through it. It's not going to be enjoyable at times and its really going to suck. But at the end of the day you're going to feel better. You are going to actually feel accomplished.

Rob and Alex who did not find online coursework beneficial, looked for ways to motivate themselves, reminding themselves that they were paying for college. They realized the importance of trying their best to learn the information despite the platform used. Rob stated:

I am paying for college so that's a big factor. I feel obligated to do my work, not just do my work, but actually learn things. I'm trying to learn as much as I can.

The choice of where to live during this time was the most tangible strategy used by the participants. Rob and Alex moved home for the spring semester, Bell and Steff moved to apartments, Anna and Jason changed their dorm locations, Pam stayed in her original dorm room, Bo moved into the residence halls from home for the spring semester, and Steve chose to

stay home the entire freshman year. Alex realized that dorm life was not as he expected and made the decision that moving home would save him money. Other strategies involved finding ways around rules that the students found restrictive or unnecessary. Because the students felt isolated in their dorm rooms, there were times when people would sneak in or out of the residence halls when the doors were supposed to be locked. Four of the participants, Pam, Jason, Alex, and Rob eventually confessed that either they or people they knew had broken the dorm room rules in an attempt to connect with other students and have an enjoyable freshmen year of college. About breaking rules, Pam said, “Breaking those rules and then being I was very upset with myself for breaking those rules, because you know, morally. I was pretty upset about that, but I needed to meet people.” Jason and Alex both shared that it was easier to find a friend’s house to stay for the night rather than try to get back to their residence halls by curfew.

Strategizing how to move through a transition can give a sense of control with the ability to modify, find meaning, or choose to do nothing during this time (Schlossberg, 2008). By taking control of their situation, the participants in this study were utilizing strategy. An article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* highlighted a student from Appalachian State University as she explained her experience moving into the residence halls. The student ultimately decided to move home after two weeks of living in the dorm because she did not feel safe with other students who were not following COVID-19 restriction protocols (Brown, 2020). Though she missed being on campus, her strategy of moving home gave her control over the situation. Another student from the article shared his experience at Arizona State University. He was not fearful of contracting COVID-19 but wanted to be respectful of others. He spoke about the awkwardness and lack of depth in meeting other students due to COVID-19 protocols (Brown, 2020).

Other strategies used by the participants in the current study included going to a college where they would have high school friends attending or choosing a school close to home. Bell was glad she had the support of her friends from high school as she transitioned into college. She discussed how helpful this was, not only manifesting when needed, but simply the knowledge that she could fall back on them at any time. The participants also appeared to take control of their mind and body well-being, by exercising and understanding the importance of self-care, as noted in Schlossberg's theory. Some participants revealed the moral struggle of breaking rules but also wanting to thrive in college, as indicated by Pam's statement above. Steve and Pam attempted to join clubs, but the clubs were only held online and not activated for participation. As Steve stated, "In the beginning I joined like a club but that was all online, which was not ideal. So, I ended up not doing that anymore." Rob and Alex employed the motivation of money and paying for college as a way to push through these difficult times. Anna employed self-starting and manipulation of her thoughts to push through her procrastination.

I just told myself for the end of spring break I need to get ahead. I need to start now and I am going to have less. I am going to be done earlier than May 7th which is technically when my finals are done.

Using innovative ways to strategize, whether by changing the environment, perception of the circumstances, or attitude benefitted the participants. These strategies aided in the successful transition into college.

### ***Moving In, Moving Through, Moving Out***

As the participants moved through the transition into college, the roles of being at home, moving into residence halls, and taking the next step to independence and adulthood were entangled. The students held on to high school friends and the security of being close to home,

while at the same time, embraced (or in some cases attempted to embrace) the freedom college life offers. The 2020 graduates in the current study took advantage of going home when they needed to regroup, but they embraced the responsibility of coursework. When asked about their expectations for next year, all of the participants were cautiously optimistic that in-person courses would take place.

Six of the students mentioned that next year would be similar to being a freshman again because they need to learn about the physical campus and how to navigate it. Pam put it this way:

I am a bit nervous for finding buildings and stuff because we haven't had to do that. I don't know where anything is. But I am excited to have the connection with teachers, because I have always been pretty connected with my teachers. Like I talk to my teachers. I am also kind of nervous for the workload.

As themes emerged, it was clear that the moving in, moving through, and moving out process (explained in Chapter 2) was intermixed as these students attempted to move into college while holding onto parts of high school for security. Steff made the statement, "I went home when I needed to get a hold of my emotions." She also specified:

My high school friend group lived on the same floor as me like three doors down. It was great. I love my friends, but I also wanted to branch out so that was kind of hard for me. I was trying to. Because it was so hard to meet people, we started hanging out with each other.

Bell shared:

I joined a sorority which did not have people I graduated with, but I was glad my friends from high school were also at The U. It was super helpful in my transition to have my friends from high school at The U too. It made me feel like other people are going

through the same thing. And, I have these people that are kind of like my comforts that I can go to. That really helped.

Rob confided, “I moved home because being in my dorm room and not being able to socialize was not good for me. I turned to using substances.” Alex also moved home, expressing, “For the first semester I lived in the residence halls and then I moved back home the second semester. They made it pretty difficult to actually meet people. The main reason I went back home was all the restrictions.” Bo, on the other hand moved into the residence halls in the middle of the year. He expressed, “It is gonna be difficult to not have a normal college experience but moving in [to the dorm] the middle of winter rather than staying home will help.” Research conducted in Australia also found that this transition was muddled. Students studying from home discussed the disruption from other family members, limited time to use the internet due to other people in the home needing it, or family activities, and lack of quiet places to study (Kyne et al., 2020). Rob also stated:

I feel like people move into the dorm because your kind of committed to live on campus. The main thing was people deciding to move out of the dorm. I was one of those people, and that was definitely a better decision for me. I don't speak on behalf of everybody.

In a moment of humor, Jason shared the importance of being able to call home for advice.

You were kind of leaving that support system going into college. Like you were pretty much thrown out there on your own. You can kind of fend for yourself. I am still able to call home and asked my mom if I need anything, like why is the tide pod melting to my clothes in the dryer.

During the moving through phase, people face a period of liminality, look for new roles, routines, and assumptions, and can be in a cycle of renewal (Schlossberg et al., 1995). The

participants in this study appear to be halted in this phase, with moments in both the moving in and moving out phases.

The high school graduates of 2020 faced their transition into college without a blueprint. Restrictions and lockdowns complicated the move into college. University freshmen navigated a year that was nothing like what they expected when they started applying to colleges (Brown, 2020). These students persevered and initiated habits that supported them through this transition. Through the lens of Schlossberg's Transition Theory, the students in the current study have demonstrated potential to be leaders in times of crisis.

### ***Motivation***

Motivation helps explain what pushes a student towards success. Motivation derives from the Latin verb *movere*, meaning "to move," but researchers have yet to agree on what motivation is, exactly. What most would accept as a definition of motivation is the reason or willingness for why people do something, how long they do it, and how hard they pursue it (*it* being what the person is motivated for) (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011). Motivation is dynamic, it changes with the individual, time, as well as society. Motivation is discussed more fully in Chapter 5.

There were different ways participants in this study motivated themselves to finish high school and complete their first year of college. Eight of the participants were motivated internally through personal expectations or externally through grades; only Alex stated that he was not motivated at all. He stated:

I had no motivation. I would miss a lot of classes. It was so hard to keep motivation with classes. Sometimes when I had a class at 9:00 am, which was really early for me, I would join the classroom and then set alarms every ten minutes and wait for him to do the in-class activity which is for points and I would do the activity and then turn off my alarms



go back to bed. That was when I went to that class. Other times, I would just skip it all together. Due to my lack of motivation that would allow me to skip class and just watch the lecture.

Even without feeling motivated, Alex still completed his classes successfully and intends to go back to the University of Minnesota next year.

Four participants were motivated partially because they were paying for college. For Rob, it was the only motivation. He said:

I am paying for college now. That's a big factor -paying for college, so I feel obligated to do my work. Not just do my work, but actually learn things. I am trying to learn as much as I can. That is literally the only motivation.

Four participants, Anna, Bell, Steve, and Jason were internally motivated. They were in college to do well and learn so they could move on with a career. Steve liked some of the freedom of online school. As he stated:

I am able to kind of do things whenever I want. I can stay up until 2:30 a.m. if I really want to most nights. I am able to just do stuff when I want which helps with motivation. When I feel burned-out I can walk around or go do something else, which really does help with motivation.

And Jason expressed:

Grades motivated me and then also college has the aspect of now you're paying to go to school, so I don't want to waste my money here I am trying to make sure I am not just throwing it away. So, I actually commit to my schoolwork even though at some points it's definitely difficult to just sit down and do discussion post after discussion post.

All of the female participants, Anna, Bell, Pam, and Steff also made mention of being

respectful to the teachers and professors. They were motivated to do well for their professors even if they did not feel like doing the work themselves. Pam said, “I like being around people and I want my professors to like me. Plus, I know they are working hard.” Anna explained her motivation this way:

I was pretty motivated for the front half of the semester. I was like, okay just power through the semester. Maybe next semester will be better. I would just make sure I was working out, so I felt like I was moving my body and trying to eat right.

As mentioned in the literature review, a study conducted by students at the University of Colorado, Boulder, concluded that academic motivation dropped during the pandemic because online courses did not satisfy the connection to campus or foster the positive motivation that a college campus environment typically creates (Nell et al., 2020). The participants in the current study corroborated these findings. Students found ways to search for motivation as the expected energy from campus life did not occur during the 2020-2021 school year. During the interview, Bell shared, “It was harder than actually going out there, because I love being around people and, I get my energy from other people. I get my energy, especially with school like motivation wise being in a classroom setting.”

Having had contact with at least one professor during the pandemic could be the difference between holding on to motivation or quitting/taking a break from college. If a student feels connected to their college, they are more likely to persist (Allen et al., 2006). Allen et al. (2006) found that small positive interactions with an instructor had long-term motivational value through an entire program. Because all students have contact with instructors, it makes this a clear pathway to persistence, even when using an online platform to deliver coursework. Rob, Bo, Alex, Steff, Bell, and Steve all gave specific examples of being in contact with at least one

professor. Contact with at least one professor appeared to have mattered to these students. Allen et al. (2006) noted that the impact of motivation appears more important for incoming freshmen than it is for students who have declared a major and are further along in their program. The students in this study were motivated by feeling like the option to quit was not there. They were willing to continue in hopes of a better year the next year, but also didn't talk about quitting even if there were still COVID-19 restrictions.

### *Camouflaged Feelings*

A common thread that emerged in the interviews was *camouflaged feelings*, or the lack of language and the disinclination to explain their feelings. This phrase is one that I hope exemplifies the participants' hesitation in expressing their feelings as well as the absence of vocabulary to explain what they were experiencing. On one hand, these students had feelings of loss while at the same time they understood that other populations suffered far more. This muddled thought process was true for the impacts of the pandemic as well as the civil unrest. Anna explained it by saying, "Even if you talk to people now I feel like, including myself, they just never really process that that experience didn't happen." Rob discussed not being able to control the situation. He said:

I can't control this. I'll just kind of go through the motions and try to do my best online to see how it goes. It's been going pretty well but at the same time it's not going well. Yeah, I am not learning anything – [just] going through the motions.

Some of the students wanted to be positive and also acknowledged the facets of emotions. Bo explained how it was fun and also sad. He talked about what was taken away from him and wanting to have his freshman year. In the same statement he said how cool it was knowing this [The U] was his campus. Understanding that this experience was not the expected

transition, Bell described it as “different, I think”. She explained that a lot of people think the residence halls are awesome. She met a lot of people and that is what she was hoping for, but at the same time, the experience, “unfortunately wasn’t really like that [what she had envisioned].”

As stated in Chapter 2, Generation Z has unique qualities, including the desire for hands-on experiences where they can apply knowledge to their world as they learn. This generation shows signs of being more internally motivated than their close cohorts of Generation X and Y (Mahmoud et al., 2020). This group of students does not mind learning online and even enjoys some of the aspects of it such as self-pacing and independent learning (Jenkins, 2017; Roseberry-McKibbin, 2017; Seemiller & Grace, 2017; Sparks & Honey, 2014). This does not mean that virtual transitioning is preferred. In fact, this generation values collaborative learning once they have had time to process information. They view their peers and mentors as resources. They also prefer face-to-face conversations over online, such as texting, facetime, or other internet sources (Roseberry-McKibbin, 2017; Jenkins, 2017). This generation has also been supervised, monitored, and involved in structured activities more than any other generation (Haidt & Lukianoff, 2018). In an effort to keep children safe and occupied, these young adults were stripped of the opportunities to experience risks and hazards that previous generations had prior to college. Consequently, Generation Z has lost the ability to tolerate distress and face uncertainty (Haidt & Lukianoff, 2018).

Camouflaged feelings were not an expected theme; but understanding that this is a new situation in which a blueprint and vocabulary do not exist, it is not surprising. This generation grew up with the assumption that the majority of graduates from high school would continue with their education, and institutions have expended massive efforts to make the transition and adjustment into college as seamless as possible (National Center for Educational Statistics,

2020). As this group of students first planned for the transition from high school to college, they relied on the experiences of others to guide them. When COVID-19 happened, and universities changed their platform from in-person to online, face-to-face guidance was no longer available, and students were left without a plan or the language to explain the situation.

As noted, Generation Z has been monitored more closely than any previous generation (Haidt & Lukianoff, 2018). It is the first generation that has been advised to seek professional counsel before relying on their friends for support. Rather than trusting their thoughts or people of their age and cohort, they have been guided every step of the way by adults. A student from Edinburgh discussed how young people will freely reference a therapist or medication, but they will not open up about their own struggles (Kwai & Peltier, 2021). One student studying in France said, “At least the pandemic has given us the right to be sad. We don’t have to show all the time how strong we are” (Kwai & Peltier, 2021, para. 42). At one time during the interview with Steff, she said she was trying to be negative. “Those two weeks were probably the longest two weeks of my life, but in a good way you know what I mean? I don’t know how I feel, I don’t know. I am trying to be negative.”

Still, some students had a difficult time showing emotion because of a sense of guilt from the awareness that others have it worse than they do (Kwai & Peltier, 2021). Bell said:

I felt like I shouldn't be feeling sad because other people are going through a lot worse, you know with the whole pandemic. I have a family that supports me and I had friends that I could still see like social distance and stuff so I just felt like I shouldn't be feeling these emotions because other people are going through hard times and stuff.

The participants vacillated between wanting to be understood but also realizing that they were more fortunate than others. Finding the balance between these feelings appeared to be a

challenge for the participants. The vocabulary to describe the mixture of emotions along with the hesitancy to explain their feelings of loss was unforeseen.

### *Civil Unrest*

Not only did the participants in this study transition during a pandemic, the participants also faced civil unrest throughout the United States, but specifically in the city of Minneapolis. The death of George Floyd, the peaceful protests, and the riots had a major influence on all of the participants who attended high school in a nearby suburb of Minneapolis. The participant's responses to the civil unrest varied. Some of the participants had mixed thoughts about how much of a difference people their age can make. All of the participants contributed in some way via activism online. Some of the participants were able to physically partake in peaceful protests.

Jason worked near George Floyd Square and witnessed the aftermath of the riots. He stated that it was heartbreaking. Jason worried about the way George Floyd died, at the hands of a police officer, but also about the livelihood of the families in the area. He was concerned with the ability for businesses to survive in the area. Jason stated, "When I saw the aftermath of the riots, I was worried about everyone who lives and works down there. It is really heartbreaking." When Anna was told by her parents that she could not go to the protests, she found a way to contribute by going with an adult to deliver food products. She said:

I wanted to help so bad, so I donated [items] and I educated myself. I couldn't go participate in things because my parents would have been very upset. My sister did and it turned into a big blowout.

There was agreement among the participants that the death of George Floyd was horrific. There was deep understanding for the need for change, but the participants were not aware of opportunities to protest once on their respective campuses in the fall. Due to the pandemic, the

University of Minnesota did not provide opportunities for students to peacefully protest in person. Due to these limitations, the participants relied on a sense of hope that the judicial system would make things right.

All nine participants were very cognizant of the horrendous act, and everyone stated that online activism was their most prominent involvement. The ease of “copy & paste” was part of why they believe social media played a big role in activism. Alex summed it up by saying:

I saw a lot of people's stories. One student, goes by Amber [pseudonym]. I don't know if you've heard of her, but she organized a rally for Wayzata students at Parker's Lake. A lot of students went there! About activism, other than on social media, from people close to me, a lot of people go to the memorial and stuff like that.

Pam, Rob, and Steff also admitted that some of their involvement in online activism might have been for people to see their involvement, i.e. moral grandstanding. According to Tosi and Warmke (2016), *moral grandstanding* is “making a contribution to moral discourse that aims to convince others that one is ‘morally respectable’” (p. 199). More recently this has been referred to as *virtue signaling*. Steff explained that virtual signaling is not necessarily a bad thing, but she wished people would put more effort into doing something rather than simply passing the information forward. Rob’s statement seemed to agree with Steff:

They’re just posting a story to look good but they're not actually doing anything to help. Which I think is a good point and a lot of people are just doing it because they want to look good, so I think social media has been crazy impacting on all this and yeah that's a little bit of my perspective.

Alex said, “A lot of people say ‘like oh you post a story, but you don't do anything’.”

The participants noted a lot of fear that they experienced during the civil unrest. When asked

about participating in peaceful protests, Pam talked about fear by saying:

The rioting gets so unsafe so fast and to me it seems like a downward spiral. No one's really willing to do anything about it, or at least like no one in power. There are kids our age, including me that are active on this stuff. We feel so passionately about this, but we just can't do anything because we're kids you know we don't have the ability to say no, you can't do that.

At the same time there was a sense of not belonging that Pam felt. She did not want to be in a place where she would be taking space from others.

I always wanted to go down to Lake Street or Cup Foods. I just didn't feel like it was my place because I am a white woman from the suburbs. You obviously know it hurts me, deep down, that he was murdered, but I feel like other people were hurt way more than I was, and I feel like that space is a safe space for them to grieve. I didn't want to take that away from them.

A sense of guilt for being worried about safety while at the same time wanting to participate in peaceful protest was a common theme found in this study. It resonated with me as a struggle that was evident in camouflaged feelings. Some of the statements made by Alex demonstrate this as they could be construed as conflicting. At one time he specified that he did not want to be involved in a riot if it escalated to that. He also stated, "I feel like this is like the first major time that it has been shown that justice can be served." And another declaration from Alex was:

This is just a massive setback for everyone. It makes everyone look terrible and that should not be happening to anyone over a counterfeit \$20 bill. It was hard to see him struggling and not be able to know what to do or say to make anyone feel better. White



people don't experience the same thing and then it's hard to understand the perspective [of a BIPOC person] but wanting to at the same time.

The participants understood the importance and complexity of the situation, as evidenced by this statement from Jason:

I saw the liquor store burned down. Entire buildings burned down and the scars and all the plywood put on all the buildings. It was so sad. It affected everyone. When the verdict, or when the trial was coming, I was thinking, he's got to get what he deserves because this can't happen, like businesses and employees and families are suffering. The civil unrest is needed because there needs to be change. I was praying that it wouldn't spread, because a lot of those businesses are small and, closing left and right and we're almost like running out of shops and restaurants there. I pray that it doesn't spread, because then we might not have anything or anyone come back to Minneapolis.

and from Bo:

Immediately after it happened [the death of George Floyd] it was all over social media on Instagram and Snapchat. Many of us were very upset by what happened. We thought there needed to be something done. I attended a couple different marches at different points. I don't remember exactly which ones, but I was involved with that. I spoke out a bit on social media, but I am usually not an outspoken person. But it was interesting hearing all the different perspectives. People were all coming together, well most people, to get behind this cause. It was also interesting to see how people my age can promote change and actually get things done. There were a few different events, marches, and protests that were held and that were started by peers of mine. It was cool to see that and it's still very prevalent, especially down on campus. It was a powerful energy seeing all

these people come together and march. There were thousands of people marching down highway 55 and chanting the same things and holding up signs, trying to get the thoughts and ideas out there. Trying to promote change.

Steve felt fortunate to participate in the march down Highway 55. He talked about wanting to do more but finding it difficult because of COVID-19.

I did the march off [Highway] 55. I am so glad I was able to do that because I feel I wanted to do even more. But it was just hard, because of COVID. I didn't even know what to do. I definitely saw a lot of things on social media and I was posting too.

The participants in the current study reflected many of the same sentiments found in other areas across the United States. *NPR* published an article that covered five students who stood out for their activism (Kamenetz et al., 2020). One student collaborated with others and organized a peaceful protest. Another student used QR codes to direct community members to activist sites. A student in New York collected data and shared it on his *Instagram* page. Another used her poetry to inspire others. These students capitalized on the internet and social media to find support and spread the message of equity (Kamenetz et al., 2020). The students in this study also relied on social media to find peaceful protests and to be activists themselves. Social media was a fast and reliable source to spread the word and to become involved, even when they could not participate in person.

### ***Successful Transition***

The participants in this study faced uncertainty during a pivotal time in their lives. The transition into college, as noted in chapter 2, provides opportunities for reflection, change, and growth. The nine participants in this study made a successful transition into college, with plans of continuing higher education at the same institution. Each participant talked about continuing

their education and completing (at least) a bachelor's degree. The findings of this study suggest that all nine participants had family support and social support, as well as institutional support from their high school and college. Understanding who they are and what expectations were placed on them was a common theme among these students. The situation they faced (transitioning into college during a pandemic and civil unrest), was the one area of concern for these students. They all appeared to have strategies when faced with the uncertain situation. Though the process of moving in, moving through, and moving out was slowed and amalgamated, all of the participants were successful.

### **Summary**

The qualitative case study presented in this chapter presents the results of a group of students who transitioned into college during a pandemic and civil unrest. Generation Z students have unique characteristics when compared to other generations, aiding in the explanation of how they responded to civil unrest. The nine participants in this study graduated from a large suburban high school and attend a large urban university in the Midwest. Their transition was viewed through the lens of Schlossberg's transition theory, specifically the four s's and moving in, moving through, and moving out. Through these constructs, themes emerged that provide a better understanding of the transition into college during a pandemic and civil unrest.

## Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusion

The purpose of this qualitative, constructivist, case study was to investigate the social, emotional, and cultural impact that a global pandemic and national civil unrest had on the transition of high school seniors graduating in 2020 from a large, suburban high school to a large urban university in the Midwest.

As mentioned in chapter 3, the constructivist paradigm pursues the research with an open range and variation of findings, diving into the crux of the topic (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). This real-world situation of a pandemic and civil unrest, still occurring at the time of this writing, falls into the category of which constructivist research occurs, permitting for flexibility and creativity. The case study design, with a small group of participants, allowed for a rich analysis utilizing emic language.

Due to the timing of this research there is a gap in knowledge about this group of students, during this time of life. The high school graduating class of 2020 is the first cohort to transition into college during a pandemic and civil unrest. As the literature review explains, higher education has worked tirelessly to make the first year of college a welcoming and inclusive environment, with activities and courses assisting students. The 2020-2021 school year was disrupted from what these students had come to expect in a traditional year of transition. These students navigated the year without a template or blueprint to lead the way. This group of participants willingness to share their experience gives a deep and personal understanding of the emotional, social, and cultural characteristics as they transitioned into college.

The research question for this study is: How do college freshmen of the graduating high school class of 2020 view their experience transitioning into a four-year university? The findings from this study are conducive to Schlossberg's Transition Theory. The participants faced

Schlossberg's three components of approaching change, taking stock, and taking charge in their own way as they all appeared to successfully transition into the university (Schlossberg et al., 1995).

The participants' reactions to their transitions changed over time as they moved through the phases of the change (Anderson et al., 2012). In this study, I found intermingling of phases from Schlossberg's Transition Theory of moving in, moving through, and moving out (Schlossberg et al., 1995). Evidence of the four s's (support, self, situation, and strategy) was also found throughout the study, including how the participants stayed motivated throughout this experience. A common occurrence during the interviews was camouflaged feelings. I define camouflaged feelings as the lack of language and the disinclination to explain their feelings. The participants were hesitant to express their feelings or lacked the vocabulary to explain what they were experiencing. On one hand, these students had feelings of loss while at the same time they understood that other populations suffered far more. This was true for the impacts of the pandemic as well as the civil unrest. I also discuss how the participants responded to the civil unrest during this time.

### **Support**

The participants found support in a variety of situations and with different groups of people. Every one of the participants relied on family at some point during the transition. They also sought out support in friends, sports, and activities. The commonality in the student experiences was the knowledge and gumption in searching for support when needed. This resourcefulness may have been the reason each of the participants successfully transitioned into college during the pandemic and civil unrest. Being aware of ones needs and responding to the situation in a positive and proactive manner is part of Martin Seligman's five elements of well-

being (Seligman, 2018). In his book *The Hope Circuit*, Seligman enlightens the readers about the benefits of PERMA – positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment. The results of this study indicate that when these foundations are relied upon, whether consciously or not, the outcome is more likely to be successful.

### **Self**

Psychological well-being, according to Schlossberg et al. (1995), is an individual's ability to manage transition and conflict. This group of participants appeared to have high introspection. Each of the participants intentionally managed their stress during this transition by actively searching out support, finding strategies, and taking control of their situation. Examples of this included joining Greek Life only because it was COVID, moving back home because the dorm was isolating and had become a place for using substances, going home for weekends to “re-group,” and finding the positive side of having classes online (i.e. being able to run downstairs to make a sandwich during class).

Well-being is personal to the individual but also encompasses environmental interactions (Seligman, 2018). Being able to adapt and thrive contributes to resilience and a high level of effectiveness (Hoopes, 2017). The participants in this study appeared to have an elevated understanding of their individual well-being and how to adjust actions and thoughts to illicit a more positive and progressive experience.

### **Situation**

The situation of transitioning into college during a pandemic and civil unrest was not how these participants perceived this time of life. According to Schlossberg (1981), if the role is positive or negative, a gain or loss, or internal or external, it will have an impact on the transition. All of the participants took control of what they could grasp, despite the uncertainty of

their situation. The living situation was a tangible and straightforward scenario that gave the students a sense of control. All but three participants changed their living situations from the fall semester to the spring semester. Of the three who did not change their living situations during the semester break, one changed it at the beginning of the fall semester. Only two participants stayed constant in their living situation through the entire first year of college with one living at home, where he planned to be before COVID-19 and one remaining in the same dorm room with the same roommate. Some changed their housing situations because of isolation in the dorm rooms and strict curfews, but one participant moved into the residence halls for the second semester in an attempt to capture some of the dorm experience. The participants were able to choose where they lived, which made it a situation they could control during this time of possible dissonance. The realization that they had the power to make a change, and to act on that decision, gave them more of an internal understanding of the world (Kegan, 1994).

### **Strategy**

The participants strategized by taking control of their situations, employing self-authorship, and searching for support. Where they lived, changing their course-loads to be more manageable, joining Greek Life, choosing a college close to home, making small things fun (i.e. decorating the dorm room), and using positive counseling techniques, gave the students a sense of control and relieved stress. As stated in Chapter 2, the perception of stress is a good indicator of how the transition into college will go (Arthur, 1998; Brissette et al., 2002; Jones et al., 1985; Leong et al., 1997). The participants appeared to have a growth mindset. They believed that abilities can be developed through dedication and hard work (Dweck, 2006). I believe because these students faced the challenge of transitioning with resilience and grit, and for this reason, they were able to successfully transition into college.

## **Motivation**

Generation Z-ers describe themselves as compassionate, thoughtful, loyal, responsible, determined, and open-minded. They describe their peers as competitive, adventurous, and spontaneous (Seemiller & Grace, 2016). The statements made by the participants in this study were about being respectful to their instructors, being responsible for paying for college, being adventurous by breaking rules, and being competitive with sports and grades. All of these attributes positively correlate with other findings about this generation.

Finding motivation and staying motivated through COVID-19 was intentional. An internal desire to take care of the body and mind was shared by all of the participants. Some would run, some would walk, others would skateboard, and one knew when it was time to leave the room. Regardless of the activity, they all understood the benefit of taking care of themselves.

Research has shown that motivation increases once a person makes a decision. Downing (2014) explained that making a decision is inspiring, regardless of the decision. Downing (2014) used the Wise Choice Process, in which a person goes through a series of questions to help make empowering choices in life. Making a decision on a major in college, based on this theory, would increase motivation.

Another area to consider when looking at motivation in students is self-regulated learning. Self-regulated learning involves self-awareness, self-motivation, and behavior skills. Some of this is innate, but other parts of self-regulated learning can be taught, such as goal setting, making a decision on a major, and having a goal in mind. Zimmerman (2002) provided an overview of becoming a self-regulated learner. Self-regulation is a trait that productive and conscientious students possess (Zimmerman, 2002). For students to learn, Zimmerman (2002) believes there is an active effort that occurs. In other words, learning is not passive. These skills



transform the learning process and engage students in their learning experience. Zimmerman (2002) asserted that students can learn these skills through instruction as well as from modeling by parents, teachers, coaches, and peers. Self-regulated learning is part of a successful college experience.

Extrinsic motivation suggests the desire for external rewards, such as money or recognition. Internal motivation comes from within; it is the urge for self-satisfaction or a feeling of pride (Nevid, 2018). Depending on the individual and the situation, external or internal motivation will fuel a decision. Sometimes it can be a combination of internal and external motivation. A student may attend higher education because they are looking for a career where they would make more money; this would be external motivation. If a student chooses to go to college for the feeling of pride and accomplishment, it would be internal motivation. The participants in this study relied on both intrinsic and extrinsic motivations. What they discovered appears to have worked. Every one of the participants currently has plans to stay at the University of Minnesota for their college careers, even the students who had not originally planned to attend this school.

### **Camouflaged Feelings**

A commonality found when analyzing the interviews was the lack of language and uncertainty of feelings. All of the participants in this study had a mother and a father living in the home. They attended a high school that had a small percentage (about ten percent) of students who were considered economically disadvantaged. Considering these two statistics, it can be assumed that the participants fell into the category of middle or upper-middle-class socioeconomic level. According to Haidt and Lukianoff (2018), upper-middle-class children are monitored and supervised more than lower-class family households, and yet they have also been

taught to be empathic and understanding of other situations. Statements were made during the interviews led me to believe they were not sure how to feel as they were often told how they “should” feel by well-meaning adults. This concern with saying the right thing or not knowing how they are supposed to feel could lead to yearnings for affirmation or validation, as well as not understanding their feelings or having the vocabulary to explain how they feel.

### **Civil Unrest**

Today activism is demonstrated through social media where it can spread rapidly. Generation Z learns about momentous events locally, nationally, and internationally in real-time. This is contrasted with prior generations who usually experienced such events by delayed word of mouth or after-the-fact via traditional news outlets (Twenge, 2017). In the past, people needed to rely on physical activity to promote change. The findings in this study indicate that the majority of activism and push for social justice was completed online. For this generation, online activity is the norm. Social media sites like Facebook, Snapchat, Instagram, and Twitter have gained popularity, resulting in Generation Z using social media for information and for participating in activism (Twenge, 2017). They believed in the importance of social justice and found ways to participate despite the pandemic. Douglas Murray, British author, and political commentator, put it this way: “MN discovered something very important which is racism and the whole issue of race is even more important than trying to avoid the pandemic. Everything that has flowed from it is rolling on and on.” (Rogan, #1538, 23:40).

### **Limitations**

One limitation of this study is the demographics of the participants. The case study was bounded by one suburban high school all attending one large urban university. The participants could have been of like mind in that they completed high school in the same setting and

transitioned into a college that is located approximately thirty minutes from the high school.

While I was able to find themes from this group, other demographics would have experienced the transition into college during a pandemic and civil unrest in a much different scenario. For example, research indicates that marginalized people do not have the same support system that this group of students had access to. Students from a rural area or an urban area could have experienced the transition differently. Students who attended a small college or a community college from the same high school might have had different transition experiences.

Another limitation to this study was the ability to connect with participants. My list of contacts was fifteen students, but I was only able to get nine students to participate. I had ten students sign the consent forms, however, one did not follow through with the interviews. I believe that the nine students who chose to participate are more internally motivated to succeed and to please others. The students who did not follow through with interviews might have had a different perspective on motivation, as well as their success in transitioning into college.

The ongoing pandemic and trials for the police officers involved in the killing of George Floyd are limitations to this study. As I wrote the dissertation, changes were being made, COVID-19 cases were in flux, and vaccines were being dispersed. As the trials for the officers were still underway and anticipated, emotions were high, and information being brought forth could have changed emotions and behaviors.

These participants were interviewed during their first year of college. The time to reflect on the transition was restricted. This could be considered a limitation, but it could also be a future study, one in which a comparison to this research is made.

One more limitation to this study is my position. Though I am a doctoral student and a psychology professor, I am also a mother to a 2020 graduate. I did my best to keep bias at bay;

however, I am aware of my feelings and emotions when working with this group of students.

### **Implications**

The results of this study indicate that successful transitions can occur, even when the unexpected happens. The participants in the study instituted resilience and grit searching for support and taking control of their situation. Though this group of students had a strong support network, they faced a transition that was not able to be reinforced by the experience of others. They were forced to find a way to be successful in uncharted territory.

### ***Implication for Theory***

The results of this study give evidence that Schlossberg's Transition Theory can be used to explain the transition from high school to college during unprecedented times. This theory was originally designed for adult transitions but has been used in a variety of research projects giving credence to its versatility.

The participants vacillated through the moving out, moving through, and moving in process. As they attempted to move into college life, they held on to friendships and familiarities of home, spending more time in the moving through area of the transition (Schlossberg et al., 1995). I believe they are still waffling in this area; however, their routines and new relationships would indicate that they are heading into, and some have entered the moving out phase.

The four s's of Schlossberg's theory were a golden thread for this research. Support, self, situation, and strategy were all indicative of the positive transition into college. Motivation was also easily applied to the four s's, as having support, believing in oneself, taking control of the situation, and strategizing had a positive impact on the ability to keep moving forward, even during times of uncertainty. These four s's were intertwined, but the interviews clearly showed the importance of each "s."

### *Implication for Practice*

The findings of this study can illuminate the importance of connections and networks when the university cannot provide the support that is common to freshmen in their first year of college. This study reinforced the importance of the basic necessities that first year students and students in crisis can benefit from. Mattering, connection, and support have positive effect on the life of a student. The participants in this study sought help and found avenues to success. Other groups of students may not have the aptitude or knowledge to continue searching for ways to be successful. More research can be done to see how institutions can reach students when they cannot be face- to-face. The 2020 high school graduates can be leaders and authors that guide the transition into college during unprecedented times.

The participants in this study missed the microcosms of everyday life. The rights of passage that I expected to have the largest impact, were not the areas of concern or loss. A phone call from an individual (as opposed to an automated call), welcoming a future Gopher to the school could have a large impact on this group. The students appreciated when a professor acknowledged the difficulty of the situation. Hearing the voice of someone from the university would be welcomed. Once the realization of not returning to high school set in, the focus was on college. This group wanted a reason to be excited about going to college. A welcoming package sent to the home before the school year begins would be a fun way to keep a student motivated and excited for college. They were searching for a reason to focus on college and the hope that they will continue to move through the transition. These students identified as a Gopher, even without the in-person connections. They were proud to be part of The University of Minnesota. Relying on the collection of research regarding what helps students thrive during crisis is an area that would benefit universities when in unprecedented times. These students found comfort in

any type of connection, feeling as they matter, and being heard. A small action from the university could have long lasting impacts on the commitment a student has to the institution.

My interest in positive psychology was peaked during this study, as the results indicated a strong connection to resilience, self-efficacy, and stamina. At the start of this study, I was expecting to find hardship and sorrow as students mourned the loss of their senior year in high school and freshman year of college. In place of this mourning, I found students who had a desire to succeed. They recognized that their experience was not as they expected and instead of focusing on the loss, they adapted and found a way to persevere. I enjoyed hearing the participants speak about being leaders and helping others during unprecedented times. The longing to find a purpose and utilize their lessons to benefit others is honorable. I wonder if this case study is an anomaly or if other research will have the same conclusions. There are many areas of study that could expand from this perspective alone. The importance of teaching autonomy, self-care, and motivation would be beneficial in times when life does not follow the expected or desired path.

I positioned my questions to be non-biased and open-ended, which allowed for the expansion of thoughts and conversation. As the conclusions started to form, it was apparent that my assumptions were not accurate. This was a welcomed discovery. I was pleased that all of the participants had a successful transition into college, with plans of continuing their studies.

These 2020 high school graduates will be advocates for students as they navigate uncertainty. Higher education institutions will be able to utilize these students as they move past these unprecedented times, with the realization that life and life-events are precarious. Even the best laid out plans can falter. The years of education and research developed to ensure a welcoming environment for incoming freshmen was impractical in the 2020-2021 school year.

Universities quickly reassessed and created the best environment they could for incoming freshmen, however, the first-year college experience was nothing like what they students had expected.

Administration, faculty, and staff at the college level will benefit from these findings, as well as guidance counselors at the high school level. Having support or knowing how to find support was of utmost importance to these participants. Having the ability to strategize, to alter the situation, and understanding one-self was also crucial for the success of the students in this study. During the pandemic and civil unrest, these students relied on their own ability to navigate a new world. How can people in education ensure the best of our ability that students will have the tools to succeed?

### **Future Research**

There is still much uncertainty for the future in response to the pandemic. The current study can be utilized in combination with other case studies. This study examined one group of students. There are many other groups of students who should be researched. These groups include, but are not limited to, marginalized populations, different size and demographics of high schools, different size colleges, community colleges, and public versus private colleges. Using a multiple case study design could capture many experiences of transitioning into college during these unprecedented times.

Research focused on how marginalized populations transitioned into college during a pandemic and civil unrest is an area of study that could provide institutions with knowledge and strategies that will support equity. The group of students in this study had support and knew how to find additional support when needed. It would be interesting to research if different demographics had similar experiences. One question that comes to mind is if the current

participants were taught, intentionally or through experience, how to search for solutions that were not provided. Would marginalized groups have the same resourcefulness? Along the same thought, is learned helplessness a factor that has an impact on the transition? If tenaciousness is learned, how do we educate other groups?

The response to the killing of George Floyd would be interesting to continue studying alongside the pandemic. The timing of the civil unrest that followed Floyd's death was intertwined with the pandemic. Social media allowed the news of his death to spread quickly to other cities, states, and countries. As a result, civil unrest spread rapidly throughout the entire United States and became an international situation. Though the participants in this study were in the same state where Floyd was killed, I believe other students responded similarly in that the civil unrest and the pandemic were separate occurrences for them. A thought-provoking study would be investigating this phenomenon. Was it because students tend to be focused on the transition into college and having the challenge of the pandemic as they were transitioning took much of their energy? Do people in Generation Z compartmentalize situations more naturally than other generations?

Another area of research could be a quantitative study with large numbers of participants. The quantitative data would allow for vast information that cannot be obtained from a small, qualitative study. This type of study would be able to reach more demographics, sizes, and types of institutions, making it more generalizable in its assumptions. Combining the qualitative studies with quantitative studies would provide rich information to guide institutions in the transition to college.

A longitudinal study would provide information on the success rate of this group of students. Did they persist to a degree? Did they stay at the University of Minnesota? Did they



become involved in extra-curricular at the institution? How did the pandemic and civil unrest impact their remaining experience through college?

Some of the participants mentioned being leaders for future cohorts transitioning into college. I would like to see a study that investigates any leadership from these participants. What do those leadership roles entail? How has it changed the way these students approach change and uncertainty?

Exploring camouflaged feelings could provide insight into the thoughts and feelings of Generation Z. Does this generation look for validation and affirmation from adults? Have they been conditioned to always give the right answer at the cost of exploring their feelings? Is this phenomenon something that exists in this small group, by coincidence, or is this a pattern that can be found throughout Generation Z?

This study did not go into the depth of the mental health crisis during the pandemic. Dr. Frank, the head of a psychiatric network in France believes that in the current situation, young people rank the lowest in psychological well-being, based on a survey of 30,000 people (Kwai & Peltier, 2021). I have read multiple articles of devastating reflections on how children and young adults have taken their lives during this time. Studies are currently being conducted, and more studies will be done, to see how we can better support our youth during times of unexpected isolation. Dr. Berger stated in an article from the University of Minnesota's website that "During the COVID pandemic, it is critical that students stay connected with their peers, family members, and other key individuals in their lives. This is especially true for children and adolescents who are primarily learning online" (para. # 4). She continues to offer ideas on how to make connections (Berger, 2020). It would be fascinating to research the ability for online connections and compare that to in-person connections. I believe studies on mental health during the

pandemic as well as any lingering impacts will give future knowledge on how to best support our youth during a crisis.

As I have shared the results of this study, it is worth noting that every participant ended the interview by saying thank you, to me for allowing them to share their experience. Though the transition into college was at the epicenter of their lives, their personal experience was not something they discussed with others. All of the interviews were upbeat and positive; however, two participants did expand on the difficulty and struggle they faced when I asked if there was anything else they would like to let me know. Pam stated:

I feel like people tried so hard to understand, which I appreciate so much, but they just get it wrong. Like, they are telling this differently, you know they didn't live this. I did. I think that was probably the hardest part. I think, "No you're not telling this right, this is what it is, this is what happened." Even listening to me and giving me the chance to say something I really appreciate.

Anna said:

I would summarize by saying it has been really difficult. I feel like I have made it sound manageable, but I would say, mentally it's been exhausting. It has just been one thing after another. Just that, everyone my age, whether or not they decided to go to college – it has been a lot to handle for 17, 18, and 19-year-olds.

## **Summary**

This chapter summarized the study with a conversational tone to the findings. Schlossberg's Transition Theory was the golden thread throughout the study. Motivation was contemplated as all of the participants successfully transitioned into college and have plans of continuing at the same university the following year. Camouflaged feelings were discovered and

reflected upon. All of the themes overlap to some extent, as the experience of transitioning into college is a multifaceted event that is social, emotional, and cultural.

Chapter 5 also discussed limitations, implications for practice and theory, and possible future research. I believe there is vast opportunity for future studies on how students navigated this transition during the pandemic and civil unrest. These occurrences happened at a vital time of identity formation for the class of 2020. It is exciting to ponder on forthcoming research.

This study highlights the difficulties of transitioning into college during a pandemic and civil unrest, but it also illuminates courage, resilience, and leadership. The high school graduating class of 2020 has the opportunity to persevere and lead. Through the students I was fortunate to interview, and the research of other student experiences, it is evident that this defining moment will provide opportunities for people to lead.

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## Appendix A: Semi-Structured Interview Questions

### Interview Questions

Thank you for taking the time to talk to me about your experience transitioning out of high school and into a four-year university during a pandemic and civil unrest. I will be sharing the information you provide to give a voice so that others may understand what it was like to go through this experience. I have an informed consent (the same one I previously sent via email) for us to go over. Once you sign the form, we will begin the interview.

#### Information:

1. Overview of project and informed consent
2. Tell me about yourself.
3. Can you talk about the last few months of high school when COVID closed the school and you moved to online learning? What was your experience?
  - a. What did you feel like, if anything, you missed out on from your high school senior experience?
4. What influenced your decision to choose the college you are currently attending?

#### Transition Experience:

5. What was it like preparing to go to college over summer and fall?
  - a. What was your orientation experience like? Can you give me some positive and negative examples?
  - b. What, if anything, do you feel like you missed out on by doing an online orientation and not an in-person orientation?
6. What do you wish the university had done differently or what should the university do differently next year for students if in a similar situation?
7. Did your college do anything for the freshman class of 2020, to make it special for you, when you arrived or started the semester?
  - a. Did the college have any special events during this time?
  - b. How did you prepare for your first day of classes?

#### Freshmen Experience:

8. Were you able to move into your dorm for your freshman year of college?

- a. Was this experience the same as people you knew or heard about from previous years? Can you explain the process?
9. Can you describe your feelings the first day of classes?
10. Tell me about your first semester. What was it like? How was it different from what you imagined?

Civil Unrest:

11. What was the impact of George Floyd's death over the summer on you and your collegiate experience?

Conclusion:

12. Can you think of any questions I might have missed, that you think are important to describe your transition into college during a time of a pandemic?
13. Do you have any questions for me?

Thank you for participating in this study. I will send you a transcript of the interview and ask that you review it and send any changes back to me via email. I appreciate you allowing me to delve into your experience as a 2020 high school graduate and college freshmen.

**Appendix B: Participant Request**

ST. CLOUD STATE  
U N I V E R S I T Y

EDUCATION FOR LIFE.

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

My name is Hillary Gokey and I am a doctoral student from the Higher Education

Administration department at St. Cloud State University. I am writing to invite you to participate in my research study about transitioning into college during a pandemic and civil unrest. You're eligible to be in this study because you graduated from a large suburban high school in the Midwest and are attending a larger urban university in the Midwest.

If you decide to participate in this study, you will be interviewed by me. I would like to audio/video record our interview and then we'll use the information to describe your experience transitioning into college.

Remember, this is completely voluntary. You can choose to be in the study or not. If you'd like to participate or have any questions about the study, please email or contact me at

[Hjgokey@stcloudstate.edu](mailto:Hjgokey@stcloudstate.edu).

Thank you very much.

Sincerely,

### Appendix C: Consent to Participate

You are invited to participate in a research study about transitioning into college during the Covid-19 pandemic and civil unrest in the year 2020.

If you agree to be part of the research study, you will be asked to answer questions about your experience completing high school and transitioning into college.

Benefits of the research are that your voice will be heard and assist guidance counselors, college student and academic affairs personnel, when working with students during precarious times.

Risks and discomforts could include being uncomfortable during some of the questions. You do not need to answer anything you are uncomfortable with and can stop the interview at anytime.

Data collected will remain on a password protect computer. Responses will be kept strictly confidential., your name will not be disclosed nor will identified direct quotes be used. During the interview you may refuse to answer any questions. After the completion of the interviews, you will receive your transcribed interviews. At this point, if you wish to make expand responses or note omissions to the transcription, you may].

Participating in this study is completely voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with St. Cloud State University, the University of Minnesota, or the researcher. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time without penalty.

If you have questions about this research study, you may contact Hillary Gokey, Ed.D. student at St. Cloud State University. [Hjgokey@stcloudstate.edu](mailto:Hjgokey@stcloudstate.edu) or 612-719-2224. You can also contact my advisor, Dr. Steven McCullar at [slmccullar@stcloudstate.edu](mailto:slmccullar@stcloudstate.edu) or 3203084727. This research will be published at the St. Cloud State University Repository.

Your signature indicates that you are at least 18 years of age, you have read the information provided above, and you have consent to participate.

Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

**Appendix D: Counseling Center University of Minnesota Twin Cities**

Email: Counseling @umn.edu

Telephone number: 612-624-3323

Address: 128 Pleasant Street SE, Minneapolis, MN 55455

Website: <https://counseling.umn.edu/individual-counseling>

### Appendix E: Release Form

Release Form for Use of Photograph/Video/Audio Recording

Transitioning into College During A Pandemic and Civil Unrest

Hillary Gokey  
Hjgokey@stcloudstate.edu

Dr. Steven McCullar  
Slmccullar@stcloudstate.edu

Please Print:

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Participant Name

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Legal Representative if Applicable

This form asks for your consent to use media for and from this study. We would like you to indicate how we can use your media. On the next page is a list of media types that we will use. Please initial where you consent for that type of use of your media. Legal representative initials will provide consent when needed.

Regardless of your answers on the next page, you will not be penalized.

We will not use your media in any way you have not initialed.

Questions regarding this form should be directed to the researchers. Additional answers can be found by contacting the IRB Administrator or an IRB Committee Member. Current membership is available at: <https://www.stcloudstate.edu/irb/members.aspx>

A copy of this form will be provided for your records.

Audio; no video	
Consent	
Granted	Type of Release
	Used by research team to record and analyze data

Transcription of audio	
Consent Granted	Type of Release
	Used by research team to record and analyze data

Video with audio	
Consent Granted	Type of Release
	Used by research team to record and analyze data

**I have read the above carefully and give my consent only for those items in which I initialed.**

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant Signature (if 18 years of age or older)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant Name (Printed)

**WHEN CONSENT IS NEEDED FROM A LEGAL REPRESENTATIVE, COMPLETE THIS SECTION. UP TO TWO LEGAL REPRESENTATIVE MAY SIGN.**

\_\_\_\_\_  
Legal Representative Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Legal Representative Name (Printed)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Second Legal Representative Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Second Legal Representative Name (Printed)



## Appendix F: IRB Approval



## Institutional Review Board (IRB)

720 4th Avenue South AS 210, St. Cloud, MN  
56301-4498

**Name:** Hillary Gokey

**Email:** hngokey@stcloudstate.edu

## IRB PROTOCOL DETERMINATION: Exempt Review

**Project Title** Transitioning into College During a Pandemic and Civil Unrest

**Advisor** Steven McCullar

The Institutional Review Board has reviewed your protocol to conduct research involving human subjects. Your project has been: **APPROVED**

Please note the following important information concerning IRB projects:

- The principal investigator assumes the responsibilities for the protection of participants in this project. Any adverse events must be reported to the IRB as soon as possible (ex. research related injuries, harmful outcomes, significant withdrawal of subject population, etc.).
- For expedited or full board review, the principal investigator must submit a Continuing Review/Final Report form in advance of the expiration date indicated on this letter to report conclusion of the research or request an extension.
- Exempt review only requires the submission of a Continuing Review/Final Report form in advance of the expiration date indicated in this letter if an extension of time is needed.
- Approved consent forms display the official IRB stamp which documents approval and expiration dates. If a renewal is requested and approved, new consent forms will be officially stamped and reflect the new approval and expiration dates.
- The principal investigator must seek approval for any changes to the study (ex. research design, consent process, survey/interview instruments, funding source, etc.). The IRB reserves the right to review the research at any time.

If we can be of further assistance, feel free to contact the IRB at 320-308-4932 or email ResearchNow@stcloudstate.edu and please reference the SCSU IRB number when corresponding.

**IRB Chair:**

Dr. Mili Mathew  
Chair and Graduate Director  
Assistant Professor  
Communication Sciences and Disorders

**IRB Institutional Official:**

Dr. Claudia Tomany  
Associate Provost for Research  
Dean of Graduate Studies

**OFFICE USE ONLY**

<b>SCSU IRB#: 2022 - 2630</b>	<b>Type: Exempt Review</b>	<b>Today's Date: 3/18/2021</b>
<b>1st Year Approval Date: 3/18/2021</b>	<b>2nd Year Approval Date:</b>	<b>3rd Year Approval Date:</b>
<b>1st Year Expiration Date:</b>	<b>2nd Year Expiration Date:</b>	<b>3rd Year Expiration Date:</b>



# Institutional Review Board (IRB)

720 4th Avenue South AS 210, St. Cloud, MN 56301-4498

## Continuing Review / Final Report

Principal Investigator: **Hillary Gokey**

**Co-Investigator**

Project Title: **Transitioning into College During a Pandemic and Civil Unrest**

St. Cloud State University requires all research activities involving human subject – whether or not they are supported by Federal funds – to comply with the Federal Policy of the Protection of Human Subjects (45 CFR 46). According to this policy, ongoing research activities involving human subjects must be reviewed by the IRB, at a minimum of at least once per year. In some cases, such as when research poses a significant risk, the IRB may require more frequent reviews. This form must be submitted before your study expiration date. (as indicated on your approval letter)

Proposed changes to the protocol of study documents may NOT be implemented until after the IRB has approved the

1. Please indicate the status of your project:(Choose only one of the following)

Continuing Review:

Subject recruitment/enrollement continues; current consent/assent required, please attach.

Data collection continues with enrolled subjects; no additional subjects will be recruited.

Final Report

Project has been completed.

Data collection has been completed but data analysis continues.

The project has not and will not be conducted: Please explain:

2. How many participants have participated in your study? \_\_\_\_\_

3. Have any unexpected reactions, complications or problems occurred during this study?

No

If YES, please explain:

4. Have any subjects withdrawn from the study - either voluntarily or at the researcher's request?

No

If YES, please explain:

5. Have any subjects complained about the study?

No

If YES, please explain:

6. Has any new information been identified that may affect the willingness of current or future subjects to participate in this study?

No

If YES, please explain and indicate how it was or will be conveyed to subjects:

7. Have any changes been made to your study (including changes to informed consent docutments, debriefing statements,

\_\_\_\_\_  
Principal Investigator's Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

SCSU IRB# **2022 - 2630**