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## 2023 TCPEA Outstanding Dissertation of the Year Research Summary

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## 2023 TCPEA Outstanding Dissertation of the Year Research Summary

### Cover Page Footnote

Dr. Kay Shelton, Dissertation Chair Committee Members: Jame Laub (Lamar University), Johnny O'Connor (Lamar University), and Teresa Simpson (UT-Permian Basin)

## 2023 TCPEA Outstanding Dissertation of the Year Research Summary

*The Texas Council of Professors of Educational Administration (TCPEA) annually recognizes an exceptional doctoral dissertation that expands the knowledge of educational leadership at the postsecondary or K-20 levels. In addition to presenting a plaque and having opportunity to present their research at a TCPEA meeting, a research summary of the winning dissertation is published in the School Leadership Review.*

*The 2023 TCPEA Outstanding Dissertation of the Year recipient was Dr. Maegan Collins, a recent graduate from the doctoral program in educational leadership from Lamar University, with Dr. Kaye Shelton serving as her dissertation committee chair. Dr. Collins' research interests are in higher education retention and first-generation college students. She has been an instructor of political science at Lamar University and is currently serving as the department chair of General Education and Developmental Services at Lamar Institute of Technology in Beaumont, Texas. Her dissertation was titled "Perceptions of First-Generation College Student Retention Post-Vertical Transfer: An Interpretive Phenomenological Study."*

### **Perceptions of First-Generation College Student Retention Post-Vertical Transfer: An Interpretive Phenomenological Study**

Vertical transfer students, which are defined as individuals who transfer from two-year to four-year institutions, comprise nearly half of all transfer students throughout the United States (Causey et al., 2022). The student population has become a significant retention focus for four-year higher education institutions due to the academic and social obstacles the population often experiences throughout the vertical transfer process (Thomas et al., 2018). A recent study reported a significant decrease in transfer student persistence with approximately 30% of transfer students dropping out between their first and second semester at their new institution (Causey et al., 2022). Vertical transfer students spend more time than the average four-year college graduate obtaining a baccalaureate degree than the average four-year college graduate due to obtaining an overabundance of credit hours that are not accepted by four-year institutions (Lockhart, 2018; Xu et al., 2018). Consequently, first-generation college students have been at a greater disadvantage when vertically transferring due to a lack of academic preparation and social capital needed while navigating a new campus (Ampaw et al., 2015). As a result, it is important to conduct a study that bridges the gap between two vulnerable populations and provides additional guidance on academic and social integration.

The purpose of this interpretive phenomenological study is to explore academic and social integration factors that influence first-generation college student retention as a result of vertical transfer to a four-year public institution in Texas. In addition, this study will aid public four-year institutions in understanding how to adapt academic and social programs to assist in retaining first-generation vertical transfer students.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The Student Departure Model, also known as the Student Dropout Model, effectively established the conceptual framework traditionally used by educational scholars to further

understand persistence and retention efforts for four-year higher education institutions (Tinto, 1987; 1988). The Student Departure Model outlined that a student must navigate three stages in order to persist at a four-year higher education institution (Tinto, 1987a; 1988). The first stage of separation included students parting ways from previously held beliefs and connections that may hinder their success. The second stage of transition accounted for students' ability to adapt to campus cultural norms and establish commitment to earning a baccalaureate degree. The final stage of incorporation discussed the academic and social belonging. The stage of incorporation will be the focus of this study.

The stage of incorporation required students to be immersed in their campus environment in order to persist (Tinto, 1987a; 1988). Specifically, the model pointed out students must be academically and socially integrated in order to be retained. Drawing off Tinto's (1975) model, academic integration included academic performance and faculty mentorship (Tinto, 1999). Additionally, social integration included students' involvement in extracurricular activities and peer group interactions. While the model was traditionally viewed from a high school to higher education adjustment, Tinto's model could also be viewed from a vertical transfer perspective between two-year community colleges and four-year universities (Lukszo & Hayes, 2020).

## Methodology

Participants for this study were first-generation vertical transfer students. First-generation students have been defined as higher education students whose parents(s) or guardian(s) did not receive a baccalaureate degree (Higher Education Act of 1965). Participants for this study were selected from a large four-year higher education institution in Texas. Participants must have identified as a first-generation college student and transferred a minimum of 30 academic credit hours from a two-year public high education institution. Twelve participants were selected for this study, of which nine were considered full-time students and three were considered part-time students (Appendix A). The participants came from diverse ethnicities, majors, and student classifications. The participants had also been enrolled for at least one academic semester at their four-year higher education institution before participating in the study.

Participants were selected for this study through purposeful sampling, which entailed the researcher specifically selecting a study site and population based on the central phenomenon (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). Specifically, homogenous, quota, and snowball sampling were also used to complete this study. The researcher consulted with the participant site's institutional research department, academic advising, and academic departments to produce an email invitation that encompassed the aforementioned requirements (Appendix B).

Data were collected through open-ended semi-structured interviews in compliance with a guided interview protocol (Appendix C). In addition, qualitative data was validated through triangulation strategies selected by the researcher (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019; Guion et al., 2011). Data were collected through several mediums, which included note taking, audio recording, and automatic transcription. Interview transcripts were returned to the participants directly following the interview to check whether their responses effectively communicated their perceived experiences. The researcher also used an In-Vivo coding approach, which ensured accuracy due to relying on direct quotes (Saldana, 2016). The data were then coded into themes using a two-cycle approach. Furthermore, the coded data were analyzed by comparing and contrasting the findings with similar qualitative and quantitative peer-review studies.

## Findings and Discussion

The first research question regarded first-generation vertical college students' perception of their academic integration at a four-year institution. The findings revealed the population had positive experiences with the classroom environment and faculty involvement. Most participants communicated their academic transition was easier than anticipated. However, a small number

“transfer shock” phenomenon (Ivins et al., 2017). Identified issues also included incomprehensible course credit acceptance policies, miscommunication between transfer and academic advisors, and course sequencing that was not conducive to transfer students. However, a majority of students reported they sought out assistance from on-campus support services to assist in overcoming academic and transfer-related obstacles.

The second research question examined the perceived social integration of first-generation college students post-vertical transfer. A majority of participants were involved in extracurricular activities and organizations on campus, which aligned with research that has implicated first-generation college students do not allow their background to prevent their overall success when establishing themselves on campus (Harrel-Hallmark et al., 2022). Participants also highly correlated their social integration to peer collaboration within the academic setting, which is a strong reflection within prior vertical transfer student studies (Lester et al., 2013; Shaw & Chin-Newman, 2017).

Research question three sought to identify support services that have been perceived as beneficial to the first-generation vertical transfer student population. Participants primarily identified financial aid as the most beneficial support service (Ricks & Warren, 2021). Participants also advocated for additional support services specific to their population, specifically in form of social engagement for transfer students (Cepeda et al., 2021). Further, students identified the need for additional academic services that encourage collaboration amongst peers, which has been found crucial to retention (Wang et al., 2017). Lastly, a small group of participants identified career services as a beneficial support service provided by their four-year institution, which has been statistically linked to improved social capital for underrepresented populations (Martin et al., 2020).

### **Conclusion, Implications, and Future Recommendations**

This phenomenological study related to the importance of academic integration post-vertical transfer, specifically guaranteeing academic course credits immediately following vertical transfer. While the state of Texas has made considerable strides in guaranteeing academic course credit acceptance through guided pathways, scholars have argued there needs to be additional safeguards established to guarantee students’ community college courses are counting towards their degree to improve retention rates (Hodges et al, 2018). The study also revealed social integration was key to the population’s retention and persistence; however, it was not as crucial as academic integration. This inference closely aligned with Lester et al.’s (2013) study that implicated transfer students value academic opportunities over social events. Lastly, this study sought to understand which support services were crucial to the population’s overall retention and success. This study also identified services that could aid in overall first-generation vertical transfer student retention and success.

The results presented in this study can aid higher education institutions in improving processes that promote retention and persistence of first-generation college students post-vertical transfer. First, four-year higher education institution must identify collaborative strategies that further support transfer students beyond admission processes. While many institutions may already have articulation agreements with two-year institutions, it is crucial to create multi- department collaborations that go beyond course transfer credit and holistically represent academic and social integration. In addition, institutions must provide faculty training

opportunities to further support first-generation and vertical transfer college students (DeRosa & Dolby, 2014). Lastly, higher education institutions must strengthen financial aid resources for the first-generation college student population that places an emphasis on education (Latino et al., 2018). First, it is important for financial aid personnel to educate the student population in a way that promotes accessible terminology (Taylor & Bicak, 2020). Furthermore, it is crucial for financial aid departments to provide the student population with educational opportunities that explore securing scholarships and identifying external funding. It is also imperative institutions establish first-generation college student scholarships to further support the population.

This phenomenological study was limited in scope to a single four-year higher education institution in the state of Texas. Furthermore, the sample size was small at 12 participants. Therefore, this study may not reflect the perceived experiences of all first-generation college students post-vertical transfer. The first recommendation is to expand this study to additional four-year higher education institutions in Texas. An additional recommendation for future research includes conducting program evaluations on the support services that participants identified as the most beneficial to their retention. Future research should also consider the impact intersectionality has on first-generation college students who vertically transfer. First-generation college student research traditionally lacks the use of intersectionality (Ives & Castillo-Montoya, 2020). The last future research recommendation is to complete studies at different key points of time throughout the student population's academic journey. Extending the study to key points in time would allow for a more holistic understanding of the student population and how to effectively retain them.

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