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# Recognizing Earned Credit: Student Motivations for Reverse Transfer Programs and Concurrently Earning Two Post-Secondary Degrees

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Recognizing Earned Credit: Student Motivations for Reverse Transfer Programs and

Concurrently Earning Two Post-Secondary Degrees

by

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Recognizing Earned Credit: Student Motivations for Reverse Transfer Programs and

Concurrently Earning Two Post-Secondary Degrees


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In 2006-2007, there were 6.2 million community college students in the United States, making up 35% of all post-secondary students (Provasnik & Planty, 2008). Research has historically examined transfer student experiences from a community college to a four-year institution, overlooking the newly emerging population of reverse transfer students. Reverse transfer students have the potential to concurrently earn an associate and bachelor's degree while at a four-year institution. This study contributes to the limited research regarding reverse transfer students by filling a literature gap and describing the experiences of reverse transfer students at a large, public four-year institution.

The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study is to examine reverse transfer students' meaning of concurrently earning two post-secondary degrees and their motivations to choose a reverse transfer program. Three, semi-structured, informal interviews were conducted with four undergraduate students. Using a constructivist paradigm and influenced by the theoretical framework of Rendón's validation theory, the findings indicated that communication with campus staff, a simple enrollment process, and a sense of accomplishment motivates participants to choose a reverse transfer

program.  Further, the pathway for reverse transfer provides meaningful validation for the participants' abilities at the four-year institution.  Finally, the fear of not earning a post-secondary degree provides meaning and motivation for reverse transfer student participants.  Recommendations for future research and applications for practice between personnel at the community college a four-year institution are additionally described.

**Dedication**

*To the newly emerging population of reverse transfer students whose complex and*

*fascinating experiences need to be heard.  Your experiences are unique and powerful.*

*This thesis serves to shed light on the ways that you meet challenges with courage,*

*compassion, and joy in order to thrive.*

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**Introduction**

**Introduction**

According to the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 62% of transfer students nationwide—those that began at a two-year institution and transferred to a four-year institution—graduated from a four-year institution six years after transferring (Shapiro et al., 2013). This statistic illustrates the possibility that nearly 40% of transfer students earn some post-secondary credits without earning a post-secondary within six years. For the purposes of the study, transfer students are those who have completed coursework at a two-year institution or community college and have transferred to a four-year institution.

Choy (2002) refers to *nontraditional* post-secondary students as a population that is defined, but is not limited to, by variation in age, family and work responsibilities, race, gender, residence, and employment. In the 1999-2000 academic year, nontraditional students accounted for nearly 73% of the United States undergraduate population (Choy, 2002). Among nontraditional students, nontraditional transfer students are affected by a number of challenges and barriers to their academic and personal success that must be addressed by higher education professionals. Specific challenges and barriers to nontraditional transfer student success will be articulated in Chapter Two. In response to the challenges faced by nontraditional transfer students, reverse transfer programs have been implemented in higher education institutions across the United States (Taylor & Bragg, 2015).

Marling (2013) defines "reverse transfer" programs as a "process whereby academic credits for applicable coursework at the [four-year] university are transferred back to the community college for purposes of awarding an associate degree" (p. 2). Reverse transfer programs are implemented to serve the needs of nontraditional transfer student population degree attainment. Instead of a transfer student earning partial credit at a community college and four-year institution, reverse transfer programs allow for credit to transfer back from the four-year institution to the community college for associate degree attainment. This is one way to avoid completing credits at a community college and a four-year institution without attaining a post-secondary degree. Reverse transfer programs encourage dual degree attainment.

**Purpose Statement and Research Design**

The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore students' motivations for choosing a reverse transfer program and their meaning of concurrently earning two post-secondary degrees. Studies regarding transfer students have existed for decades—mostly surrounding their successes, challenges, or experiences transitioning from a two- to four-year institution (Allen, Smith, & Muehleck, 2014; Laanan, 1996; Schmertz & Carney, 2013; Townsend & Wilson, 2006). However, these studies comprise many experiences of transfer students without reference to a reverse transfer program. Reverse transfer programs are new initiatives that seek to recognize a student's academic credit that is earned across two- and four-year institutions. Studying transfer students involved in a reverse transfer programs offers a glimpse of its impact on the student's academic and personal experiences. This qualitative study will also examine the significance or meaning that participants make of concurrently earning two degrees.

Reverse transfer students are a population of nontraditional students in higher education. Complementing the scarcity of scholarly literature regarding reverse transfer students and their nontraditional status in higher education, higher education professionals can seek to gain a new perspective on the experiences and needs of an emerging student population. This qualitative research study will not only provide details of the experiences of reverse transfer students, but also highlight the significance of reverse transfer programs for those seeking to transfer from a two- to four-year institution. If educators, administrators, and policy makers do not learn about the needs and experiences of the reverse transfer student population, then the effectiveness and vitality of reverse transfer programs may be unknown, underestimated, or misunderstood. Since reverse transfer potentially helps student attain a degree, an important metric in higher education, understanding this program is important (Long & Kurlaender, 2009).

The qualitative study was influenced by the constructivist paradigm. Mertens (2015) articulates that knowledge is socially constructed by individuals who are involved in a designed research study. As previously mentioned, the purpose of the study is to examine students' motivations of choosing a reverse transfer program and the meaning they make of concurrently earning two post-secondary degrees. Further, a phenomenological methodology was incorporated to the research design. A phenomenological study describes, according to Mertens (2015), the essence of the lived experiences of an individual in regards to a particular phenomenon. In the qualitative study described below, the phenomenon examined pertains to the experiences of the reverse transfer student.

The following describes the data collection process of the qualitative study. I conducted three, semi-structured interviews via Skype™ telecommunications in a one-on-one, private setting. I actively listened to each of the participant's experiences by arranging multiple conversations—supporting the phenomenological strategy of the qualitative study. Listening to the participant's experiences is critical in understanding the connection to their personal identities and to their experiences as a reverse transfer student. During each of the interviews, I asked open questions to each participant in order to openly share their experiences addressed in the specific interview series.

The first interview protocol was designed to understand the post-secondary educational experiences of the participant. The interview protocol included questions to address the participant's initial perceptions of the reverse transfer program. The second interview protocol included information in regards to the extent to which participants were motivated to choose the reverse transfer program and the meaning they made of concurrently earning two post-secondary degrees. The first and second interview protocol were influenced by Laura Rendón's (1994) validation theory.

Rendón's (1994) validation theory examines the impact of academic and interpersonal validation on student's experiences in higher education. For instance, validation can include institutional faculty and staff members who show individualized concern for students or a set of close friends who easily share concerns with one another (Rendón, 1994). The third interview served as a reflection on the individual impact of the reverse transfer program. Each participant served as an expert on their experiences as a reverse transfer student and the subsequent phenomenon associated with it. From the participants' responses, I looked for a pattern of phenomenon for reverse transfer

students. This study seeks to serve as an exploration of reverse transfer students that are currently at a four-year institution. As a result, higher education practitioners can view the significance of experiences drawn by reverse transfer students to maximize the impact of reverse transfer programs. The following describes the research questions used to inform the study.

**Research Questions**

The following are the two research questions associated with this study.

a. What motivates students to choose a reverse transfer program?

b. What meaning do students make of earning an associate degree while concurrently seeking a baccalaureate degree?

**Definition of Terms**

The following term, reverse transfer student, is used throughout this paper. As a result, it is necessary to provide a clear definition for readers to understand the nature of the study and its subsequent findings.

*Reverse transfer students*: This term is used to describe a post-secondary student population. As described by Marling (2013), a reverse transfer student describes one that earns academic credit at a four-year institution with the prospect of reversely transferring academic credit back to a two-year institution for the purposes of earning an associate degree. In many circumstances, a student may have begun post-secondary education at a two-year institution before transferring to a four-year institution.

**Delimitations**

As the qualitative study was designed, there were a series of boundaries that served as delimitations to the research process. Participants were eligible to be in the study if

they were enrolled at Central Midwest University (CMU), were over the age of 18, and had currently chosen the reverse transfer program at CMU. CMU is a pseudonym for a public, four-year research institution in the Midwest region of the United States. The age range was determined to exclude children from the study. The participants needed to be enrolled at CMU in order to be eligible to participate in the specific reverse transfer program targeted for this study. Finally, the participants needed to have chosen to participate in the CMU reverse transfer program in order to describe their motivations for entering the initiative.

**Limitations**

The limitations of the qualitative study are listed and addressed below. While this study included four participants, it may be viewed as a small sampling limitation considering the amount of reverse transfer students in higher education. However, the purpose of the study was to explore the meaning participants made of concurrently seeking two post-secondary degrees. This study does not generalize or summarize the experiences of reverse transfer students, rather details the essence of the experiences of four participants (Mertens, 2015). The intention of the qualitative study is to demonstrate the impact that this reverse transfer program had upon these reverse transfer students at CMU.

The recruitment and interview process was a limitation of the study. I had little familiarity regarding the population of reverse transfer students at CMU and was dependent upon the CMU community college coordinator to forward recruitment materials to applicable CMU students for participation. This allowed me to conveniently promote this study to a wider audience of eligible reverse transfer participants, however,

limiting the population studied to a single institution.  The interview process provided another limitation of the study.  Participants were asked their preference of either face-to-face interviews or via Skype™ telecommunications.  Participants who elected to Skype™ were faced with issues regarding wireless connectivity and/or volume issues.  Both forms of communication issues that occurred during Skype™ telecommunications were rectified before continuing each of the interview protocols with participants.  During the Skype™ sessions, when there was a break in wireless connectivity that hindered the interview, I would ask the participant to repeat their response a second time.  When the interview was not hindered by connectivity issues, the interview protocols and discussion was not a limitation.  There were no technical issues with email communications.  This might have caused participants to rethink and rephrase their initial responses as they were forced to repeat their conversation, impacting their responses and perhaps feeling frustrated by repeating themselves.

Time was a major limitation that affected the execution of the study.  I am currently pursuing a master's degree at the University of Nebraska – Lincoln and the completion of a graduate thesis was a graduation requirement.  The graduate requirement needed to be proposed, executed, and defended within one academic year.  This limitation conflicted with the extent to which greater and longer relationships could have been established between the participants and myself.  Since I was only in contact with participants during a series of three interviews, it is a possibility that the extent of shared information between the participant and me was limited.  Additionally, I would have been able to spend more time analyzing the data.  Although I have confidence in the findings presented in this study, more time may have allowed me to analyze the data over

time, to extend the participant pool to other campuses, and/or to form stronger relationships between myself and the participants, which might have resulted in different conclusions for this study.

**Assumptions**

I considered a series of assumptions regarding the reverse transfer student population. The first assumption included the impact of choosing the reverse transfer program and being affected by others in the process. I assumed that reverse transfer students were impacted by university and/or community college personnel communicating the tenants of the program, promoting students to participate. Additionally, I assumed that participants were motivated by a series of academic and interpersonal validating agents, as outlined by Rendón's (1994) validation theory. This is supported by scholarly literature that suggests transfer students are affected by a myriad of external and internal agents that impact them after transitioning between higher education institutions (Allen et al., 2014; Ellis, 2012; Gard, Paton, & Gosselin, 2012; Laanan, 1996). I suspected that participants might suggest higher education personnel, professors, family, friends, or personal motivation as factors that impact their decision to choose the CMU reverse transfer program.

These beliefs were also shaped by my personal experiences as a student in higher education and my role as a student affairs practitioner. I was motivated to transfer community college credits by a guidance counselor and several teachers as a high school student. While I do not consider myself a transfer student, the nature of recognizing earned credit was significant while transiting from high school into higher education. Earning college credit through a community college before I started my first semester in

college gave me confidence that I could succeed in higher education. Chapter Three discusses the ways I address personal assumptions of the population studied in order to ensure the quality of this study.

**Conclusion**

The following study explores the meaning participants made of concurrently earning two post-secondary degrees and the motivations associated with choosing a reverse transfer program. As a newly emerging nontraditional student population, the literature regarding reverse transfer students is limited. In order to maximize and evolve the execution of reverse transfer programs across the United States, it is significant to hear this student population share their experiences of reverse transfer and its significance to them. A series of three interviews were conducted with four reverse transfer students at CMU. Participant data were coded to determine the impact of reverse transfer programs and their experiences. The intent of this study is to better understand why students might choose a reverse transfer program. Doing so will provide higher education administrators a better understanding of a newly emerging college student population: the reverse transfer student.

**Chapter Two**

**Literature Review**

**Introduction**

The following literature review includes content that addresses the (a) historical framework of community college and four-year institutional missions, (b) the conflicts associated with transferring between institutions, and (c) the emergence of reverse transfer programs. It is important to recognize these three areas of content to provide historical context for the development of reverse transfer programs as well as to illustrate the way reverse transfer programs satisfy the missions of community colleges and four-year institutions to academically and professionally support the transfer student. In addition, the literature review provides a basis for transfer students' personal, social, and academic conflicts to demonstrate how reverse transfer programs may alleviate such experiences.

**Historic Missions of Community Colleges**

This section explains the historical context of community colleges and four-year institutions' mission statements and educational values (Ayers, 2002; Bragg, 2001; Hegeman, Davies, & Banning, 2007; Kalogrides & Grodsky, 2011; Long & Kurlaender, 2009). It is important to understand the missions of the community colleges because their missions suggest to reinforce the goals of reverse transfer and to support student meaning for concurrently earning two post-secondary degrees. Presently, community colleges and traditional four-year institutions express various mission statements, values, and beliefs. For higher education institutions, these statements are ubiquitous and are often created and amended to serve the needs of the institution's student body (Ayers,

2002).  Until recently, however, mission statements or values that are embraced by a

higher education institution were not often clearly articulated, publicized or known.  This

need for goal setting or "academically planning" in academia was coined by Keller

(1983, p. 141).  Later, I will discuss how Keller's organizational model provides benefits

for academic planning in higher education.

Community colleges have largely sought to serve the needs of nearby communities.

This is due in part to a community college fundamental mission: access.  The nature of

this mission illustrates an assumption that community colleges are higher education

settings for a variety of student and adult populations (Ayers, 2002).  However,

historically speaking, many students enrolled in community colleges sought transfer

skills and coursework in preparation for work at a four-year institution—including

reverse transfer students.  As the demographics of students and disciplines at community

colleges have evolved, the missions of community colleges have transformed the

expected outcomes of students, staff, and community colleges (Ayers, 2002).  Previous

research on the missions of community colleges has identified three primary mission

components: (a) responsiveness to the needs of the community, (b) diversity, (c)

excellence and development.  Each of these concepts will be discussed in the following

sections.

**Responsiveness to the service needs of the community.**  The needs of the

surrounding community of community colleges are a likely indicator of an institution's

missions (Ayers, 2002; Bragg, 2001; Hegeman et al., 2007).  Locally, traditionally-aged

students, adult learners, and those seeking to transfer to a four-year institution are able to

take advantage of the benefits of a community college.  Professional training, academic

coursework, and volunteering opportunities are key components of community colleges that provide a service to the community it serves. For reverse transfer students, community colleges align with the nature of their academic and professional needs.

As community college students transition to a four-year institution, there is an emerging need for community colleges to respond to this population's efforts to attain an associate degree. Hegeman, Davies, and Banning (2007) state a mission for community colleges is responding to the emerging needs of the surrounding community. In fact, Hegeman (2007) argues that community colleges are serving the rapidly changing needs of a community in response to providing online learning options. Community colleges are responding to the changing needs for transfer students through reverse transfer. For reverse transfer students, the opportunity to engage in coursework at local community colleges before transitioning demonstrates a constituency for community colleges to serve. Carrying out the responsibility to serve the needs of a community is often a responsive challenge, however, leads to a rich assessment of outcomes for the benefits of students, personnel, and overall campus climate (Ayers, 2002; Bragg, 2001; Hegeman et al., 2007). Reverse transfer students are a newly emerging population of students, however, community colleges can respond to this change for institutional and individual benefits.

**Diversity.** Evidence of personnel and student body diversity is also demonstrated in the mission statements of community colleges (Hegeman et al., 2007, Kalogrides & Grodsky, 2011). In 2000, data from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System of the National Center for Education Statistics, minority and first-generation, low-income (FGLI) students were more likely to attend community colleges as opposed to four-year

institutions (Wirt et al., 2000).  Complementing affordability, promoting diversity has increased representation of students at community college by promoting career opportunities and social mobility for students (Kalogrides & Grodsky, 2011).  Reverse transfer programs offer a pathway for concurrent post-secondary degree completion for a diverse population of students who may not have originally planned on taking courses at a four-year institution.  Reverse transfer students not only vary by their unique diversity of experiences, but also differ in the amount of credits that are transferrable between both the two- and four-year institution.  Encouraging different ways of thinking and by welcoming the message and commitment to diversity, students are exposed to the variety of ideas and opportunities at the community college.  Ideas, including reverse transfer, provide options and potential pathways for students who are seeking baccalaureate degrees at a four-year institution.

**Excellence and development.**  Excellence in academics, career preparation, and a quality educational experience are additional highlights of community college mission statements (Ayers, 2002; Bragg, 2001; Hegeman et al., 2007; Long & Kurlaender, 2009). Specifically, research has indicated that community colleges emphasize a democratic view of academic excellence, not only through open enrollment, but also by permitting low costs (Long & Kurlaender, 2009).  The results of the previously described cornerstones of community college mission statements underline its core values of excellence and development.  Competition across higher education institutions encourages community colleges to specialize in disciplines or niches often not offered at the four-year institution (Ayers, 2002).  These special disciplines provide educational

excellence for a specialized institution—an indication of the educational excellence of community colleges.

Community colleges also aim to develop the population of students they serve—individually and as a whole (Ayers, 2002). Broadly, community colleges seek to complement the ideas of developing the student academically and through the use of the services offered by the institution. For instance, Ayers (2002) found that mission statements of community colleges in the southern United States reference student development and excellence in a variety of methods:

> Thirty-seven [community college] mission statements employed "quality," "excellence," "standards," or "soundness" as a complement to educational offerings, programs or opportunities. Eighteen [community college] mission statement used these terms in reference to teaching and learning, instruction, or courses. Other mission statement used "quality" or "excellence" as a descriptor of support services, community services, personnel, work environment, physical environment, the learning environment, and in one case, research. (p. 21)

Student development at the community college does not appear to be concentrated in the classroom; rather, the missions of community colleges are favorable for development to occur across academic services, support services, and at the workplace. For the population of reverse transfer students, academic and service excellence may serve as important meaning of concurrently earning two post-secondary degrees before and after transferring to a four-year institution.

**Conflicts Between Community College and Four-year Institutional Missions**

While the tenants of community college missions described above echo the missions of four-year institutions, some remain distinctive of the community college. Wang, Gibson, Salinas, Solis, and Slate (2007) examined the thematic differences two- and four-year institutions in the state of Texas. Both two- and four-year institutions outline themes including collaboration, critical thinking, access, and technology (Wang, Gibson, Salinas, Solis & Slate, 2007). Whereas academic skill development is a primary focus of community colleges, statistically, vocational and technical skills were a significant difference between two-year and four-year institutions (Wang et al., 2007). This demonstrates that two-year institutions provide a message of offering job training skills for a variety of vocational careers while also valuing the importance the excellence of academic achievement (Wang et al., 2007). However, this disconnect becomes problematic when describing the academic interests of reverse transfer students.

Since the population of community college students are not a monolithic group with a universal academic goal, two-year institutions that specialize in vocational training might diminish the academic intentions of a critical population of students. While the academic demands of community college students are mentioned in an institution's mission statement, reverse transfer students are a unique population who also seek education at a four-year institution. If community college missions have indicated skill development and/or vocational training, then it is also important to harmonize both missions for the benefits of reverse transfer students. Therefore, it is important to recognize the missions of reverse transfer students to encourage concurrent post-secondary degree attainment. Community college missions must place emphasis upon academic transfer and vocational skills.

**Keller's Academic Planning Model**

Reverse transfer programs are an emerging phenomenon in higher education that respond to the needs of transfer students and is supported by Keller's (1983) academic planning model. Keller's model of academic planning stemmed from six major, contemporary shifts in higher education: a changing student demographic, an overhauled college curriculum, competition across colleges and universities, technology, changing faculty demographics, and governmental oversight (Keller, 1983). As Keller (1983) notes, strategic academic planning for higher education is an ongoing active process that focuses on the priorities of the institution's leaders and aligns the institution with its ever-changing environment. While the educational environment has changed since the concepts of academic planning were introduced in the 1980s, Keller's ideas are relevant to the study because of the emerging nature of reverse transfer initiatives across the United States. Keller's ideas of adapting to the changing educational environment strikes cause for institutions—both community college and four-year—to revisit their academic planning and missions in response to the needs of this population of students. Learning transfer students' motivations for earning an associate degree aligns with understanding the needs of these students and how important it is to earn an associate degree in the process of earning a bachelor's degree.

Ayers (2002) best articulates the canon of research that responds to the needs of the students transitioning from a community college to a four-year institution by noting that "community college leaders must articulate the adaptive challenges ahead if colleges are to respond to learner needs in a rapidly changing environment" (p. 11). Similarly, Keller (1983) identifies the need for institutional leaders to become an "active defender,

analyzer, or prospector" instead of a "passive reactor" in response to strategic planning at

institutions (p. 144).  While research experts provide ample support for institutions to

actively respond with a changing environment, recent literature suggests a disconnect

between mission statements at four-year institutions and community colleges (Wang et

al., 2007).  These disconnects will be examined in a later section.  This is problematic for

reverse transfer students that are concurrently seeking two-post secondary degrees.  If

both institutions do not support reverse transfer students though their mission statements,

then this population of students may not feel supported in their educational endeavors.

Thus, the interests of the emerging population of reverse transfer students may not be

fully represented by the disjointed mission statements of community colleges and four-

year institutions.

**Transfer Students**

Reverse transfer is a newer phenomenon than a traditional transfer from community

college to four-year institutions or between a two- or four-year institutions.  Therefore,

there is a wealth of literature about the experiences of transfer students.  Since there is

less known specifically about the experiences of reverse transfer students, understanding

the literature about transfer students gives some context to the issues faced by this

population of students.  Students who transition from a community college to a four-year

institution, colloquially referred to as transfer students, have a variety of goals—

educationally and professionally (Townsend & Wilson, 2006).  However, during this

transition and while beginning coursework at a four-year institution, research has

demonstrated that transfer students have conflicts associated with this change in a variety

of ways (Townsend & Wilson, 2006).  These conflicts include but are not limited to

social integration on-campus, academic integration, and academic and career advisement (Allen et al., 2014; Gard et al., 2012; Laanan, 1996; Townsend & Wilson, 2006).  The following sections explain in more detail the conflicts that transfer students experience before, during, and after the transition from a community college to a four-year institution.  These conflicts are important to understand what is currently known about the transfer student experience.

     **Conflicts of transferring.**  Academic performance, student expectations, social connections, and counseling are some of the conflicts experienced by transfer students and are explained here.  The term *transfer shock* refers to the characterization of a student's dip in first-semester academic performance after transitioning from a community college to a four-year institution (Laanan, 1996).  This phenomenon suggests that academic performance is impacted immediately after a transfer student transitions onto a new campus.  A difference in perceptions and expectations of academic rigor often provide transfer students little anticipation for the demands of university courses (Gard et al., 2012).  Without preparation, a student's academic performance will impact their transition and success, especially during the initial academic term (Gard et al., 2012).  Reverse transfer students differ in many ways, including the time each student transfers from a community college to a four-year institution.  Transferring after one year completion at a community college is different than transferring after several years at a community college.  Academic performance inside of the classroom is one of many factors that are affected by transitioning into a new higher education setting, but social connections and counseling also impact transfer student retention and success (Allen et al., 2014; Schmertz & Carney, 2013; Townsend & Wilson, 2006).

*Financial and social adjustments.* Transfer students have indicated apprehensions in regards to transferring from a community college to a four-year institution. These feelings of discomfort are associated before and after transferring from one institution to another: including financial apprehensions and social interactions. I will begin to describe transfer students' perceptions of financial apprehensions below.

Before adjusting to a new campus, community college students describe concerns not only with the financial cost, but also with personnel that communicate financial aid details (Gard et al., 2012). According to Gard, Paton, and Gosselin (2012), these reported issues for transfer students indicate a concern regarding payment options and the communication of a financial aid (Gard et al., 2012). In fact, Gard et al. identify a series of perceived financial conflicts that are experienced by transfer students:

> One student expressed "sticker shock" at the difference in cost between the community college and the university. Another student noted that the deadline for university scholarship applications had passed. Some students mentioned that there were limited scholarships available for students enrolled in the university program. (p. 839)

Transfer students acknowledge a variety of financial concerns and conflicts before entering a four-year institution, which may cause a delay with regard to academic advising or promoting reverse transfer policies. While there are certainly financial burdens attached to entering higher education, the apparent commonness of financial conflicts among transfer students has shed light upon the realities of obstacles faced when transferring from one institution to another. If financial concerns at a four-year

institution are obstacles expressed when transferring, then it might impact the extent to which transfer students understand the tenants of a reverse transfer program.

In addition to the financial costs of transferring, students who transfer between institutions potentially cause disruptions to their social connections and interactions inside and out of the classroom. Once transfer students transition to a new institution, students interact with a multi-dimensional campus climate. A campus climate refers to the student interactions across multiple dimensions of diversity, including, but not limited to, race, ethnicity, and gender (Laanan, 2001). The difference between the expectations and reality of a four-year institution's campus climate has been documented through the lens of transfer students. In fact, research has indicated that transfer students perceive difficulties inside and out of the classroom after transferring from a community college (Townsend, 1995). First, I will describe the campus climate within the classroom.

Transfer students describe a different classroom atmosphere when comparing experiences between a community college and a four-year institution. Townsend (1995) provided evidence that students are competitively present, while at the same time providing little assistance to the transfer student. A White, female, transfer student described her experiences in the classroom as "more competition than [she] expected. At the university, students aren't interested in helping one another" (Townsend, 1995, p. 185). Similarly, another female participant described the four-year institution's classroom climate as "more competitive" than the community college to the point at which she "always [has] to watch out for [her]self" or "someone will step over [her]" (Townsend, 1995, p. 185). The findings of the Townsend (1995) study are critical to understand the dynamics of the transition process for transfer students. For the purposes

of this study, it is important to examine the factors associated with overcoming these potential transfer conflicts. Perhaps reverse transfer programs instill confidence in students that they are capable and will thrive in the four-year institution classroom, thereby limiting the perceived level of competition as described in the Townsend (1995) findings. Understanding the motivations for students to enter into a reverse transfer may provide evidence of the importance of overcoming in-class climate conflicts.

Outside of the classroom, transfer students have detailed their experiences embracing campus climate after transferring. Researchers have indicated the impact of nontraditional and transfer student populations and their perceptions of campus climate upon enrollment at the four-year institution (Ellis, 2012; Laanan, 2001; Smedley, Myers & Harrell, 1993). Specifically, Smedley, Myers, and Harrell (1993) identify psychological and sociocultural stresses associated with a campus climate for racial and ethnic minority transfer students. While stresses affect students' perception of a four-year institution's campus climate, social integration with other students also impacts the student's perception of the climate. This is especially true for nontraditional transfer students or students who do not identify as the archetype 18- to 22-year-old college student. It is important to note that Ellis (2012) identified transfer students entering with junior standing at a four-year institution found it "hard to become a part of the university cohorts that were formed during the freshman year at the university" (p. 80). Transfer students fit the term nontraditional student based upon their academic and personal experiences. The reality is that conflicts are found within and outside of the classroom and affect those throughout the transfer student population. Understanding the rationale

behind why reverse transfer students consider a reverse transfer program may provide information as to how this population of students overcomes a series of campus conflicts.

*Academic advising between institutions*.  Community college and university personnel as well as students acknowledge the importance of school, personal, and career advising (Allen & Smith, 2008).  Specifically, pretransfer students, individuals that have intentions to transfer from a community college to a four-year institution, indicate that degree and general education course options are the most important needs (Allen et al., 2014).  Reverse transfer students specifically will benefit from cross-institutional advising.  The importance of relaying transcripts, knowledge, and advising tools are significant to student success and retention post-transfer.

However, research studies have illustrated that students' perceptions and expectations of advising between institutions are dissatisfactory (Allen et al., 2014). Allen, Smith, and Muehleck (2014) indicated emerging themes regarding pre- and post-transfer student advising experience including "inaccurate and inconsistent information", "inaccessibility of advising", and a "lack of individualization" (p. 363).  One student, according to Allen et al., indicated the inconsistencies and dissatisfaction associated with advising:

> Honestly, I cannot believe the incredibly low value of advising here.  I have been given completely false or incorrect information three times in one school year. For some reason advising here is full of inaccuracies and mistakes and omissions. I'm not the only one to experience this." (p. 363)

This inhibits advising success and resources for the population of reverse transfer students as they leave the community college for the four-year institution.  Providing

supportive services for transfer students across both institutions is necessary for this population to understand their individual academic progress.

**Rendón's Validation Theory**

Rendón's theory of validation was used as a theoretical framework for this study, in order to express the way that diverse, nontraditional populations of reverse transfer students experience the campus climate when transitioning from the community college to the four-year institution. The diverse ages, working statuses, and family responsibilities of student transferring from a community college to a four-year institution demonstrate a greater likelihood of nontraditional status. As a result, this study was influenced by Rendón's validation theory. The theory of validation holds that academic and interpersonal methods of affirmation contribute to success in college for nontraditional students (Rendón, 1994). As described by Rendón (1994), validation is "an enabling, confirming and supportive process initiated by in-and out-of-class agents that foster academic interpersonal development" (p. 44). These described "agents" include, but are not limited to significant others, classmates, friends, college staff, professors, and family members (Rendón, 1994).

Rendón describes fostering academic and interpersonal validation while researching nontraditional students at a community college. I contend this model also applies to nontraditional reverse transfer students who have transitioned to a four-year institution that may experience similar transfer conflicts as described in previous sections. Academic validation refers to actions that support students "trust[ing] their innate capacity to learn and to acquire confidence in being a college student" (Rendón, 1994, p. 40). For example, a military veteran student that shares and contributes their experiences

during a class discussion may foster academic validation (Rumann & Bondi, 2015).

Interpersonal validation refers to the actions that foster "personal and social adjustment

occurr[ing] both inside and outside of class" (Rendón, 1994, p. 42). Again, a military

veteran student may experience validation when a professor grants an assignment with a

flexible due date in order to support their experiences as a nontraditional student

(Rumann & Bondi, 2015). Reverse transfer students are faced with embracing a new

academic environment while transferring to a four-year institution. The impact of

validation—by confirming and supporting a student's experiences—through in- and out-

of-class agents serve to promote self-worth and student development. Since there have

been a number of barriers that may be experienced during reverse transfer, validation

theory could provide some insights on how students may be able to overcome them.

**Reverse Transfer**

A reverse transfer program typically involves an agreement between a four-year

institution and community college with regards to how students earn academic credit

towards degree completion. Articulation agreements are instruments that assist students

in regards to credit transfer between community colleges and four-year institutions

(Anderson, Sun & Alfonso, 2006). Such agreements serve as a platform for students to

move between specific institutions or throughout higher education systems (Anderson et

al., 2006). However, recent student demographic data has indicated that transfer students

from states with statewide articulation agreements have the same probability of

transferring from a community college to a four-year institution as a student from a state

without an articulation agreement (Anderson et al., 2006). Recently, a new higher

education and private foundation partnership has evolved to increase the amount of

students attaining an associate degree while concurrently seeking baccalaureate degrees, which will be explained next.

Partnerships between higher education and independent organizations have launched a new strategic partnership called Credit When It's Due (CWID) (Taylor & Bragg, 2015). This initiative, also known as reverse transfer, is a recognition of post-secondary credits—both at a two- and four-year institution—earned in the form of an associate degree (Marling, 2013). Academic credits from a university are transferred back to the student's community college for completion of the associate degree (Marling, 2013). Without programs like these, many community college students transfer to a four-year institution without a degree. Legislatively, 13 states offer a formalized reverse transfer program. Programs have a varied degree of credit minimum and maximum transfers between institutions (Garcia, 2015). One state in particular, Missouri, has legislatively enacted a policy that facilitates the reverse transfer process across higher education institutions.

According to House Bill 1042 (2012), the state of Missouri, under the direction of the Coordinating Board for Higher Education, is required to develop a policy that facilitates reverse transfer across higher education institutions within the state (Missouri House Bill NO. 1042, 2012). According to the policy, Missouri House Bill 1042 serves to address the following policy objectives, which are copied here directly from the bill:

1. Increase the degree attainment for students in the state of Missouri.
2. Ensure that all eligible students have the opportunity to be awarded a first associates degree that reflects their educational efforts and allows

them to compete more successfully in other academic arenas and the workforce.

3. Create a streamlined, technology enhanced process that will assist four-year and two-year institutions in transferring student credits more efficiently, securely, and successfully. (Missouri House Bill NO. 1042, 2012)

The residency requirement, 15 credit hours through an in-state two-year institution, qualifies residents to participate in the Missouri Reverse Transfer Program (Missouri House Bill NO. 1042, 2012). Therefore, the initiative serves to increase eligibility for reverse transfer students in higher education and to prepare competitive graduates across the state.

Reverse transfer initiatives are generating a newly implemented policy changes to the broad advising, collaborative, and communicative roles between two and four-year institutions. Recently, a case study of higher education professionals in Hawaii, indicated that the policy and implementation of reverse transfer was impacted by the following characteristics: (a) the presence of strong leadership; (b) the consideration of implications for policy, perception and personnel; and (c) the communication to and the involvement of staff (Robinson, 2015). This indicates how a reverse transfer program can be implemented by higher education administrators.

**Conclusion**

Current and emerging research on reverse transfer students is limited. There is a lack of evidence that illustrates a reverse transfer student's motivation to opt-in to a reverse transfer program, nor articulate the meaning of concurrently earning an associate

and bachelor's degree.  Instead, scholarly literature reflects the experiences of traditional and nontraditional transfer students, indicating social, advising, and academic conflicts associated with the transfer student experience at a four-year institution.  To this end, it is important to study why transfer students may be motivated by an individual, personal experience, self-motivation or a combination to choose a reverse transfer program in addition to understand the meaning of concurrently earning two post-secondary degrees. Understanding transfer students' experiences and motivations to choose a reverse transfer program, will assist higher education professionals determine ways to promote and expand these initiatives.  By seeking to understand the motivations for students to become a reverse transfer student and the meaning reverse transfer students make of concurrently seeking two post-baccalaureate degrees, professionals will better support this population throughout their education.  This study addresses these issues as perceived by reverse transfer students.  Chapter Three will explain the methodology employed for this research study.

**Chapter Three**

**Methodology**

**Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this qualitative study is to examine the motivations students have to participate in a reverse transfer program and what meaning does this population of students make of concurrently earning two post-secondary degrees.  The emergence of reverse transfer programs across the United States is an unexamined subject of research, which means there is lack of literature detailing this population's experiences.  This study serves to explore and to discuss the significance of transfer students participating in a reverse transfer program.

**Research Paradigm**

The limited literature regarding transfer students and their experiences participating in a reverse transfer program provided me the motivation for my qualitative study.  This is not to say that the transfer student experience and individual student motivations for participating in a reverse transfer program could only be studied through a qualitative process; rather, another qualitative, quantitative, or mixed-methods study would examine another component to the reverse transfer student experience.

This study was performed under the influence of the constructivist framework. The constructivist framework or paradigm is guided by the premise that "knowledge is socially constructed by people" involved in the study and researchers must attempt to comprehend the knowledge of the lived experience (Mertens, 2015 p. 16). Constructivism seeks to examine the experiences of those living it in order for the researcher "to understand the complex world of lived experiences" (Mertens, 2015, p.

16). For this study, reverse transfer students were interviewed to understand their lived experiences. Additionally, the paradigm describes the research products as being informed by the values of the researchers (Mertens, 2015). The values of the researcher can inform a variety of methodological decisions including reflexivity, journaling, and debriefing as part of the process to attempt to understand the lived experiences of participants (Mertens, 2015). Reflexivity, journaling, and debriefing are important methodological tenants to construct a qualitative study. I kept a journal that included details of each participant's experiences, which I would ask for clarity during and after the interview. I also sought a peer debriefer to review the study's major themes, which I will discuss in a later section.

**Qualitative Research**

The following describes the qualitative study which details the meaning and motivations of transfer students to choose a reverse transfer program. Also, this qualitative study describes the meaning that transfer students make when concurrently seeking two post-secondary degrees. As defined by Maxwell (2013), qualitative research, "involves interconnection and interaction among the different design components" (p. 3). This served as the basis for my interview series with each reverse transfer participant. Qualitative research seeks to involve a series of contextual and interpretative practices used to interpret the world (Mertens, 2015). Collecting a variety of physical, contextual, and observational materials describes methods of qualitative data collection (Mertens, 2015). As the primary researcher, I sought to gather and analyze information regarding the reverse transfer student experience in regards to those participating in a reverse transfer program.

The researcher has an interpretative role while performing qualitative research (Creswell, 2013). In fact, the researcher often is involved in a prolonged experience while working with participants (Seidman, 2005). According to Seidman (2005), the first interview should incorporate the participant's contextual history, the second interview should include details of the participant's experience, and the third interview should include a reflection of the participant's experience (Seidman, 2005). As a result, I decided to perform a series of three interviews with each participant to establish rapport and have more time to better understand participants' experiences (Seidman, 2005).

**Phenomenology**

The study was performed with a phenomenological design. At the foundation of phenomenological research lies the individual's experience (Mertens, 2015). Rooted in philosophical tenants, the phenomenological design describes a method that operates within daily life (van Manen, 2014). Phenomenology is based upon the methods of hermeneutic phenomenology or "a method of abstemious reflection on the basic structures of the lived experience of human existence" (van Manen, 2014, p. 20). In this qualitative phenomenological study, the experience or phenomenon described by participants includes the essence of being a reverse transfer student. Furthermore, Seidman (2005) explains the importance of building rapport while conducting interviews with participants. Following the common protocol in phenomenology, I chose to conduct a three-round, semi-structured interview series and shared my personal experiences relevant to each interview with the participants (Seidman, 2005). Also, I provided the participants an opportunity to reflect after each interview to provide response clarity (Mertens, 2015). Finally, throughout the interview process, I maintained a note-taking

journal that included personal responses, reactions, and thoughts regarding the participant's commentary to further understand the essence of the participant's experiences. These memos were helpful in developing my thoughts and understanding my connection to each participant's experiences (Maxwell, 2013).

**Recruitment and Research Setting**

Next, I describe the recruitment strategies and research setting. This is to aid in determining the transferability of the qualitative research. Mertens (2015) regards the transferability of research as a concept that provides readers a means to compare research in one situation to another situation based upon similarities and differences. The following describes the recruitment and research setting of the qualitative study.

The research setting was a large, public, research institution in the Midwest region of the United States. The participants that were involved in the study were over the age of 18 at the beginning of the study. The recruited participants were enrolled at the same institution within the United States and were identified to me by a staff member in a student services office. The singular institution, large, public, research institution in the Midwest region of the United States that was involved in the study will be referred to by a pseudonym, Central Midwestern University (CMU). CMU is primarily a residential campus, a public land-grant institution, and is a predominantly White institution (PWI). As of fall 2014, CMU reported about 17,000 total students enrolled, including around 15,000 undergraduate and 3,000 graduate students. The total number of transfer students at CMU totaled around 3,500. This institution is located in a state that has legislatively mandated the installation of reverse transfer programs between all its community colleges and four-year institutions. The statewide initiative has provided a robust rollout of

reverse transfer programs, including at CMU, to bring about a partnership between community colleges and four-year institutions.

**Participant Selection**

The following section describes the process by which participants were selected for the study. Mertens (2015) describes criterion sampling as a method to recruit individuals for a study based upon a set of criteria. The criteria to select individuals from CMU was made possible by emailing the CMU community college coordinator, detailing that participants should meet the following criteria: (a) be over the age of 18 and (b) have formally chose the reverse transfer program at CMU. The community college coordinator at CMU has access to contact information for CMU students who had formally chosen the reverse transfer program, which allowed access to participants for the study. The CMU community college coordinator sent a recruitment letter, provided in the appendix, via email to CMU students that have formally chose the reverse transfer program. The email was forwarded to each CMU student's personal and university email accounts. The number of emails forwarded to reverse transfer students at CMU totaled over 220.

After the recruitment letter was forwarded to all CMU students that have formally chose the reverse transfer program, participants were selected on a first-come, first-served basis. The entire body of reverse transfer students at CMU were notified by email. Those that responded and met the criteria for the study were selected to participate. In an attempt to avoid a biased sample, the participants were selected on a "first-come, first-served" basis after meeting the criteria presented in the recruitment email.

Demographic information was collected for each of the participants (Table 1). Following this chapter, the participant profiles will be discussed with detail.

**Table 1. Participant Demographic Information**

| Participant Demographic Information | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Participant | Pseudonym | Age | Race | Gender |
| 1* | Rachel | 21 | White | Female |
| 2 | Douglas | 23 | White | Male |
| 3 | Kim | 47 | White | Female |
| 4 | Olivia | 59 | Black | Female |

*Table 1. Participant demographic information. *Denotes textual responses*

During the first interview protocol, each participant was provided the opportunity to describe themselves and identities including preferred pseudonym, age, race, and gender. Participants identified their co-curricular and personal interests and obligations as they described their experiences as a transfer student at CMU.

**Interview Protocol**

Three interview protocols were created for the purposes of understanding the motivations that students chose a reverse transfer program and the significance of concurrently earning two degrees. The first interview, on average, lasted between 30-45 minutes and detailed the participant's background, experiences as a student, and their initial perceptions of the institution's reverse transfer program. The second interview, on average, lasted between 30-60 minutes and detailed student motivations for participating in a reverse transfer program. The third and final interview, on average, lasted between

15-30 minutes and served as a follow-up and clarification interview session that reflected upon the previous two interviews. Interview protocol is included in Appendix D.

Participants were interviewed in quiet, secure, and private locations. As a researcher, I embrace the notion that transfer students are typically involved in many curricular and personal responsibilities, including but not limited to, raising children, work-related obligations, and supporting their family. As a result, I decided to arrange interviews to occur via Skype™ telecommunications if approved by the participant. If the participant was willing to meet with me, I was willing to meet the participant in a private, secure location at the CMU campus library. Although the participants were not willing to meet in person, reverse transfer students that were interviewed mentioned their many family, career, and education obligations. In order to respect their time and value their experiences as reverse transfer students, I determined that it was necessary to pursue an interview that respected their time. Hence, I requested Skype™ sessions and the participants agreed to conduct the interviews virtually. Due to scheduling conflicts, one participant was willing to submit textual responses to each of the three interview protocol questions via email. Including this participant acknowledges the schedule rigidity of the participant's schedules. Three participants completed the Skype™ virtual interviews for this study. Each of the four participants conducted each of the three sets of interview protocols. In total, twelve interviews were conducted with four reverse transfer students involved in the reverse transfer program at CMU.

The first interview focused on two concepts: understanding the background of the participant and their discovery of the reverse transfer program at CMU. Laura Rendón's (1994) validation theory describes the supportive process by which students are

confirmed by "in- and out-of-class agents that foster academic and interpersonal development" (p. 44). While transitioning from a two-year institution to a four-year institution, participants may have had difficulty with academic, social, and interpersonal transitions. Also, while transfer students may experience forms of validation outside and inside the classroom, participants in the study at CMU are in a university environment that has historically favored non-transfer, traditional students. It was not only important to understand each participant's educational and personal background, but also vital to comprehend their educational experiences at the two-year and four-year institution. In particular, I am interested in understanding the ways transfer students feel validated. For instance, I asked participants about the extent to which a staff member or advisor served as a resource to understand the CMU reverse transfer program in the second interview protocol, which might provide a source of validation for reverse transfer students. Additionally, it is important to understand the essence of the participant's initial perceptions of the reverse transfer program at CMU. Perhaps, this initial exposure to a reverse transfer program provided motivations and validation during the student's transition.

The second interview protocol was designed to address the participants' motivations for choosing the reverse transfer program at CMU and the meaning to concurrently earn two post-secondary degrees. The interview protocol was designed to incorporate the participant's most vivid details surrounding their experiences as a reverse transfer student. Rendón's (1994) validation theory describes interpersonal validating agents that occur in- and out-of-class. These include, but are not limited to, validation from professors, family, university staff members and students. The questions in the

second interview protocol seek to understand the validation presence or lack thereof for

students before and after choosing the reverse transfer program at CMU. It is important

to understand the motivations for students choosing the reverse transfer program in order

to improve the methods of recruiting other transfer students to enter a reverse transfer

program.

The final interview protocol was designed as a comprehensive reflection upon the

participant's experiences as a reverse transfer student and a summation of the research

study. This protocol included questions that would clarify and/or identify further

discussion points regarding participant's experiences as a reverse transfer student. It was

also a way for the me to understand the previous interviews with the participant.

**Reflexivity**

The following details my positionality and background. I identify as a 24-year-old,

male, Caucasian graduate student that was born in the suburbs of Chicago. I do not

consider myself a transfer student, however, I was able to dual enroll in courses at my

high school that were affiliated with a nearby community college. These credits were

transferred and credit bearing at the undergraduate institution I attended. I was close

friends with two transfer students from nearby community colleges during my experience

as an undergraduate student. One of my friends identifies a single parent that took many

community college courses with the hopes of earning an associate degree. Once she

earned the associate degree, she was able to transfer courses at a four-year institution and

advance in her biology degree program to become a nurse. These personal experiences

with my friends made me empathize with the transfer student experience and visualize

their need for college credit transfer at my undergraduate institution for financial, personal, and academic purposes.

As a graduate student at a public, four-year institution, I was privileged to attend a nationwide, annual conference. I attended a breakout session at NASPA Student Affairs Administrators conference regarding reverse transfer programs and the implementation of such initiatives across the United States. After listening to the breakout session speaker, I was intrigued by the relatively little information about the experiences of those in a reverse transfer program. Also, being an academic advisor made me consider the effect of implementing a reverse transfer program for the transfer student population I advise. Even though the college I serve does not participate in a reverse transfer program, I have listened to transfer students inquire about earning an associate degree at a four-year institution. This study hopes not only to address the needs of the reverse transfer student population, but also to understand the way this population of students are motivated by concurrently seeking two post-secondary degrees.

**Data Management**

The series of interviews were conducted through Skype™ and email on a password-protected laptop computer. Confidentiality was maintained by securing all voice-recorded data on a password-protected hard drive. The participants were identified by voice without specifically identifiable information during the audio recordings. All electronic recordings and data were stored on a password-protected laptop computer. As the primary researcher, I was the only one with access to the data. The transcribed interviews were placed in a Microsoft Word document on a password-protected laptop. The data are reported using direct quotations from the interviews using pseudonyms to

maintain the confidentiality of the participants. Participants had the option to select the pseudonym to protect their identity. In the circumstance with the participant interviewing over email, the responses were secure in password-protected email account. The risk of sending the responses over email was tolerable because the project did not involve more than minimal risk to the participants. After completion of the project, the text and voice responses to the interview protocols were permanently deleted from the hard drives.

**Data Analysis**

I completed the transcription of the all the interviews in order to be immersed in the participant's responses. Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2010) describes the active process of transcribing as a valuable opportunity for the researcher to connect with the research data. Further, Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2010) describes transcribing as an opportunity to demonstrate to the researcher "their own impact on the data collection" during the process of "deep listening, analysis, and interpretation" (p. 304). As noted by Hesse-Biber and Leavy, the process of transcribing was engaging and effective to recall the participants and their responses throughout the study.

Following Maxwell's (2013) strategies for qualitative analysis, I completed data analysis by coding the transcribed interviews. First, I listened to the data recordings and read the interview transcripts twice. As I read the transcripts a second time, I began to write down categories of emerging ideas about motivations students have for choosing a reverse transfer program and the meaning of earning two post-secondary degrees. These categories and data were highlighted using different colors to organize the data into similar themes, thereby assisting me to understand the essence of the reverse transfer student experience. Afterwards, I was able to review personal notes in a journal to recall

memorable conversations and to check my assumptions while the interviews were being held and compare it to the transcripts (Maxwell, 2013). This helped me begin to notice similar ideas described across participants during and after the interview process (Maxwell, 2013). I also used it as a means to serve as a member check to clarify any details or moments throughout the interview process (Maxwell, 2013). If I had a question about a participant's initial exposure to a reverse transfer program, for instance, then I would use the notes to reference back to the conversation and ask the participant to recall and detail the experience. As a result, the following five themes emerged from the participants' data and will be discussed in the following chapter.

**Credibility**

This research process was prolonged and persistent, consisting of three interview series (Mertens, 2015). This was helpful to get to know the participant and learn about their experiences though in-depth conversations (Mertens, 2015). Throughout each of the three interviews, credibility of the research study was checked by continuously asking the participants to clarify their experiences (Mertens, 2015). The participants were able to respond to my interview protocol if a disconnect between my interpretations and the participant's experiences were not aligned. If the interpretations were not aligning, the researcher would ask the participant to clarify their experiences during data collection. The final interview protocol served as a means to identify any gaps in the participant's previous interviews. I provided a summary of my interpretations to participants and asked for their feedback. I incorporated changes based on their feedback, for example, if there were any gaps or misinterpretations in the previous interviews, the participant's clarifications were adjusted in the data analysis process. Specifically, this occurred when

the participants discussed their initial exposure to the CMU reverse transfer program—via Skype™ or via email.

Further, a personal friend, who identifies as a transfer student, served as a peer debriefer to the study's analysis.  Sharing the findings of the study served to provide a plausible account for the emerging themes. This peer debriefer was selected to review the emerging themes and to ask questions to me about the findings in order for me to confront my personal thoughts and values regarding transfer students and the CMU reverse transfer program.

**Institutional Review Board Approval Process**

A prospectus was presented and approved in front of a committee of three Education Administration (EDAD) faculty on September 16th, 2015.  The three-member committee included the secondary EDAD researcher and two EDAD faculty with concentrations in community college research.  The prospectus included an abridged literature review, a methodology, an interview protocol, and an estimated timeline of events for data collection.  After presenting the following sections of the prospectus to the committee, I was provided commentary and suggestions regarding the interview protocol.  Demographic questions were added to the interview protocol.

I was certified in the fall of 2014 for the Consortium of IRB Training Initiative in Human Subjects Protection (CITI).  This training certified me to conduct research on human subjects.  After consultation with the secondary researcher, I submitted all appropriate research proposal materials to the University of Nebraska – Lincoln Institutional Review Board (IRB) on September 21, 2015.  This included, but is not limited to, the interview protocols, recruitment emails, informed consent, research

methodology, description of participants, confidentiality.  In addition, I consulted the IRB at CMU and received tentative approval of the research experience pending IRB approval at the University of Nebraska – Lincoln.  IRB granted approval for the research study on October 9, 2015.  See Appendix A for IRB approval letter.

Research participants received a recruitment email via the community college coordinator at CMU with an attached informed consent form.  Participants were able to indicate their approval to the informed consent document via Skype™ telecommunications before answering the first interview protocol question.  The participants that verbally consented to the informed consent were reminded that their involvement in the research study was to their discretion.  The approved informed consent document and recruitment email template can be located in Appendix B and C, respectively.  At the conclusion of the study, the participants were allowed to be referred to a pseudonym at their choice.  The pseudonyms selected by the participants are encouraged to protect the identity of those that participated in the research study.

**Conclusion**

The phenomenological design of this study was purposefully executed in order to qualitatively understand the meaning students make of concurrently earning two post-secondary degrees and their motivations for choosing a reverse transfer program at CMU. Therefore, three participants were participants in a three-series, semi-structured interview sequence.  One participant engaged in a three-series interview sequence by submitting textual responses through email.  The interviews were personally transcribed and coded to find emerging themes.  The entire research process was approved by the IRB at the

University of Nebraska – Lincoln.  Member checks and peer debrief sessions were incorporated to ensure credibility of the findings.

**Chapter Four**

**Findings**

**Introduction**

The purpose of this qualitative study is to understand the essence of the reverse transfer student experience. Specifically, the study seeks to explore the meaning of students concurrently earning two post-secondary degrees and the motivations that drive students to choose a reverse transfer program. Understanding and learning about the experiences of reverse transfer students is a recent phenomenon and it is not widely examined in scholarly literature. Therefore, in order to understand this student population's experiences, participants were recruited from CMU with assistance from the institution's community college coordinator. As stipulated from the recruitment invitation email, participants were selected for the study if each individual (a) had formally chosen to participate the CMU reverse transfer program and (b) was at or over the age of 18.

The above-mentioned purposes of the study were developed with the creation of two research questions. The research questions of the study seek to understand the experiences of reverse transfer students and are listed below:

a. What motivates students to choose a reverse transfer program?

b. What meaning do students make of earning an associate degree while concurrently seeking a baccalaureate degree?

Based upon the data gathered from the participants at CMU, several themes emerged that describe the essence of their experiences. The depth of the data provided by the pool of participants serve to examine the lived experiences of reverse transfer students in relation

to the study's research questions.  Before I explain the findings, I offer a profile of each participant so that readers can better understand who they are and their experiences.

**Participant Profiles**

The four participants from CMU are current reverse transfer students and over the age of 18.  One man and three women were involved in the research study.  Each participant was able to describe a vastly different lived experience and share their own personality throughout the research process.  Participants each shared a differing level of intrigue in the research study and excitement of achieving the goals of the study.  All of the participants were willing to describe their personal and educational experiences in order to reach the objectives of the study.

To provide information regarding the participants, I am including descriptions of the backgrounds of each participant.  The diversity reflects how reverse transfer students are not a monolithic group.  The following four summaries provide details of each participant that may include information such as career experiences, academic experiences, family experiences, and life experiences, among others.

**Rachel.**  As a member of the honors college at CMU, Rachel is currently in the business program as a part-time student. Before enrolling at CMU, Rachel was student at the local community college for two years.  Her hobbies include horseback riding, cooking, listening to audiobooks, writing, and spending time with her dog.  She is involved in three jobs where she spends most of her time outside of the classroom. Rachel self-identifies as a 21-year old, White, female.

**Douglas.**  Recently earning United States citizenship, Douglas originally was born in Europe and sought refuge away from his birth home as a child.  After moving around

Europe, Douglas and his family immigrated to the United States. Douglas also works at a local bank while taking courses at CMU. He originally began to take courses at a local community college before transferring to CMU. As a commuting, full-time transfer student, Douglas finds comfort living at home. Douglas identifies as a White, 23-year old male and full-time student at CMU.

**Kim.** As an employee at a pharmaceutical corporation, Kim spends time during the week as a commuting transfer student at CMU. Kim has two twin teenaged daughters. One of Kim's most vivid memories as a community college student was participating in a *Lord of the Rings* course on history, which provided the foundation for her interests in history. Kim spent almost two and a half years as a community college students and transferred to CMU, where she is currently a full-time student. Kim is also the proud "mother" of five adopted stray rescue dogs. Kim is 47-years old, a full-time student, who identifies as a White, female, parent of two.

**Olivia.** Olivia is a retired postal worker who has a liking to the arts, especially photography. She is the parent of an adopted daughter, and she herself has four sisters. Receiving her first camera spawned her artistic interests. Olivia was employed at the U.S. Postal Service for many years. After retiring, Olivia began to eat healthier, exercise, and take courses of interest at the community college. She has a sense of humor, but does not associate with the word *comic* as she describes her humor growing up in the public school system:

> I just think I say things that are funny. I don't say them intentionally…It's kinda just what shows up in my head and shoots out of my mouth. In junior high my mother had to go up there quite a bit to keep them from expelling me for talking

back to the teachers. 'Cause I had my opinion, I had freely expressed it at home,

so I was told I could freely express it anywhere.

After taking classes for a number of years, Olivia transferred from a community college

continue her art passions at CMU—which has provided her with many friends in the

CMU fine arts department. Olivia identifies as a 59-year old, Black, female student.

**Theme Overview**

A series of five themes emerged from the data. The first three emerging themes are

based upon participants' experiences, challenges, and the meaning of being a reverse

transfer student at CMU. These three themes include the following (a) communication

with campus staff (b) enrollment process is simple and (c) sense of accomplishments.

The three themes are associated with the research question regarding the student

motivations to choose a reverse transfer program. The fourth and fifth themes that

emerged from the participant data include (d) the pathway for reverse transfer provides

validation for students' abilities at a four-year institution and (e) the fear of not earning a

post-secondary degree. The fourth and fifth themes directly answer the research

questions that involves the meaning students make of concurrently earning two post-

secondary degrees. The fifth theme directly responds to both research questions. The

following themes of the research findings are presented in Table 2 below.

**Table 2. Themes**

| Student Motivation for Choosing Reverse Transfer | Meaning of Concurrently Seeking Two Post-Secondary Degrees |
|---|---|
| Communication with campus staff | The pathway for reverse transfer provides validation for students' abilities at the four-year institution |
| Enrollment process is simple | Fear of not earning a post-secondary degree |
| Sense of accomplishment | |
| Fear of not earning a post-secondary degree | |

*Table 2. Themes, separated with respect to research question.*

**Theme I: Communication with campus staff.** Participants recalled their experiences when initially presented with the opportunity to choose a reverse transfer program. Each of the participants described having a direct contact via email with the community college coordinator at CMU regarding the institution's reverse transfer program. For many, the information that described the reverse transfer program was communicated electronically via email. The email delivered to applicants eligible for the reverse transfer program at CMU were presented with an opportunity to have their credits from the four-year institution transfer back to the community college in order to complete the associate degree. Douglas actually recalled receiving an email:

> I got an email on my school email. It said: "Are you interested in receiving your associate degree?" or something along those lines. It stated that I could take my courses that I had taken at [CMU]- which at the time I believe, such as college algebra, which I had not taken at [Community College]. I'd basically bring them back, finish my associates and get it. So I was like, why not. I might as well have something to show for it.

Douglas' first exposure to the reverse transfer program was through email

communication by the CMU community college coordinator. Similarly, Kim described

the same experience when describing here initial perception of the CMU reverse transfer

program. Kim remembered receiving an email from the community college coordinator:

"It was really done all by email. [The community college coordinator] just said, you

know, [CMU] ha[s] this program called reverse transfer for students that had attended a

community college to get their diploma." For the participants described, their initial

exposure to the CMU reverse transfer program was facilitated through email

communication. Yet, after reflection, Olivia acknowledged a specific university staff

member who facilitated a direct, in-person conversation about the reverse transfer

program.

The community college coordinator served as a main point of contact for a few

participants who were contacted about the reverse transfer program via email. Olivia

specifically mentioned the community college coordinator as someone who explained the

extent of the program after receiving the email:

> [The email] said this is the program, this is what it is, you are qualified to join this
>
> program if you wish. Contact us and I think I contacted the [community college
>
> coordinator] or somebody in [the] department. I had to go over and basically
>
> interview and sign paperwork, so they could get copies of the transcripts from my
>
> previous community colleges, which I thought they already had, because I had
>
> transferred over previously and taken summer classes. Now, they needed a whole
>
> new set of transcripts. So, I had to go back and do that and they went over the

transcripts. Later, after they got them, they called and I made an appointment, we went over everything.

After meeting this staff member at CMU, Olivia formally chose the CMU reverse transfer program. It is important to note that Olivia mentioned that her experience with the community college coordinator was significant to describe the ways to earn both degrees. During the discussions with the director, Olivia mentioned, "I think the [community college coordinator] was trying to make sure that I finished, I only had a couple more general ed. classes to do, and I think [the individual] was trying to make sure I didn't get discouraged and drop out." In this specific instance, Olivia mentioned the importance of encouragement from the community college coordinator to continue taking courses in order to concurrently earn the associate degree. My assumptions prior to conducting this research was that most students would have been motivated to do the CMU reverse transfer program through relationships with faculty or staff, but Olivia was the only participant who spoke about a meaningful interaction with a staff member contributing to her participation in the program. Other participants joined the program based on the communications sent via email.

For instance, Rachel described her experience and explained, "I really just got an email from [CMU] saying that I could join the program. I didn't talk to many other people…and signed up online." Although limited, Rachel acknowledged learning about the CMU reverse transfer program before formally choosing the program through an email. Kim also acknowledged the emails as significant to familiarizing herself with the CMU reverse transfer program and specifically stated:

No, there was no individuals.  Apart from the email – I guess it was the

[community college coordinator] who was sending out those emails – apart from

that, there was nobody really directly encouraging me to do it.  I pretty much did

it all on my own.  No, I really didn't seek answers from anybody else.  So I'm not

sure if there was anybody out there that would understand [CMU] reverse

transfer.

Like Rachel, Kim provided details about receiving email communications from

university personnel, specifically the community college coordinator, yet choosing the

reverse transfer program on her own without much interaction with college faculty or

staff.  All participants indicated that they had received email communications from the

university personnel, explicitly the community college coordinator, that explained the

CMU reverse transfer program.  No participant described professors or other staff

members at either CMU or their community college as important influence for their

decision to choose the reverse transfer program.  This theme describes student

motivations for choosing a reverse transfer program which is the first research question

for this study.

      **Theme II: Enrollment process is simple.**  Each of the participants described the

process to choose the reverse transfer program as swift and easy.   Some participants

imagined a difficult enrollment process.  However, participants described a fast and easy

way to choose the CMU reverse transfer program.  Douglas mentioned that it was a quick

form to fill out and most of the transfer process was completed by others:

The ["opt-in"] process was actually really fast.  I believe it was like a one-page

form – very simple. I don't recall exactly what it said, so that tells you right there

– it was a really fast process.  It wasn't a lot of back and forth or anything like

that. It was straight and to the point.  You want to, yes, fill this out.  We will take

care of the rest. I had nothing else to do.  It was easy.  I loved it.

For Douglas, signing up for the reverse transfer program was easier than what was

initially perceived.  Like, Douglas, Kim held similar sentiments regarding the registration

process for the CMU reverse transfer program.  After receiving the email about the

reverse transfer program, Kim mentioned, "Everything I did was online – all through one

link."  The registration for Kim was a swift process that did not require an extensive

application.  After receiving the email from university personnel, Kim was able to enroll

into the CMU reverse transfer program in an online process.

After hearing about the programs details from the university email communication,

Rachel described personal reservations about signing up for the reverse transfer program,

but found relief after consultation with the community college coordinator.  Rachel also

made reference to the ease of choosing the reverse transfer program online:

I think in the email it just seemed like a "too good to be true" kind of thing.  How

much paperwork was I going to have to do? What costs were associated with the

program? What kind of degree would I get?  What exactly were the credit

requirements for getting my degree?  After everything was finalized many of

these questions were answered.  I was very happy to find that there was no cost.

College is expensive enough already!  Additionally, this was probably the easiest

thing I've done since starting my college career.

In this instance, Rachel best harmonizes the two themes presented thus far.  Specifically,

Rachel is motivated to choose the CMU reverse transfer program because of the

communication from university personnel and the swiftness of the process to sign up. Each of the participants described a certain degree of ease when formally choosing the CMU reverse transfer program. The second major theme also associated with the participant's motivation for choosing the reverse transfer program.

   **Theme III:  Sense of accomplishment.**  Participants talked about the importance of recognizing their academic achievements from their community college experience while at the four-year institution.  For some, the feeling of accomplishment in earning an associate degree was a motivating factor to choose the CMU reverse transfer program.  In addition, the sense of accomplishment of receiving the associate degree led participants to feel confident to succeed further at CMU, which will be discussed in the next section. The essence of this motivation was also coupled with a fear of leaving CMU without any academic degree, which is discussed in the final theme.  Specifically, the motivation to choose the CMU reverse transfer program was directly related to the participants' worry of not completing the bachelor's degree, but maintaining credit for the associate degree.

   Specifically in this theme, I am interested in discussing that part of the reason participants chose the CMU reverse transfer program was that they wanted to acknowledge the effort, academic credit, and work during their time at the community college.  Douglas mentioned the importance of earning the associate degree for the professional prospects beyond higher education:

   Mainly knowing that if I had some sort of degree, more doors would open, when

   it came to maybe internships, jobs.  That was my main motivator— knowing that

   it would open more doors to a lot of other things out there.  I felt that I could

maybe stand out a little more, compared to other people. If I had a degree going

into an interview. So that's really what drove me.

Here, Douglas describes the value of earning the associate degree for the purposes of earning an internship or job. His reference towards "open[ing] more doors" in response to earning the associate degree demonstrates a motivating factor towards signing up for the CMU reverse transfer program. Like Douglas, Rachel describes the importance of choosing the CMU reverse transfer program in order for recognizing her efforts at the community college. In fact, Rachel stated, "To me, it's the credits. I really think it's important to recognize my work at the community college and help me succeed at CMU. It has shown me and given me confidence that I can do it." Her motivation to choose the CMU reverse transfer program is related to her previous academic efforts and her personal stride to continue academic achievements at CMU. The third major theme that arose from the participant interviews associated with the research question regarding student motivations for choosing a reverse transfer program.

**Theme IV: The pathway for reverse transfer provides validation for students' abilities at the four-year institution.** For this particular theme, participants recalled their experiences of recognizing their academic effort in higher education and how that gave them confidence in their ability to succeed at the four-year institution. As previously mentioned, all of the participants described the impact of the CMU reverse transfer program and receiving recognition of their academic achievement at the community college. In certain instances, however, the participants were willing to discuss the meaning of earning the associate degree for professional purposes and claiming their academic credit along the way towards achieving the bachelor's degree.

Douglas mentioned that he felt excitement during the process of earning two post-secondary degrees:

> I was kind of excited that everything that I had put in at [the community college] wasn't just a bunch of credits that transferred, but rather a degree that I could show employers and everybody else. I was excited. A lot of people aren't excited about the associate degree but to me, it meant a lot. Starting with the fact that I never did so well in high school, there were times in high school where I thought I wouldn't graduate high school. I did pretty bad in high school. So to reach the point of an associate degree was for me, it was awesome.

In this respect, Douglas acknowledged the importance of receiving validation for his academic efforts at the community college. Using Rendón's validation theory, Douglas' statement suggests a need for receiving academic validation from his community college academic accomplishments. His performance at both the community college and four-year institution create an exciting accomplishment while seeking the bachelor's degree.

Rachel also described how earning two post-secondary degrees was an important part of believing in herself. Rachel stated, "Working towards both [associate and bachelor's] degree means I have worked really hard and can see my progress as I look back at what I've done. [Reverse transfer] just sweetens the deal and makes me believe in myself." Earning the associate degree contributes to her feelings of success and belief in her academic abilities. Using Rendón's validation theory, one could describe the external recognition provide by the awarding of an associate degree as a tool of validation. It shows her evidence of her past success, which can be the encouragement needed for her continued success in unchartered territory of the four-year institution. She

also acknowledges the connection between the community college course and those at the four-year institution by referencing her "progress." The fourth emerging theme that was provided by the participants associated with the research question regarding the meaning of concurrently earning two post-secondary degrees.

**Theme V: The fear of not earning a post-secondary degree.** In certain circumstances, receiving recognition of the community college accomplishments was significant because the transfer student was concerned about the possibility they could fail to earn the bachelor's degree at CMU. In fact, Olivia mentioned that her motivation for choosing the CMU reverse transfer program was part of a contingency plan if she could not finish her bachelor's degree at CMU. Olivia stated that earning the associate degree would provide her academic recognition and an alternative plan should she not finish at CMU:

> The plan has always been the [Bachelor of Arts degree]. So, when it was offered to me it was like if I don't, if something happens, God forbid, and I don't finish the [Bachelor of Arts degree], then I can finish and still have the associate degree. I can still have the, I can have it on my resume, it'll be online or wherever they do checks for looking at your qualifications.

Faced with the decision to earn the associate degree while concurrently earning the bachelor's degree, Olivia notes that she might need a degree from the community college—indicating a reason to pursue the reverse transfer program. In addition, being a reverse transfer student places a fear of not earning a bachelor's degree into Olivia's mind. If she was unable to finish the bachelor's degree, Olivia would earn the associate degree and still possess a post-secondary degree. Therefore, it is meaningful for Olivia to

concurrently seek two degrees, which gives her the assurance of earning an associate degree if she needed to leave CMU without finishing bachelor's degree requirements.

Similarly, Kim mentioned the importance of the reverse transfer program if a student leaves college for personal circumstances that arise during their studies at the four-year institution. In fact, Kim stated her fear of leaving a four-year institution and not returning:

> You know, [students] are going to want to take time. Once you take time, that semester off, and you have probably heard this all the time, once you take a semester off, you never go back. This gives them the opportunity to do it. 'Cause you never know, things happen. Something medical, you might get sick. You might get cancer, you might have this, you don't know what you're going to have. You know, you don't know what the unforeseen circumstances are going to be."

This demonstrates that the reverse transfer program provides an option for students who want to know they have a degree if an unforeseen circumstance arises. For Kim, this was a motivation for choosing the CMU reverse transfer program. Kim also stated her fear of the possibility of not finishing the four-year degree based on the commonly held belief that if a student leaves a four-year institution, they are often times not likely to return after a semester. Therefore, the reverse transfer program provides insurance in the form of a post-secondary degree if she is unable to return after a break.

Further, Kim mentions the importance of feeling assured while enrolling in the reverse transfer program regardless of the personal situation or age. Self-identifying as an adult transfer student, Kim mentions that her fear of leaving higher education and not completing degree requirements was a motivating factor to enroll in the reverse transfer

program at CMU. Specifically, she stated, "I mean if it's an older adult or a student that has unforeseen things like a parent died, or something and they have the credit hours, then they should [choose the reverse transfer program]. In this situation, Kim knows that the reverse transfer program serves as an assurance towards degree completion regardless of age and circumstance. For the transfer student population, the reverse transfer program resembles an insurance policy towards credit accumulation for degree completion.

**Conclusion**

This qualitative research study examined the meaning of concurrently earning two post-secondary degrees and the motivations students have for choosing the reverse transfer program. The analyzed data provided five primary themes that seek to address the study's two research questions. The first three themes responded to the motivations student have for choosing the reverse transfer program: communication with campus staff, enrollment process is simple, and sense of accomplishment. The fourth theme, the pathway for reverse transfer provides validation for students' abilities at the four-year institution**,** responded to the meaning of concurrently earning two post-secondary degrees. The fifth theme responded to both research questions regarding student motivations for choosing the reverse transfer program and the meaning of concurrently seeking two post-secondary degrees: the fear of not earning a post-secondary degree. The next chapter will discuss the implications of the emerged themes. In addition, best practices for assisting the reverse transfer student population and higher education implications regarding reverse transfer programs will be examined. Finally, further

questions and research suggestions regarding reverse transfer students will be addressed

in the next chapter.

## Chapter Five

## Discussion

**Introduction**

The reverse transfer student population is a group in higher education that is newly emerging.  As such, literature that addresses the needs, progress, and attitudes of reverse transfer students is limited.  In order to successfully design and implement a reverse transfer program, while addressing the needs of the reverse transfer student population, it is important to understand the essence of such population.  Reverse transfer programs are emerging on college campuses that responds to transfer student with needs that are different from other traditional undergraduate student populations, including transfer students.  Therefore, valuing the voices of the reverse transfer student population is critical to respond to their academic and personal needs.  The following describes the summary of the research study findings, the findings in connection to the scholarly literature, best practices for the reverse transfer student population, recommendations for future research.

**Summary of Findings**

Five central themes emerged from the participant's data including: (1) communication with campus staff, (2) enrollment process is simple, (3) sense of accomplishment, (4) the pathway for reverse transfer provides validation for students' abilities at the four-year institution, and (5) the fear of not earning a post-secondary degree.  The first three themes supported the first research question regarding the motivations for students choosing the reverse transfer program.  The final two themes supported the second research question regarding the reverse transfer students' meaning

for concurrently earning two post-secondary degrees.  The last theme supported both research questions.

**Connections to Literature**

The commentary of Chapter Two illustrates the experiences of transfer students at a four-year institution and the development of reverse transfer programs across the United States.  Each of the study's themes are highlighted below and are linked to scholarly research to provide context to qualitative research findings.

**Communication and ease of enrollment.**  This study suggests that communication with students about reverse transfer programs may be enough to motivate them to sign up.  The literature does not describe motivations for choosing a reverse transfer program so this is a key contribution to the literature.  The participants in this study, after receiving information about the program, decided to sign up without needing much further intervention except one participant.  Validation theory suggests that validating agents, like faculty or staff, can play an important role in helping nontraditional students embrace their ability to be successful in higher education (Rendón, 1994).  The participants in this study did not report significant influence of a faculty or staff person.

One participant, Olivia, who met with a CMU staff member to go over questions, was seeking information about the option of reverse transfer, which she was already seriously considering.  However, the interaction seemed to confirm and give her confidence with what she had already planned to do, suggesting a validating component.  With respect to feeling motivated to choose a reverse transfer program, Olivia described the importance of meeting a staff member at CMU to discuss the tenants of the program,

the CMU community college coordinator. Having a college professional demonstrate students' potential academic success provided a motivating factor for this student to choose the reverse transfer program.

Further, it is important to note the importance of the easy enrollment process for the CMU reverse transfer program. While it is also important to note the enrollment was free, participants mentioned the swift online procedure of formally choosing the reverse transfer program after learning about it. This motivating factor for students to choose a reverse transfer program is not described in the literature regarding reverse transfer students, adding another contribution. Interestingly, participants said choosing the CMU reverse transfer program was easy, which is contrary to the typical conflicts of transferring between the community college and four-year institution. Previous research (Allen et al., 2014; Gard et al., 2012; Laanan, 1996) documents the conflicts typical when transferring between institutions. In this study, the enrollment process was easy and did not add to the researched conflicts experienced by transfer students.

Usually, transfer students must overcome a series of obstacles related to their academic, personal, and social success after transferring, including *transfer shock* and financial aid details (Laanan, 1996; Allen et al., 2014; Schmertz & Carney, 2013; Townsend & Wilson, 2006). However, participants found the enrollment process easy. This study adds to the understanding of what is important when establishing and operating a transfer or reverse transfer program. Administrators and student affairs practitioners can use this information to develop, enhance, and/or evaluate their institution's reverse transfer policies and procedures. When beginning a new program or assessing to improve an existing program, administrators and policy makers should

consider how easy the enrollment process will be for students to begin the institution's reverse transfer program.

**A sense of accomplishment and the validating pathway of reverse transfer.** Participants indicated the importance of recognizing their individual academic accomplishments in the form of the associate degree as a form of motivation for choosing the CMU reverse transfer program. Previous research has explored psychological and sociocultural conflicts of transferring (Ellis, 2012; Laanan, 1996; Smedley et al., 1993) to a four-year institution, however not for this population of students. This study adds to the literature that students may be motivated to participate in a reverse transfer program through a sense of accomplishment that can be found when the credits materialize into a degree. Since transferring can be difficult and bring up several academic insecurities (Ellis 2012; Laanan, 1996; Smedley et al., 1993), having a sense of accomplishment during the transfer process may be really important to overcome the barriers. Due to the scope of this study, it is unclear about the extent to which a sense of accomplishment played validating reverse transfer, but participants consistently described a sense of accomplishment so it seems like an area for future research.

The associate degree, as indicated by some participants, provides a designation of the milestone for employment and professional opportunities while achieving the bachelor's degree. Instead of earning an aggregate number of academic credits before earning a bachelor's degree, earning the associate degree at the same time as the bachelor's degree provides an opportunity to earn a post-secondary degree even if the student is unable to complete bachelor's degree requirements (Marling, 2013). As validation theory suggests, academic validation supports students' ability to feel

confident as a college student (Rendón, 1994). Academic validation is when students see their academic successes. When they see their successes, the theory asserts that they will be more likely to see their capability for continued success and realize that success (Rendón, 1994). This part of the theory contradicts a prevailing notion in higher education that students should be responsible for their own success and that if educators and administrators make educational opportunities available then students should be able to take advantage of them. In this case, the educational opportunity could be the four-year degree. Following validation theory, it could be argued that many nontraditional students at the two-year college may have difficulty obtaining a four-year degree if they do not have validation that they are capable of earning a four-year degree. Having the option to earn the associate degree while at a four-year institution, as described by participants, contributes to the participants' confidence while at a four-year institution. Further studies of this population may provide evidence as to the level of confidence by earning their associate degree that reverse transfer students experience while taking courses at the four-year institution.

As it is significant to create a pathway for degree completion for transfer students at a four-year institution, it is also important to recognize the challenges that accompany the transfer student experience (Laanan, 1996). Previous research indicates the challenges associated with advising transfer students (Allen et al., 2014; Gard et al., 2012). The participants of the study indicated that their exposure to the reverse transfer program, although thoroughly advertised by the community college coordinator, as limited. As a result, and to respond to the previously indicated research involving advising challenges for the transfer student population (Allen et al., 2014), it is important

that academic and career advisors promote the reverse transfer program to eligible participants. In such manner, academic and career advisors can respond to reverse transfer students' academic needs and their requirements necessary for associate and bachelor's degree completion, which may play a role in validating a student's pathway towards dual degree completion.

**The fear of not earning a post-secondary degree.** The fear of not earning a post-secondary degree played a significant role for those concurrently seeking both degrees. Laanan (1996) identifies the *transfer shock* associated with lower transfer student academic performance after transitioning to a four-year institution. The participants of the study echoed similar academic fears and described scenarios by which their ability to continue coursework at the four-year institution might be hindered due to personal circumstances. Pregnancy, death of a parent, and personal illness, were described by participants as reasons that four-year degree might not be completed. This describes how participants are fearful of not earning any post-secondary degree. In fact, participants described the impact of not earning any post-secondary degree, while holding variety of academic credits. As a result, a student that earns credit from the community college and four-year institution without a degree may not qualify for particular career opportunities. In this instance, the meaning of concurrently earning two post-secondary degrees provided assurances to those who had chosen the reverse transfer program.

In response, the reverse transfer program permits students to concurrently earn two post-secondary degrees based upon their academic history at the community college and four-year institution (Marling, 2013). As a result, participants were motivated and felt assured by the prospect of earning an associate degree through this program, even if

presented with an unexpected life event. Participants mentioned that the importance of assuring one degree, should a major life event or conflict arise, made the difference when it comes to finding meaning of concurrently earning two degrees. Even though many of the participants described their goal to earn a bachelor's degree, the reverse transfer program provides options in the event of a change of plans.

Educational assurance provides options. For transfer students that chose a reverse transfer program, many describe the importance of options. Since reverse transfer students are eligible to concurrently earn two post-secondary degrees, this population of students is benefitted degree-seeking options with respect to earning an associate degree while taking courses at a four-year institution. Offering this opportunity of concurrently earning dual post-secondary degrees harmonizes the needs of the community and diversity missions of the community college and the four-year institution (Ayers, 2002; Hegeman et al., 2007, Kalogrides & Grodsky, 2011), even as recent research indicates a potential disconnect (Wang et al., 2007). Reverse transfer students are diverse, they hold a variety of academic credits, and they are responding to the needs of the community, even if they are not pursuing vocational training as described in Chapter Two. The essence of the data is that students are assured when they earn a degree that culminates from academic credits at the community college and four-year institution. The fear of leaving higher education without an earning either post-secondary degree is alleviated by reverse transfer. Future studies might further explore the fear associated with not earning and post-secondary degree as a reverse transfer student and its impact on transfer student success at a four-year institution. It could be useful to better understand the level of fear,

the contributing factors, and the ways that fear may be shaping students' aspirations, self-efficacy, and degree completion rates.

**Applications for Practice**

This qualitative study examined the meaning of concurrently earning two post-secondary degrees and the motivations students have for choosing a reverse transfer program. Based upon the emerging themes provided by reverse transfer participants at CMU, reverse transfer students may have similar motivations for choosing reverse transfer. They also place significance when it comes to concurrently earning two post-secondary degrees. Therefore, there are a number of recommendations for practice that can be taken from this study.

It is important to note that the participants of the study, as well as transfer students from community colleges, face obstacles while transitioning from institutions Allen et al., 2014; Laanan, 1996; Schmertz & Carney, 2013; Townsend & Wilson, 2006). Such obstacles described in scholarly literature are sought to be reduced or alleviated through the development of reverse transfer programs across the United States. After the study's completion, the following recommendations for best practices are provided.

First, community college and university personnel should advise eligible students about the option of reverse transfer. As literature has indicated, students have a perception of inadequate and misinformed academic advising while transferring (Allen et al., 2014). Further, students in this study reported that finding out about the reverse transfer program was enough motivation to enroll so there should be a high payoff for institutions sharing information about the program. Creating a collaborative task force of academic advisors between the community college and the four-year institution not only

would help alleviate the burden for transfer students to contact personnel at both institutions for advising assistance but also would establish a partnership to strengthen the communication of reverse transfer to students. To this end, academic advisors at both institutions would be informed of the options for transfer students to choose a reverse transfer option.

Secondly, creating a greater awareness of the reverse transfer program across campus personnel, specifically academic advisors, faculty, and transfer student support staff, would bring the message of reverse transfer to a greater audience. For example, participants included in the study explicitly mentioned a singular individual, the community college coordinator, as the main point of contact for details and information about reverse transfer. It is important for college personnel to develop a communication plan regarding the reverse transfer program. This includes, but is not limited to, email communication, information sessions, and advertising informational sheets. At the same time, teaching and training university and community college personnel about the tenants of reverse transfer will expose potential applicants to the reverse transfer program. This also will provide greater collaboration between an institution's transfer student coordinator and student support staff in response to the meeting the needs of the transfer student population.

Thirdly, institutions should plan and review their admissions policies as it specifically relates to transfer student populations. Participants in the study mentioned the ease of participating in the reverse transfer program. However, research has indicated potential conflicts regarding communication of admissions details and entering transfers students (Gard et al., 2012). This makes it especially significant that institutions must

reflect on the design of the enrollment procedures and application process for entering students.  Piloting an online application specifically for transfer students to choose a reverse transfer program might ease the students' transition process.  It might be beneficial to have a committee of college professionals and reverse transfer students design the application to appeal to potential reverse transfer student populations.

Finally, it is important for the reverse transfer student populations to share their experiences as a reverse transfer student.  For instance, understanding ways to ease the process of transferring, much like the enrollment process for the CMU reverse transfer program, will provide assistance and support to this student population.  This might help students connect with current reverse transfer students instead of advisors to discuss its impact on their college experiences.  Each of the four participants interviewed for this study shared their experiences as a nontraditional student, but acknowledged similar themes in response to their motivations for choosing the CMU reverse transfer program.  Selecting reverse transfer students and academic advisors or transfer coordinators to collaboratively create a series of information sessions at four-year institutions and community colleges will help expose potential students to the reverse transfer program in their area.  Speaking with other transfer students, reverse transfer students should share their experiences as a transfer student to advocate for reverse transfer, whereas an academic advisor would demonstrate the credit requirements to qualify and to earn an associate degree.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

Research on reverse transfer students is a limited, but newly emerging field of study.  With the establishment of reverse transfer programs across the United States,

there is a growing need to conduct research studies about the reverse transfer student experience. Specifically, what, qualitatively, are the ways in which reverse transfer students stay at a four-year institution until graduation and what, quantitatively, retention data exists for reverse transfer students across a variety of four-year institutions?

Most of the previous research about transfer students have been qualitative in nature to describe participant's experiences while making the transition between institutions. It is significant to continue qualitatively researching reverse transfer students to understand their experiences and modify promotional, educational, and procedural aspects to a reverse transfer program to meet students' needs. Quantitative research would also be significant to consider with regard to reverse transfer student populations. Quantitative research studying the retention rates of reverse transfer students at four-year institutions and the attainment of two post-secondary degrees would assist in determining the goals of reverse transfer.

Furthermore, studying the impact of campus personnel promoters of reverse transfer should be studied. Perhaps it might be interesting to understand the extent to which reverse transfer program promoters, including faculty and staff, serve as validating agents to this population of students. A future study might play a significant role as to understand how these promoters serve as validating agents to support a campus' reverse transfer student population. While this study provided evidence of one staff member as a main contributor to the communication of the program, studying the impact of people that promote reverse transfer could shed light on their effect as a validating agent.

More research about reverse transfer students should include participants from a larger sample of institutions. As a limitation of the study, I found it challenging to recruit

and connect with campus personnel and reverse transfer student populations. In the future, I would like to address the population of students that have identified themselves as reverse transfer, however, have not begun classes at a four-year institution. Perhaps this might provide even more insights into the motivations of intending transfer students to choose a reverse transfer program. Future studies should also examine the experiences of people from a diverse background. This qualitative study included three White reverse transfer student and one African-American. Although the ages of the transfer student participants were diverse, listening and understanding the stories of participants from different ethnic backgrounds, cultural heritages, and various regions of the United States would provide a broad understanding of the reverse transfer student experience.

**Conclusion**

The purpose of the qualitative study was to explore the motivations that students have to choose a reverse transfer program and the meaning of concurrently seeking two post-secondary degrees while attending CMU, a four-year public, research institution. During the study, four reverse transfer students, one male and three female, from CMU told their stories in order to provide detailed evidence of their experiences as a reverse transfer student. Data from the participant's experiences provided a series of themes that indicate students are motivated to choose a reverse transfer program when it is promoted by campus personnel, when the enrollment process is simple, and to acknowledge their previous accomplishments at the community college. In addition, reverse transfer students make meaning of concurrently earning two post-secondary degrees. Specifically, reverse transfer students are validated and feel accomplished while completing classes at a four-year institution and feel academically assured upon earning

the associate degree should an unexpected life event halt their progress at a four-year institution.

In order to respond to these emerging themes, higher education personnel should continue exploring the population of reverse transfer students. For example, researchers should study reverse transfer students' progress and motivations to persist at in higher education through qualitative and quantitative research studies, particularly across a variety of reverse transfer programs. Looking at a larger and diverse sample of reverse transfer participants will also provide insights on the experiences, meaning, and quantifiable data that will support reverse transfer student populations in higher education.

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**Appendix A**

**Institutional Review Board Approval Letter**

## Official Approval Letter for IRB project #15679

October 9, 2015

Matthew Geyer
Department of Educational Administration

Stephanie Bondi
Department of Educational Administration
117 TEAC, UNL, 68588-0360

IRB Number:
20151015679EX Project
ID: 15679

Project Title: Recognizing Earned Credit: Student Motivations for Reverse Transfer Programs and Concurrently Earning Two Post-Secondary Degrees

Dear Matthew:

This letter is to officially notify you of the certification of exemption of your project for the Protection of Human Subjects. Your proposal is in compliance with this institution's Federal Wide Assurance 00002258 and the DHHS Regulations for the Protection of Human Subjects (45 CFR 46) and has been classified as exempt category 2.

o Exempt review categories: 2

o Date of Exemption
Determination: 10/09/2015

You are authorized to implement this study as of the Date of Exemption Determination: 10/09/2015.

We wish to remind you that the principal investigator is responsible for reporting to this Board any of the following events within 48 hours of the event:

* Any serious event (including on-site and off-site adverse events, injuries, side effects, deaths, or other problems) which in the opinion of the local investigator was unanticipated, involved risk to subjects or others, and was possibly related to the research procedures;
* Any serious accidental or unintentional change to the IRB-approved protocol that involves risk or has the potential to recur;
* Any publication in the literature, safety monitoring report, interim result or other finding that indicates an unexpected change to the risk/benefit ratio of the research;
* Any breach in confidentiality or compromise in data privacy related to the subject or others; or

* Any complaint of a subject that indicates an unanticipated risk or that cannot be resolved by the research staff.

This project should be conducted in full accordance with all applicable sections of the IRB Guidelines and you should notify the IRB immediately of any proposed changes that may affect the exempt status of your research project. You should report any unanticipated problems involving risks to the participants or others to the Board. If you have any questions, please contact the IRB office at 402-472-6965.

Sincerely,
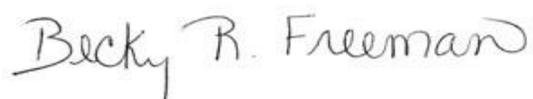
Becky R.
Freeman, CIP
for the IRB

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**Appendix B**

**Informed Consent Form**

**UNIVERSITY OF Nebraska Lincoln**

COLLEGE OF EDUCATION AND HUMAN SCIENCES
Department of Educational Administration

*Informed Consent Document*

IRB#15679

Title:  Recognizing Earned Credit: Student Motivations for Reverse Transfer Programs and Meaning-Making of Concurrently Earning Two Post-Secondary Degrees

## Purpose:

The purpose of this study is to examine student motivations to participant in a reverse transfer program and the meaning students make of concurrently earning two degrees. You must be 18 years of age or older to participate. You are invited to participate in this study because you are a revere transfer student at the ███████████████████████.

## Procedures:

You will be asked to participate in three interviews.  The interviews will last for 60 minutes each and will be conducted via Skype telecommunications and/or in a private room at the ████████████████████████. The first interview focuses on your perceptions of the ███████ Reverse Transfer Program and your community college history.  The second interview focuses on your motivations for participating in the ███████ Reverse Transfer Program. The third interview will serve as a follow-up to the previous interviews.  The interviewer intends to audio-record these interviews.  The interviews will be scheduled over the course of two months.

## Benefits:

The study will provide you a reflection on your experiences as a reverse transfer student. This may allow you to make greater meaning of this experience and to share their experience with other reverse transfer students. This will inform higher education professionals about reverse transfer student motivations and the meaning of concurrent degree progress.

## Risks and/or Discomforts:

There are no known risks or discomforts associated with this research.

## Confidentiality:

Any information obtained during this study which could identify you will be kept strictly confidential. Pseudonyms will be used for all participants.  The data will be stored on a password-protected hard drive and will be only viewed by the principal researcher, Matthew Geyer, and the thesis advisor during the study. The information obtained in this study may be published in scientific journals or presented at professional conferences, but the data will be unidentifiable.

141 Teachers College Hall / P.O. Box 880360 / Lincoln, NE 68588-0360 / (402) 472-3726
FAX (402) 472-4300

**Compensation:**
Participants will be compensated up to $10 for participation in the study. Participants will receive $3 per interview or $10 if all three are completed.

**Opportunity to Ask Questions:**
You may ask any questions concerning this research and have those questions answered before agreeing to participate in or during the study. Or you may contact the investigator(s) at the phone numbers below.  Please contact the University of Nebraska-Lincoln Institutional Review Board at (402) 472-6965 to voice concerns about the research or if you have any questions about your rights as a research participant.

**Freedom to Withdraw:**
Participation in this study is voluntary. You can refuse to participate or withdraw at any time without harming your relationship with the researchers or the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, or in any other way receive a penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

**Consent, Right to Receive a Copy:**
You are voluntarily making a decision whether or not to participate in this research study. Your verbal consent certifies that you have decided to participate having read and understood the information presented. You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep.

**Name and Phone number of investigator(s)**
Matthew Geyer, Principal Investigator                              Cell: 
Stephanie Bondi, Ph.D., Secondary Investigator            Office

**Appendix C**

**Recruitment Email Template**

Dear student,

You are invited to share your experiences as a reverse transfer student to help Matthew Geyer understand your motivations and the benefits of reverse transfer for his master's thesis. You are asked to participate in three (3) 60 minute interviews via Skype and/or in a private location at the ████████████████████████. You will be compensated $10.00 for your participation in three interviews. Participants will receive $3 per interview or $10 if all three are completed.

Please contact Matthew Geyer for details and to participate in this study by calling ████ ██████ or emailing ████████████████.

Thank you!

[Name], [Title], [CMU]

**Appendix D**

**Semi-structured Interview Protocol**

First Interview:

1. Tell me about yourself.
2. How long were you a student at X community college?
3. What classes did you take at X community college?
4. Why did you take such courses at X community college?
5. When did you decide to attend a four-year institution?
6. Tell me about the first time you discovered the [CMU] Reverse Transfer Program?
7. What was your perceptions of the [CMU] Reverse Transfer Program?
8. What feelings did you have in regards to "opting-into" the [CMU] Reverse Transfer Program?

Second Interview

1. How were you encouraged to "opt-into" the [CMU] Reverse Transfer Program?
2. To what extent were you motivated in participating in the [CMU] Reverse Transfer Program?
3. To what extent did an academic advisor or staff member serve as a resource to help you understand the [CMU] Reverse Transfer Program?
4. What does it mean or will it mean to earn an associate degree while, at the same time, seeking a baccalaureate degree?
5. What does it mean to transfer to X four-year institution as a reverse transfer student?

Third Interview

1. How would it be different if you decided not to "opt-into" the [CMU] Reverse Transfer Program?
2. Is there any else you wish to share that would help me understand your experiences as a reverse transfer student?
3. Is there anything else that you wanted to talk about that we did not get to in the previous interviews?
4. Do you have any concluding thoughts regarding your experiences as a reverse transfer student?

Thank you for your participation.