

Transfer Student Engagement:
Understanding the Experiences of First-Semester Transfer Students

by

Kristy Lynn Kulhanek

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Graduate Supervisory Committee:

Katie Bernstein, Chair
Jeanne Wilcox
Sarah Edwards
Sherman Dorn

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ABSTRACT

Transfer students have emerged as a growing student population in higher education. There is a need for higher education professionals to understand the needs of transfer students. In this study, the implemented intervention consisted of restructuring retention programming for first-semester transfer students. This qualitative action research study explored how first-semester transfer students understand and experience academic and social engagement across the semester they participate in retention programming. Students identified perceived barriers and facilitators to engagement. The researcher also examined transfer students' experiences of the intervention. The findings indicate that students' understanding of engagement align with their expectations of their first semester and remained consistent throughout the study. One of the biggest perceived barriers to engagement was lack of time. Overall, transfer students found the intervention useful during their transition to a new institution.

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to those who have helped me on my pursuit of
higher education.

To my husband –

For your kind words, unwavering love, and endless support.

To my parents –

For teaching me that I can do anything I set my mind to.

To Chris –

For being my academic role model and an exceptional brother.

To my loved ones in Fayetteville, Texas –

You finally have a doctor in the family.

To my girls –

I hope that you read this one day and know that anything is possible.

Mommy loves you.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

“Transfer students are proven. You’re not taking a chance with them. Once they come to a four-year institution you know they want a degree. Transfer students are a great investment.”

—Frank Ashley, Texas A&M University System (Handel, 2011, p. 4).

According to a report from the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (2015), an average of 46% of students who complete a four-year degree in the United States were previously enrolled at two-year institutions. Referencing this same report, the state of Texas had the largest percentage of students who began matriculation at a two-year institution: 70% who completed a degree at a four-year institution in the state of Texas were previously enrolled in a two-year institution. A majority of individuals who obtained a baccalaureate degree in the state of Texas were transfer students at some point in their education journey. In a time where earning a degree is “the norm rather than the exception,” more students are seeking alternative pathways to earning a baccalaureate, including transferring between multiple institutions (Walker, Sherman, & Shea, 2016, p. 44).

In July of 2014, the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB) released *Improving Transfer to Increase Student Success*, a report that showcases state-level initiatives to improve the transfer process for college students attending public institutions in Texas. Students who transfer to a new institution often face challenges of not meeting core curriculum requirements or having unused prior credit, which can result in falling behind in sequential coursework. THECB implemented multiple transfer

initiatives in order to accommodate students transitioning between two or more state institutions in Texas that face these specific challenges. One of these initiatives included legally requiring Texas public higher education institutions “to adopt a core curriculum of 42 semester credit hours (SCH) that are consistent with the Texas Common Course Numbering System” (THECB, 2014, p.1). Given these new requirements which have eased the transfer process to other state institutions, the number of transfer students in the state of Texas has steadily increased. Texas has been improved accommodation of transfer students, but individual institutions are responsible for retention and graduation once students enroll.

Multiple studies examined the prevalence of transfer students in four-year institutions, primarily focusing on pathways for transfer students or how community colleges prepare students for the transition (Auluck & West, 2017; Hodara, Martinez-Wenzl, Stevens, & Mazzeo, 2017; Townsend, 1995). There are a lack of studies that examine transfer students after they arrive at their target university. In regards to intervention programming, multiple studies examined the transition between high school and college and have shown the positive effects of first-year programs for college freshmen (Hendel, 2007; Jajjairam, 2016; Schnell & Doetkott, 2002). Using these intervention programs as models, this project seeks to understand the success of transfer students at one university in Texas, implement an intervention that focuses on assisting transfer students during their transition to new university, and to examine effects of that intervention.

Local Context

Located in College Station, Texas A&M University currently serves the largest student population in the state of Texas. Texas A&M University is rooted in tradition and culture unique to the institution. A student who attends Texas A&M is referred to as an “Aggie.” The Aggie identity, network, and community are well-known across campus. Terms such as “*Howdy*” (a greeting), “*Gig ‘em*” (sign of approval), and “*Whoop*” (expression of excitement) are consistent in Aggie vocabulary. One of the most popular traditions for a student is earning the coveted Aggie Ring. Once a student earns 90 hours, with at least half taken at Texas A&M, the student is eligible to order their ring. Aggie Ring Day is an extravagant event that occurs each semester with thousands in attendance where students receive their rings. There are multiple unwritten characteristics of the Aggie context. Students typically share a lens of "family" when referring to other Aggies - a lens that others may not understand. Students are familiar with the difficulty of explaining the Aggie Spirit and often say, "From the outside looking in, you can't understand it. From the inside looking out, you can't explain it."

According to data and research services at Texas A&M University (2019), nearly 14,000 undergraduate students transferred to Texas A&M University between 2012 and 2017. For Texas A&M University, the one-year retention rate for transfer students varied from 91% to 94% between 2012 and 2017. Over 3,000 of these students were accepted into the College of Liberal Arts and within that college, over 750 students were admitted to the Department of Communication. Retention rates within the College of Liberal Arts were between 88% and 93%, and for the Department of Communication they were 92% to 94%.

The College of Liberal Arts (CLLA) recently implemented mandatory intervention programming for first-semester transfer students because the retention and 4-year graduation rates for the college and department were slightly lower than those of the university. The purpose of this programming was to improve retention and 4-year graduation rates. Larger departments such as Psychology, Communication, Sociology, and Political Science created their own seminars to accommodate the substantial numbers of incoming students. Basic parameters were set, but specific course content was not provided. Advisors received little guidance on learning outcomes for intervention programs.

As an Academic Advisor in the Department of Communication, I assisted in the creation of a graded one-hour seminar, COMM 485: Directed Studies, that would count toward students' coursework as a major elective. I am the primary instructor of COMM 485 and my supervisor, the Director of Undergraduate Studies, serves as the instructor of record. To ensure students commit to the course, it is graded, and thus impacts their GPA. We first implemented the program during spring 2016 and continue each fall and spring semester with a new cohort of transfer students. All transfer students are required to enroll in COMM 485.

I have been in my current position, Academic Advisor, for over four years in the Department of Communication. During this time, I have worked with transfer students on a daily basis, assisting them with transfer course equivalency, degree planning, course adjustments, curricular exceptions, course selection, and career and graduate school preparation. During the reconnaissance phase of my research, Cycle 0, I explored the struggles of transfer students by surveying and interviewing first-semester transfer

students and their academic advisors. The results showed that both students and advisors identified the following challenges: time management, lack of study skills, lack of professional communication skills, adjusting to campus culture, socialization, locating on-campus resources, and navigating a large campus. During interviews in Cycle 1, students disclosed they have generally positive feelings toward Texas A&M University, but they occasionally feel overlooked or unimportant in comparison to traditional first-semester freshmen. Texas A&M University has offered many support services for all students such as the Academic Success Center, Peer Tutoring, the Money Center, the Writing Center, Student Counseling Services, etc., yet the breadth of information can be overwhelming for first-semester students.

Problem of Practice

Transfer students in COMM 485 have at least 24 graded credit hours and a 3.0 cumulative GPR on all college coursework. Their prior educational experiences include community colleges, large public institutions, small private institutions, international institutions, or a combination of institution types. With these varying backgrounds, COMM 485 attempts to address the needs of transfer students who all have one thing in common - beginning matriculation at a new institution at a higher academic level, along with navigating a new campus and culture. Through teaching COMM 485, I noticed lower academic skills among transfer students, such as note-taking techniques and time-management skills.

The course has varied in meeting times since its inception, ranging from multiple times throughout the semester to only meetings only during the first five weeks. Assignments also varied including a fixed time commitment calendar, career

exploration essay, mandatory academic advising, critical thinking activity, university involvement assignment, an assessment over learning outcomes, and a digital portfolio. Advisors are consistently reevaluating the program and concluded that COMM 485 is not doing its job well enough to improve the academic and social engagement of transfer students. Without resulting in increased retention and graduation rates, COMM 485 serves as a waste of student's time, energy, and money. There is a need to improve this program to benefit first-semester transfer students.

For this study, the intervention was to restructure COMM 485 by combining online modules, in-person activities, and lectures. The goal of the intervention was to increase academic and social engagement of first-semester transfer students enrolled in COMM 485. The intended outcome was to increase social engagement by participating in small-group forums to discuss midterm challenges, sharing study skills, and building a virtual community. The virtual community was supported by weekly meetings throughout the semester where the instructor invited speakers from the Academic Success Center, Student Activities, and Student Counseling Services. Additionally, students completed assignments that were successful in previous semesters, such as time management, academic advising, career exploration, and university involvement. For their final project, students submitted an online digital portfolio covering various competencies they learned in the classroom, as well as applying these skills to professional situations. The intention of the intervention was to increase student's intention to persist and pursue a degree from Texas A&M University.

Research Questions

Collectively, the issues related to success of transfer students suggests the following research questions are worthy of investigation. The research questions are:

RQ1: How do students understand and experience academic and social engagement across the semester they participate in retention programming?

RQ2: What do students see as barriers and facilitators of engagement during the semester they participate in retention programming?

RQ3: What do students find helpful about retention programming?

Chapter 2

Theoretical Perspectives and Research Guiding the Project

In Chapter 1, I provided an introduction to the context, problem of practice, a brief overview of preliminary findings through previous cycles of research, and research questions guiding this study. Chapter 2 will provide an overview of the literature, including the definition and characteristics of transfer students, factors hindering transfer student success, and intervention programs. After providing a background of literature, the three theoretical frameworks that inform this study will be presented: Tinto's Model on Student Retention (1975), Astin's Theory of Student Involvement (1984), and Schlossberg's Transition Framework (1981). Additionally, I will discuss previous cycles of action research that have informed the research questions and proposed intervention.

The literature defines "transfer student" as an undergraduate student who begins matriculation at one institution and chooses to continue taking courses elsewhere, with or without earning a degree (Bragg, 2017; Taylor & Jain, 2017; Townsend, 2001). There are multiple pathways for transfer, and the most common are vertical transfer, lateral transfer, and co-enrollment. Vertical transfer refers to students who begin matriculation at a 2-year institution and transfer to a 4-year institution. Lateral transfer occurs when students transfer between two similar institution types. For example, students can transfer laterally from a 2-year institution to a 2-year institution or from a 4-year institution to a 4-year institution. Finally, co-enrollment is when a student is enrolled at two or more institutions at once and transfers coursework between the two schools. This is common with students who want to continue taking core curriculum requirements at a community college and transfer that coursework to their primary institution where they

are currently working on major course requirements. Because of the prevalence of student transfer, “many community colleges design their curriculum and programs with the assumption that students desire to and will transfer to a 4-year institution” (Taylor & Jain, 2017, p. 274).

Transfer students are a diverse student population with varying backgrounds, which can make it difficult to anticipate their academic needs. Transfer students can vary in college student demographic categories, such as enrollment or employment status. However, transfer students also vary by classification, prior earned credit, previous institution type, and type of transfer pathway.

Students can also have many different reasons for transferring institutions. Students may choose to complete a vertical transfer because of financial reasons or academic rigor. With many students and families struggling to afford advanced degrees, choosing to begin their postsecondary education at a junior, community, or technical college can lessen the financial burden. Transfer students may choose to begin their education at a 2-year institution in order to save money on core curriculum courses that are not related to their desired area of study. Additionally, starting at a 2-year institution may serve to bridge the gap between academic rigor of high school versus a 4-year institution. Some transfer students choose to take courses at a community college that they may not do well in at a larger institution.

Students can also choose to laterally transfer either from a 2-year institution to a 2-year institution, or more commonly from a 4-year institution to a 4-year institution, for a variety of reasons, such as: desired major, campus climate, financial aid opportunities, cost of attendance, institution prestige, academic ability, or social influence. Some

students also laterally transfer between 4-year private institutions and 4-year public institutions (Lee & Schneider, 2016).

Factors Hindering Transfer Student Success

Multiple factors can hinder the success of transfer students. For the purposes of this study, student success is linked to GPA and retention (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Rhine, Milligan, & Nelson, 2000). According to Duggan and Pickering (2008), “transfer students frequently bring with them an assortment of barriers to academic success and retention, often finding themselves in situations that require skills they neither possess nor are even aware that they lack” (p. 438). Additionally, students who start matriculation at a two-year college are less likely to earn a bachelor’s degree than “equally qualified students from similar demographic groups who begin at four-year institutions” (Kahlenberg, 2011, np). Scholars and higher education professionals refer to this phenomenon as “transfer shock.” First conceived by John Hills (1965), “transfer shock” refers to a brief descent in grade point average during a transfer student’s first semester at a new 4-year institution. Students who have a lower GPA prior to transferring to a 4-year institution are more likely to suffer from transfer shock (D’Amico, Dika, Elling, Algozzine, & Ginn, 2013; Hills, 1965; Rhine, Milligan, & Nelson, 2000). Transfer shock, which includes a variety of causal factors, leads to an increase in time-to-graduation, which Lichtenberger and Dietrich refer to as “the community college penalty” (2016, p. 3). Transfer students are also more likely to drop out of college or take longer to earn degrees than their native counterparts (Hoyt & Winn, 2004; Mondal & Galbraith, 2014).

Although the vertical transfer process is a more financially responsible pathway to earning a baccalaureate, it can also harm students once they arrive at the 4-year institution. Community colleges typically offer smaller class sizes where students can get more individual attention, which can result in students feeling lost in the crowd of a large university (Davies & Casey, 1999; Townsend & Wilson, 2006). Since the coursework varies, transfer students may be underprepared to reach the academic expectations of the larger university (Duggan & Pickering, 2008; Townsend, 2008). However, a study by Rhine, Milligan, and Nelson (2000) showed that transfer “student academic progress is most likely to be impeded by administrative obstacles and concerns, not lack of academic preparation” (p. 448).

A common administrative obstacle that hinders transfer student success is a loss of academic credit after they transfer (Miller, 2013; Rhine et al., 2000; Taylor & Jain, 2017). Taylor and Jain (2017) define credit loss as “the extent to which students lose college credits when they transfer to another institution” (p. 278). Although students cannot actually “lose” credit or remove it from their academic record, the credit does not count toward the requirements for a bachelor’s degree at the new institution, thus putting them at a disadvantage and adding time-to-degree. Although students may transfer with enough credits for an associate’s degree, they may still need three or more years of coursework at the new institution in order to complete requirements. The reasons for credit loss can vary from courses not having direct equivalents to students not planning for a specific major, thus taking unnecessary coursework. Although the state of Texas has 42 semester credit hours of core curriculum, some of these courses do not apply to

degrees that have major-specific requirements. This is also problematic for students who transfer from private or out-of-state institutions.

Intervention Programs

Intervention programs are implemented at higher education institutions to assist students during their initial transition to college or a new university. These programs can also mitigate transfer shock. Examples of intervention programs include: learning communities, freshmen interest groups, and seminars. These programs address similar topics and are positively related to student engagement (Bonet & Walters, 2016; Inkelas, 2007; Rocconi, 2010; Zhao & Kuh, 2004). The proposed intervention for this study, an overhaul of COMM 485, is modeled after the programs listed below.

Learning Communities

Learning communities, a type of high impact experience and intervention program, are a way to maximize academic engagement of college students. According to Lenning and Ebbers (1999), there are four types of learning communities: curricular, classroom, residential, and student-type learning communities. Curricular learning communities are designed for students to take two or more courses together that are commonly linked. Classroom learning communities are designed to foster community-building within the classroom by using collaborative learning techniques. Residential learning communities, also known as living-learning communities, require students to live on-campus and take common courses. Lastly, student-type learning communities are created for specific student groups, such as first-generation students. Although there are multiple types of learning communities, most target first-semester freshmen (Knight, 2003; Pike, 1999; Rocconi, 2010; Zhao & Kuh, 2004).

Using the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), Zhao & Kuh (2004) examined how participation in learning communities affected student engagement, including academic effort and gains in competency. The researchers collected data from over 80,000 students across 365 4-year institutions in 2002 (Zhao & Kuh, 2004). The results showed that learning communities are associated with “enhanced academic performance, integration of academic and social experiences,” and an “overall satisfaction with the college experience” (Zhao & Kuh, 2004, p. 130). It should be noted that the effectiveness of learning communities depends on the local context and program structure.

Freshmen Interest Groups

Similar to curricular learning communities, freshmen interest groups (FIGs) are designed for first-year students to take two or more courses together. However, unlike a learning community, students also participate in “some form of unifying experience that seeks to establish linkages between course content” (Tinto & Goodsell, 1993, p. 15). The results of a study by Wilcox and delMas (1997) show that participation in FIGs or “package courses” lead to improved academic performance and increased social integration.

The proposed intervention will include an activity where students must identify core competencies they learn in the classroom and apply this knowledge to the workforce. Unlike FIGs, students will not take two or more courses together. Students will, however, create linkages between course content and real-world experiences.

Seminars

The last type of intervention programming is university seminars. Seminars can vary on whether or not they bear credit, influence a student's GPR, or are required by the college. In a study conducted by Baylock and Bresciani (2011), first-semester transfer students were enrolled in a 3-hour seminar called Transfer Bridge, which involved academic advising, library literacy, financial literacy, and peer mentoring. The results of an assessment of the learning outcomes of Transfer Bridge showed that students who participated in Transfer Bridge had an increased understanding of degree requirements, awareness of on-campus resources, and improved confidence.

Yet, despite the success of programs like Transfer Bridge, most established programs are intended for first-time-in-college (FTIC) students, specifically freshmen, and not transfer students. According to Lichtenberger and Dietrich (2016), "community college transfer students traditionally fall outside the scope of most retention and integration programs at 4-year institutions, which are typically designed with the first-time direct entrant in mind" (p. 23). Students transitioning to life at a new university deserve attention from administrators, yet rarely receive it due to the assumption that they are experienced college students and do not require special assistance (Handel, 2013). Too often, administrators make assumptions about transfer students, specifically that "because transfer students have college experience, they require less attention and fewer services than first-time college students," which is not the case (Handel, 2011, p. 23). It is vital to provide students with the opportunity to connect with their peers since it is often difficult to clearly identify a transfer student on campus.

Theoretical Perspectives

Three theoretical frameworks inform the present study. These include Tinto's Model on Student Retention (1975), Astin's Theory of Student Involvement (1984), and Schlossberg's Transition Framework (1981). Each theory is described in relation to this action research study. Additionally, relevant studies are discussed for each individual theory. After the three theories are presented, I will provide details of previous cycles of action research and a summary of Chapter 2.

Model on Student Retention

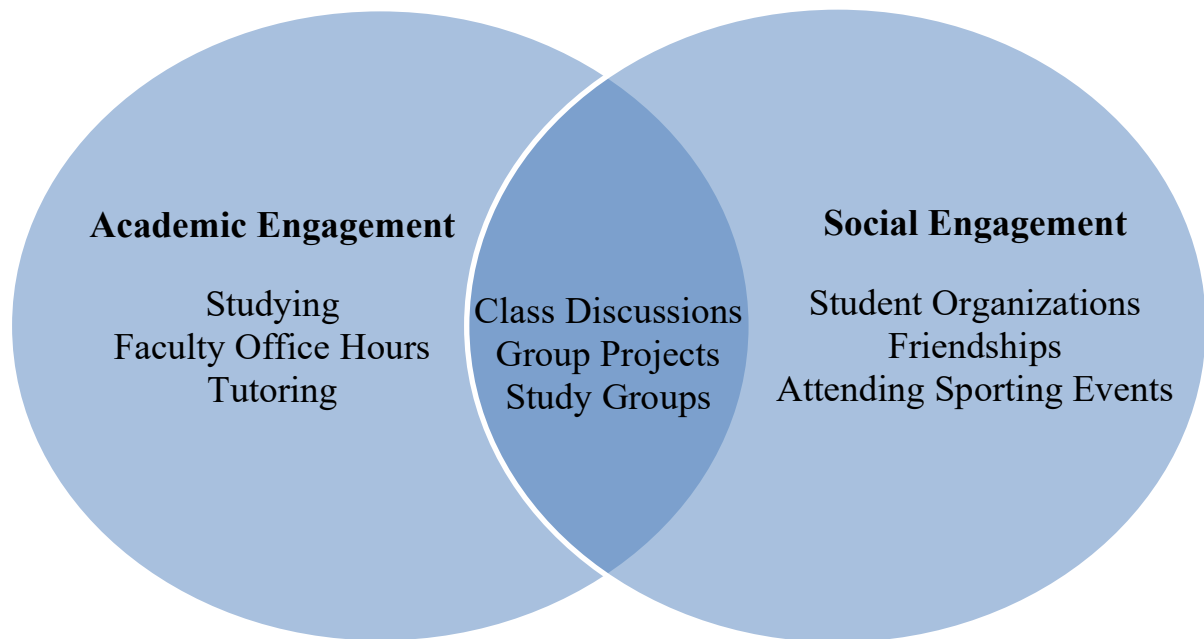
The first theoretical framework guiding this study is the Model on Student Retention developed by Vincent Tinto (1975). The basis of the retention model is student integration. The term "integrate" is defined as "to combine...into one unified system; desegregate" (dictionary.com, 2016). Tinto claims that academic integration and social integration are determining factors of student graduation and retention rates (1975). A student's success is directly influenced by the student's commitment to the institution, social system, academic goals, and career goals. If a student lacks integration, they are more likely to leave the institution and pursue alternate endeavors.

Academic integration. According to Tinto, academic integration includes both grade performance and "intellectual development during the college years" (1975, p. 104). Grade performance is measured by institutional standards and remaining in good standing with the academic department. Intellectual development refers to the student's "identification with the norms of the academic system" (Tinto, 1975, p. 104). Examples of academic integration include: GPA, self-efficacy, enjoyment of coursework,

recognizing the value of courses in the core curriculum, applying course content to daily life, and acknowledging and meeting the academic standards of the institution.

Social integration. Another category of integration that Tinto addresses is social integration. Social integration “occurs primarily through informal peer group associations, semi-formal extracurricular activities, and interaction with faculty and administrative personnel within the college” (Tinto, 1975, p. 107). Examples of social integration include: joining clubs or student organizations, engaging in study groups, personal interactions with faculty and staff members, and having a support group on-campus or closely associated to campus. Students who are socially withdrawn or fail to make an effort to establish friendships are more likely to leave their institution or leave college altogether. However, it should be noted that excessive social integration can result in students neglecting their studies, leading to voluntarily or involuntarily dropping out. Tinto’s Model on Student Retention has been adapted over the years and serves as a foundation for retention research in higher education. Although academic integration and social integration are two different constructs, they often overlap. Figure 1 shows the relationship between the constructs.

Figure 1
Relationship Between Constructs



Related studies. In a study conducted by Duggan and Pickering (2008), the authors examine the noncognitive factors that affect transfer students. In the study, the authors use Tinto's Model of Student Retention as the basis of their adapted survey instrument, which included subject areas such as: reasons for attending college, reasons for transferring, frequency of academic experiences at previous institutions, likelihood of social involvement, predictions of academic success, etc. The results of this study enhance the Model of Student Retention by claiming that the barriers a transfer student faces to integrate socially and academically depend on their classification (earned hours) and academic history.

In this study, freshmen students' responses were more related to academic integration. Students anticipated negative academic integration, claiming that there was

“some chance or a very good chance of failing one or more courses” (Duggan & Pickering, 2008, p. 449). Academic integration was also a concern of sophomore students in the study. Similar to the freshmen, sophomores also expected to encounter academic difficulty at the new university through increased workload and more challenging course content. Additionally, the results showed that another barrier to the success of sophomore transfer students was the inability to use classroom knowledge in daily life. Unlike freshmen transfer students, sophomores showed a higher concern for social integration. The results showed that sophomore students’ social connections played a large role in choosing the university. Sophomores also viewed the development of interpersonal skills as an important reason to attend college. In the study, upper division transfer students were most likely to face barriers with social integration. Out of all of the student classifications, upper division students claim that they were least likely to socialize on-campus. However, this contradicted with the results of upper division students placing high importance on attending a school with interesting social activities. Upper division students also reported to be more likely to miss class or turn in assignments late. The overall results of this study show that transfer students have difficulty balancing academic and social integration.

Another research study that used Tinto’s Model on Student Retention as a theoretical framework is “Early Integration and Other Outcomes for Community College Transfer Students” conducted by D’Amico, Dika, Elling, Algozzine, and Ginn (2014). For this study, the researchers administered a survey to all first-semester students 6 to 8 weeks into the semester (around midterms) to explore academic and social integration of transfer students. The results showed that academic integration was linked

to student persistence, specifically perceived academic fit and class participation. However, students reported interesting results that utilizing academic advising was more significant to academic integration than meeting with faculty members. Additionally, the results showed that transfer students were less likely to attain friends in class or use their classes as a social outlet. It should be noted that the population of the study included nontraditional transfer students, which may contribute to the results. The population for my action research study consisted of traditional college-aged transfer students (ages 18-21).

Theory of Student Involvement

A second, related theory that contributes to the framing of this study is the Theory of Student Involvement. Developed by Alexander Astin (1984), this theory was partially derived from Tinto's Model on Student Retention (1975). There are many similarities among the two frameworks. According to Astin, the term student involvement "refers to the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience" (1984, p. 518). The Theory of Student Involvement claims that the more a student is involved, the more the student will learn and grow. Student learning outcomes are directly affected by the student's level of involvement. In order to achieve success, students must be actively and highly involved. Highly involved students tend to spend time on campus, devote a large amount of time to their studies, actively participate in sponsored student organizations, and frequently interact with faculty members, staff, and peers. Uninvolved students display little interest in class, do not spend an adequate amount of time studying, are socially reserved, and make little to no contact with faculty

members or peers. There are five postulates of the theory of student involvement (Astin, 1984):

1. Student involvement can be viewed as student investment.
2. A student's degree of involvement can vary.
3. Involvement can be assessed both quantitatively and qualitatively.
4. A student's personal and academic growth is a direct result of the quality and quantity of their involvement.
5. An educational practice can only be effective if it increases student involvement.

This theory can be used to “design more effective learning environments” by higher education professionals (Astin, 1984, p. 518). Additionally, there are three core elements of the Theory of Student Involvement that differ from Tinto's model, which are: inputs, environment, and outputs.

Inputs. In the Theory of Student Involvement, inputs refer to the student's previous experiences and pre-existing qualities that the student brings with them to college. Inputs can also be institutional policies and procedures. Examples of inputs are: high school GPA, GPA at their previous institution, socioeconomic status, demographics, natural academic ability, GPA requirements for honors programs, and perceptions of self. All inputs, both personal and institutional, affect student success.

Environment. The most developed core element of the Theory of Student Involvement is environment. Environment refers to the overall college experience, including student involvement and engagement. Environment includes all of the following: a student's employment, place of residence, extracurricular activities, social involvement, and academic involvement. Academic involvement encompasses many

areas of the academic experience, such as the quantity and quality of interactions with faculty members, study habits, critical thinking experiences, and participation in honors programs.

Outputs. The final core element of Astin's theory is outputs, which are the results of the coalescence of inputs and environment. Examples of outputs include: academic achievement at the student's new institution, retention, graduation, and new characteristics, perspectives, behaviors, and skills gained while earning their degree.

Related studies. Several studies that are supported by the Theory of Student Involvement have shown that "student engagement is a critical part of student success," (Astin, 1984; DeWine, Ludvik, Tucker, Mullholland, & Bracken, 2016; Ellis, 2013; Lester, Leonard, & Mathias, 2013, p. 203). One study that uses the student involvement as a theoretical framework is a case study conducted by DeWine et al. (2016). The study was conducted at research university in the western United States with a large traditional-aged transfer student population. Data was collected through multiple methods, including individual interviews and document analysis. Six environments (or themes) emerged that "influenced the transition process of community college students," including: academic support, faculty, social support, orientation, preenrollment programs, and university communication (DeWine et al., 2016, p. 5). Academic support consisted of both input and environment elements such as previous academic history, academic advising, and university expectations. The results of this study show that environmental elements play a key role in the success of transfer students and their likelihood to graduate.

Lester, Leonard, and Mathias use the Theory of Student Involvement to explore how transfer students view involvement and how and to what extent they engage themselves academically and socially (2013). The researchers conducted numerous interviews of transfer students at a single institution. The results showed that transfer students identified the value of involvement and “viewed support services outside of the university as contributing to their success in college” (Lester, Leonard, & Mathias, 2013, p. 211). The findings of this study support the Theory of Student Involvement, since “students who engaged in academic and social activities were more likely to persist and receive a bachelor’s degree” (Lester, Leonard, & Mathias, 2013, p. 218).

Another study that aligns with the Theory of Student Involvement is qualitative research completed by Ellis (2013). The researcher conducted several focus groups at each campus of a large university system in the southwestern United States. The purpose of the study was to explore the factors that contribute to transfer student success. Participants who volunteered to take part in the study were referred to as “successful transfer students,” meaning that they were “academically progressing successfully at the university” (Ellis, 2013, p. 75). Results of the study showed that successful transfer students were actively involved on campus and in the community, utilized on-campus resources, engaged in undergraduate research, and built relationships with their peers. According to Ellis, successful transfer students also “expressed a desire for institutions to promote more social interaction with peers” (2013, p. 83).

Both Tinto and Astin’s theories primarily focus on individual factors and are driven by results, such as retention and student success (e.g. GPA or graduation). While these theories were useful for developing the intervention, they do not consider

ecological factors or unique circumstances, both of which surfaced in the data for this dissertation. In my analysis, therefore, I chose to use a third framework as a lens to explore students' individual situations and experiences.

The Transition Framework

The final theoretical framework guiding this project is the Transition Framework, developed by Schlossberg (1981). Schlossberg defines transition as “any event or non-event that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles” (1981, p. 5). Although adults experience different transitions at different stages in life, the characteristics of transitions are the same. For the purposes of this theory, a transition is only a transition “if it is so defined by the person experiencing it” (Schlossberg, 1981, p. 6). Transitions can result in psychological growth or downturn. Understanding how adults process life transitions will assist in understanding the experiences of transfer students in their first semester at a new institution.

According to Schlossberg, there are three different types of transitions: anticipated, unanticipated, and non-events. Anticipated transitions are those that are expected or planned. Examples of anticipated transitions include graduating from college, getting a job, and getting married. Conversely, unanticipated transitions are those that are not planned or expected. These include events such as divorce, battling a severe illness, or losing employment. Non-events are those that are expected, yet do not occur. Examples of non-events include not graduating from college, not getting married, or not having children.

Schlossberg also provides a system for coping with transitions: the 4 Ss System (2008, 2011). This system takes an ecological view, encompassing all aspects of a major

transition. Unlike the previous two theories, Schlossberg considers various factors outside of the college student identity. The four S's represent categories of characteristics that are similar among transitions: situation, self, supports, and strategies.

Situation. The first S represents *situation*, which refers to the current life situation of the individual who is experiencing the transition. Different situations can make the transition easier or more difficult. For example: if a student's parent becomes chronically ill in the semester they transfer to a new university, the transition will be significantly harder. The length of the transition and situation can also affect how individuals cope.

Self. The next S represents *self*, or a person's "inner strength for coping with the situation" (Schlossberg, 2011, p. 160). These are personal characteristics and psychological traits such as resiliency, optimism, and perseverance. Highly motivated individuals will be more successful coping with transitions.

Supports. The third S represents *supports*, which refers to the actual or perceived supports that are available during the time of the transition. Supports for transfer students can include family, friends, on-campus resources, academic advisors, or peer mentors. These perceived or actual supports can affect how a student handles the transition to a new institution.

Strategies. The final S represents *strategies* or methods of coping. Adults choose different strategies to cope, depending on the situation, self, and supports. Coping strategies can be healthy (exercising or praying) or unhealthy (binge eating or excessive alcohol consumption). Some examples of coping strategies for transfer students include: spending time with friends and family, exercising, and practicing self-care.

Related Studies

Current studies related to higher education that are supported by the Transition Framework and 4S Model primarily focus on specific student populations, such as athletes, male students of color, veterans, and adult learners. (Flowers, Luzynski, & Zamani-Gallaher, 2014; Griffin & Gilbert, 2015; Ryan, Carlstrom, Hughey, & Harris, 2011).

Using narrative inquiry and hermeneutic analysis, Karmelita explored the experiences of adult learners during their transition to college through an eight-week course (2018). The goal of the transition course (*support*) was to help adult learners identify the expectations of college, practice research and presentation skills, and explore career options. After analyzing data from semi-structured interviews, observations, and class artifacts, the researcher understand how students' personal goals and experiences (*self*) affected their decision to go back to college (*situation*). The researcher also found that adult learners relied heavily on interpersonal relationships (*supports*) to cope with the transition (*strategies*).

Another study that supports Schlossberg's 4S Model focuses on a specific transfer student population: student athletes. Flowers, Luzynski, and Zamani-Gallaher examined the experiences of male student athletes that transferred to a new institution because of athletic opportunities (2014). Using semi-structured interviews, the researchers found that transfer student athletes identified that personal characteristics (*self*) and social networks (*supports*) played significant roles in the transfer process (*strategies*). The researchers also found that student athletes primarily relied on supports within the realm of NCAA athletics and did not feel connected to the institution as a whole. Although

student athletes reported participation in new student orientation programs and academic advising, they did not identify these experiences as impactful on their transition.

Previous Cycles of Action Research

In addition to being shaped by prior research and the theoretical framework outlined above, the intervention for this study was influenced by two previous cycles of action research, conducted in the spring 2017 and fall 2017 semesters. Cycle 0 was a reconnaissance phase and Cycle 1 explored academic engagement through faculty interaction.

In Cycle 0, I wanted to explore what struggles students faced when transferring to Texas A&M University and what interventions would help with the transition. I interviewed and surveyed three transfer students in the Department of Communication and three academic advisors in the College of Liberal Arts. The results of Cycle 0 showed that there is a need for intervention programming due to the unpreparedness of transfer students. The academic advisors shared that transfer students are typically unaware of all requirements and expectations once they arrive at Texas A&M University. There was also a consensus that this can delay graduation, especially for students who do not actively seek help or come in for academic advising. Transfer students shared that they were specifically unprepared for the academic rigor, expectations, and large size of campus. Two of the students also expressed difficulty with socializing and time management.

For Cycle 1 during Fall 2017, I chose to implement an intervention in COMM 485 focusing on academic engagement through interacting with faculty members. I administered a pre-intervention survey to 85 transfer students, which measured the

following constructs: academic engagement, social engagement, university engagement, and future planning. The intervention consisted of showing transfer students in COMM 485 a YouTube video describing how to successfully utilize faculty office hours. Students also participated in a role-play activity to help practice interacting with faculty members. For their final assignment, students were asked to reflect on their experiences engaging with faculty members and how it impacted their perceived academic engagement, if at all. After implementing the intervention, I administered the same survey and conducted interviews with students in COMM 485. Through these interviews, I realized that transfer students do not identify faculty interaction as an area of academic engagement that needs improvement. Cycle 1 results showed that over the course of the typical first semester, including the COMM 485 class and the intervention on interacting with faculty members, although students' perceived academic engagement decreased over the first semester, their commitment to the university and earning a degree increased.

Summary of Theoretical Perspectives and Research Guiding the Project

In Chapter 2, relevant literature was discussed, including the definition of student transfer, characteristics of transfer students, factors hindering transfer student success, and programmatic efforts to assist transfer students. Additionally, three theoretical perspectives and related studies were discussed, all of which support the problem of practice. Previous cycles of action research were also discussed, including reconnaissance and an unsuccessful intervention. The Model on Student Retention and the Theory of Student Involvement are connected, build upon each other, and serve as

rationale (Tinto, 1975; Astin, 1984) The Transition Framework has a slightly different structure and helps explain the findings (Schlossberg, 1981)

The foundation of the intervention and research study is a combination of the three theoretical frameworks, related literature, and results from previous iterations of action research. The intervention was an entire modification of COMM 485 and its course content. Rather than focusing on faculty interaction as a way to increase academic engagement, students had more opportunities to plan for their future, take control of their educational experiences, and reflect on their first semester. This intervention attempted to mitigate the unpreparedness of transfer students through increasing academic and social integration (Tinto, 1975), improving their college environment (Astin, 1984), and providing an environment of support to help them cope with the transition (Schlossberg, 1981).

Chapter 3

Methods

Chapter 3 provides details of the methodology of the research study. To begin, I briefly describe action research. Then, I describe the types of changes I wanted to see from COMM 485 and reiterate the research questions. Next, I describe the intervention in detail. Finally, I describe the setting, participants, role of the researcher, and procedure I used to study the outcomes of the intervention.

Action Research

Action research is an applied research method where the researcher “addresses a specific, practical issue and seeks to obtain solutions to a problem” (Creswell, 2015, p. 579). The purpose of practical action research is to address an educational problem within a specific context and improve practice. This type of research is important for promoting change in educational contexts, collaboration, and self-reflection of practitioners.

Action research, such as this study, addresses local issues. Scholar-practitioners and graduate students typically conduct action research since they can complete a study in a short period of time, such as a semester. This type of research is also iterative, with each cycle building upon others.

Research Questions

As a programmatic effort, the goals of COMM 485 are to increase student retention; increase graduation rates of transfer students; provide transfer students with the resources and tools needed to be successful at the institution; and increase academic and social engagement during their first semester. Taking these goals into consideration, the following three research questions guided this project:

- RQ1: How do students understand and experience academic and social engagement across the semester they participate in retention programming?
- RQ2: What do students find helpful about retention programming?
- RQ3: How does it relate to their understanding of engagement in their major, in the college, or at the university?

Intervention

The intervention consisted of restructuring the already-established retention program (COMM 485) that targets first-semester transfer students in the Department of Communication. Prior to the study, COMM 485 included eight module activities and six in-person meetings, which focused on: time management, career exploration, academic advising, degree planning, resources, critical thinking, and university involvement. Previous cycles of research included the addition of a faculty engagement module, which I removed from the latest intervention.

For this intervention, I restructured COMM 485 to include increased peer interactions, online modules, and online discussions. For the first change, I increased the number of face-to-face meetings from six to seven. The additional meeting was used for in-class activities provided by the Student Counseling Services. Additionally, I graded participation based on submitting weekly reflections rather than attendance. I password-protected the reflections prompts and students received the password when they attended class. By combining online modules, in-person activities, and lectures, the goal of the intervention was to increase academic and social engagement of first-semester transfer students enrolled in COMM 485. For increasing social engagement in online modules, students participated in small-group discussion forums covering topics such as goal

setting, midterm challenges, sharing study skills, and building a virtual community. Weekly meetings throughout the semester supported this virtual community. Additionally, students completed assignments similar to previous semesters, such as time management, academic advising, career exploration, and university involvement. For their final project, students submitted an online digital portfolio that covered various competencies learned throughout the semester, as well as professional application of these tools. The intervention included strategies and opportunities to help students develop skills to connect with peers, faculty, and the university as a whole. Additionally, the intervention helped students navigate a new campus and provided a sense of community among first-semester transfer students.

Specific changes to the structure of COMM 485 and the rationale behind the changes can be found in Table 1. The first column contains attributes of COMM 485 during its first inception. The second column contains changes that were made during Cycle 1 in Fall 2017. The third column, Spring 2019, contains proposed changes for this dissertation.

Table 1
Changes to COMM 485

	Spring 2016	Fall 2017	Spring 2019	Rationale for Change
Contact	4 face-to-face meetings	6 face-to-face meetings	7 face-to-face meetings	More in-person meetings will support development of a learning community (Zhao & Kuh, 2004)
	No online discussions	No online discussions	Addition of online discussion boards	Providing students with an environment to connect and collaborate throughout the semester will encourage social interaction (Ellis, 2013).
Assignments	No structured assignments	Lecture on identifying skills learned in the classroom	Continue lecture of identifying skills; add Digital Portfolio assignment	Teaching students to showcase skills they learn in the classroom will help apply their knowledge to everyday life (Duggan & Pickering, 2008).
	No structured assignments	Addition of University Involvement assignment	Addition of Career Exploration assignment; expand University Involvement assignment to include goal-setting	Incorporating assignments that are goal-oriented and future-focused will increase students' intention to persist (Azjen, 1991).

The syllabus for COMM 485 - Spring 2019 can be found in Appendix A.

Setting

I implemented to new course and conducted research during the spring 2019 semester at Texas A&M University, located in College Station, Texas. With over 66,000

students, Texas A&M University has the largest student population in the state of Texas. The institution is separated into 17 different academic colleges. I conducted the research with students in the Department of Communication, which is within the College of Liberal Arts. In addition to serving as the researcher, I am also an academic advisor in the Department of Communication, which offers 4 different baccalaureate programs and has over 1400 undergraduate students. Over 56% of new students in the Department of Communication are transfer students. I conducted research as part of a graded one credit-hour course (COMM 485), which is required of all first-semester transfer students within the Department of Communication.

Role of the Researcher

As the primary researcher for this action research study, I created the content of the intervention and served as the instructor of COMM 485. The Director of Undergraduate Studies was listed as the Instructor of Record and had access to course assignments and submissions. I was mindful with data collection and maintaining confidentiality. I emailed instructions and procedures to four participants to conduct self-interviews. Although participants were still enrolled in COMM 485, I did not review the audio file until the semester ended and I posted final grades. While analyzing reflection data, I kept students' names confidential by create a unique identification number for each student that corresponded with their reflection responses. Ensuring confidentiality helped alleviate any pressure students may have felt to participate in the research or not be forthcoming with their thoughts or experiences.

As an academic advisor, instructor, and former student, I was considered an insider at Texas A&M University. Since I attended Texas A&M University and earned a

degree from the Department of Communication, I personally identify as an Aggie. This position helped me understand “Aggie” terminology and traditions. As an academic advisor I work with undergraduate students daily, listening to their complaints, struggles, and victories. Although I tried my best to have an objective lens, I acknowledge that my position and assumptions of students may impact the results.

Since I conducted this study in my work environment, I took additional steps to separate the roles of academic advisor/instructor and researcher. I used my personal computer to download and analyze data outside of working hours. I also did not discuss my research with any students or colleagues. Since retention programming is mandatory in the College of Liberal Arts, the results of this study did not affect my employment status. Although this research study was connected to my job, no promotion or employment opportunity was contingent upon the findings. I had the support of my supervisor to conduct this study, but was not offered any monetary incentives. I had no external motivating factors relating to this research.

I did not reference my research in a classroom setting. Students only knew of the research from the recruitment email for reflection prompts. Four students were contacted for self-interviews and only three responded. This suggests that students did not feel any direct or indirect pressure to participate. No students approached me regarding the research project.

Selection of Participants

First-semester transfer students accepted into the Department of Communication at Texas A&M University for the spring 2019 semester participated in the study. As an academic advisor, I enrolled 75 students in COMM 485. Of those 75 students, three were

not asked to participate due to special circumstances. Of the 72 students asked to participate, 24 students gave consent to participate in the study.

Educational background of participants. Based on the transfer admission requirements of the institution and college, students' classifications ranged from freshmen to juniors (24 - 75 completed credit hours) and their cumulative GPAs prior to transferring were at least a 3.0. Additionally, participants transferred from community colleges and 4-year public institutions from all over the country. 17 students transferred from a 2-year institution and 7 students transferred from another 4-year institution. Nine students have been pursuing a degree for 3-4 years; 14 students have been pursuing a degree for 1-2 years; one student has been pursuing a degree for less than a year.

Employment background of participants. 21 participants entered college immediately upon graduating high school. Three of the 24 participants took time off to work. Only one participant reported having a full-time job. Six participants were employed part-time. The remaining 17 participants were unemployed.

Additional demographic information of participants. Along with the demographic information listed above, I asked participants to disclose additional information. Six participants reported to be Hispanic or Latino; 18 reported to be White or Caucasian. Seven participants identified as male and 17 identified as female. No participants reported having any children or being a primary caregiver. Only one student reported being a first-generation college student. No participants reported being a veteran. One student identified as nontraditional, four students were unsure if they considered themselves a nontraditional student, and the remaining 19 students did not consider themselves a nontraditional student.

Instruments

I used qualitative methods to collect data. The first data source were student reflections. The coursework of COMM 485 included these written assignments. Throughout the semester, students completed six reflection activities for participation (30% of their final grade). Students attended class to receive the password to access the reflection prompt. Although the reflection assignments were mandatory, students had the option to consent to participate in the study. Each reflection activity included one or two prompts. The instructions informed students to write at least five sentences per prompt. After students completed the optional consent form, they received a form to collect demographic information. Since the reflection data was part of COMM 485, responses were not anonymous.

Results from Reflections

Reflection questions were provided to students as an assignment in eCampus. In order to earn participation credit for the course, students were required to attend class where they received the password for the online assignment. The reflection assignment included two prompts where students were encouraged to be honest and elaborate on their responses to the open-ended questions. Students were reminded that their grade depended on completion, not content. Reflection questions can be found in Table 2 below.

Table 2
Reflection Prompts

Reflection Prompt	Meeting Topic	Submission Date
What are your expectations and goals for this semester? How do you want to get involved, both academically and socially?	Course Expectations, On-Campus Resources	January 20, 2019
What do you think it means to be an engaged college student?	Career Exploration	January 27, 2019
How do you think being engaged helps you achieve a bachelor's degree?	Career Exploration	January 27, 2019
Describe how you have gotten involved on campus.	Time Management & Academic Success Center	February 3, 2019
Describe your experiences connecting with others on campus.	Time Management & Academic Success Center	February 3, 2019
Before you started attending Texas A&M, what did you imagine yourself doing? Are you actually doing these things?	High Impact Experiences	February 10, 2019
Is your engagement in the Department of Communication different from your engagement in the College of Liberal Arts?	High Impact Experiences	February 10, 2019
Describe a time where you or someone you know felt really connected to others on campus.	Academic Advising	February 24, 2019
Describe a time where you or someone you know felt isolated or disconnected at Texas A&M.	Academic Advising	February 24, 2019

Results from Self-Interviews

I also collected qualitative data through student self-interviews. I wanted to select students across a range of understandings and levels of engagement. Based on preliminary analysis of reflection prompts, I identified students in a range of ways who understood and/or experienced academic and social engagement. I searched for key

words such as "study groups," "group projects," and "student organizations" in order to gather a preliminary perception of students' understanding of engagement.

After reviewing reflection data, I selected four students to invite to participate in self-interviews based on the following criteria:

- 1) Student seemed to understand engagement and reported to be engaged.
- 2) Student seemed to understand engagement but did not report to be engaged.
- 3) Student did not seem to understand engagement but reported to be engaged.
- 4) Student did not seem to understand engagement and did not report to be engaged.

I sent an email to the four students requesting their participation in audio-recorded self-interviews. Of the four students, three consented to participate. The fourth student (did not understand engagement; did not report engagement) did not participate. The students received a list of questions to answer on their own recording device, such as a cell phone or laptop. Participants submitted the audio file to an online dropbox during the last two weeks of the spring semester. I did not review the audio files until the semester concluded. Since I did not listen to the self-interviews until after I posted final grades, students may have felt more open to discuss their honest opinions about COMM 485 and their first semester experience. The following constructs were investigated: academic engagement, social engagement, future planning, and the usefulness of COMM 485. The self-interview consisted of 20 questions. Self-interview questions can be found in Appendix C.

Procedure

Preparation for this research took place during fall 2018, the semester before the implementation of the intervention. The first step of the procedure was to identify all of the first-semester transfer students enrolled in COMM 485. As an academic advisor and instructor, I had access to this information in December. Students enrolled in the course at New Student Conferences in January 2019.

Once the semester began, I assigned reflection activities at each meeting. I provided the class with a password that gave them access to each assignment in eCampus. After the first class, I emailed students a recruitment letter and an online consent form. I ensured students that neither participation nor nonparticipation in the study would have any effect on the student's grade in COMM 485 or academic standing in the Department of Communication. Students completed the reflection assignments for a participation grade in the course but had the option to let their response be used for the purposes of this study. After a week of collecting consent forms, I sent a Google Form to collect demographic information of students who agreed to participate in the study. The recruitment letter and can be found in Appendix B. The instructor of record and I had access to the data since the reflections were used to determine course participation. Each submission was attached to personal and identifying information, including students' name and identification number. Although responses were not anonymous, I ensured confidentiality by creating a unique identifying number for participants.

Based on reflection data, I selected four students to conduct self-interviews using purposive sampling (Teddle & Yu, 2007). Only three of the four students submitted audio recordings. Participant A seemed to understand the definition of student

engagement and was an engaged student herself. Participant B seemed to understand the definition of student engagement, yet was not engaged. Participant C did not understand the definition of student engagement, yet reported actions that would suggest she was engaged. Participant D did not seem to understand the definition of student engagement, nor did he report any actions that suggested engagement. Participant D did not submit an audio recording. As compensation for their time, I offered each interview participant a \$15 giftcard to Starbucks. Students submitted their audio recording to a dropbox link. Once the semester ended in May, I uploaded the recordings to rev.com for transcription.

Data Analysis

As I collected data, I organized reflections and imported data to MAXQDA. I began the analysis process by reviewing data without coding. Once I read through all responses, I conducted open coding for each response, organized by participant. With the final list of codes, I categorized them using axial coding and identified themes that emerged. I reviewed the responses again and highlighted specific quotes to potentially cite in the findings.

For self-interview data, I used an online service, rev.com, to transcribe the interviews. Once the online transcription was complete, I listened to the interviews and read through the transcription to correct any errors. I conducted open coding of the transcription, which resulted in an initial list of codes. I categorized the codes using axial coding and identified three themes that emerged. After I created a list of themes, I reviewed the data again to identify any overlooked themes and highlight specific quotes to support findings. I quantified the percentage of students who fell into particular patterns and themes. I also explored the possible differences of experiences between

students who transferred from a community college versus a 4-year institution. In total, I conducted three rounds of coding, not including the initial review. The timeline of the study is illustrated in Table 3. In the next chapter, I will provide an analysis of reflection and interview data.

Table 3
Timeline and Procedures of the Study

Time Frame	Actions	Procedures
Fall 2018	Planned intervention	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prepared syllabus • Prepared assignment instructions and rubrics
December-January	Identified participants	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assisted transfer students at new student conferences in registering for COMM 485 • Gathered list of first-semester transfer students enrolled in COMM 485
January	Prepared intervention	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Developed course in eCampus <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Added modules ◦ Created discussion boards ◦ Uploaded assignment instructions and rubrics ◦ Added links to reflection submissions
January - March	Implemented Intervention and Collected Data	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collected demographic information • Facilitated class discussions • Held 1-hour meetings for 6 weeks • Administered reflection assignments • Analyzed reflections after each class
April	Selected Participants and Requested Interviews	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Uploaded reflection data to rev.com for transcription • Coded reflection data • Identified trends and selected participants for self-interviews • Emailed instructions for self-interviews and assigned deadline for submissions
May	Data Analysis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Uploaded audio recordings to rev.com for transcription • Coded self-interviews

Chapter 4

Data Analysis and Findings

Chapter 4 provides an analysis of reflection and interview data. The results are presented per research question:

RQ1: How do students understand and experience academic and social engagement across the semester they participate in retention programming?

RQ2: What do students see as barriers and facilitators of engagement during the semester they participate in retention programming?

RQ3: What do students find helpful about retention programming?

Findings and Analysis for RQ1: How do students understand and experience academic and social engagement across the semester they participate in retention programming?

The following section will include findings for RQ1 categorized by patterns. The *a priori* themes for RQ1 are academic engagement and social engagement. Using the Theory of Student Involvement and the Model on Student Retention, I chose to search for codes that could be categorized as academic engagement or social engagement (Astin, 1984; Tinto, 1975)

Comments related to academic engagement were indicated by words such as: *study, GPA, professor, learning, projects, and class discussions*. Social engagement was indicated by keywords such as: *student organizations, friends, networking, and getting involved*. Table 4 represents subcodes of academic engagement, and Table 5 represents subcodes within the social engagement theme. Table 5 can be found in Appendix D.

Table 4
Academic Engagement Subcodes

Subcode	Frequency	Example
Academic Engagement <i>General*</i>	27	"I feel like now I'm more academically engaged on campus because I actually know what's offered here and things that suit my interests."
Academic Achievement	18	"My academic goal for this semester is to pass my courses with no worse than a C, but do my best to pass with an A in each course."
Faculty Interactions	11	"I've been going to my professor's office hours, and he's been going over the class work and the tests and stuff with me, so that's been helpful. He's giving me more useful strategies on how I can study better for this class."
Study Groups	10	"I felt very connected on campus when I formed a study group with people from my class."
Class Discussion	9	"An important aspect of being an engaged college student is being involved in discussion in class. This will help facilitate the learning process and success in the subject as a whole."
Group Assignments	6	"I've also met some really cool people from group assignments in most of my classes. It really helps having someone to ask questions about the same subject. We're all in this together."
GroupMe	5	"With a campus so big, it is hard to remember the people you see or the people you're supposed to work with. This is why I think GroupMe is a great way to connect on campus because it is an easily accessible source to reach out to people on campus!"
Attendance	5	"One of my expectations and goals for this semester is to attend all of my classes"
Active Learning	4	"While listening and absorbing information during class times is key, the continuation of learning and practicing the given material is vital for a college student, and is an important characteristic of an engaged college student."

*General academic engagement encompasses all aspects of academic engagement and does not focus on one subcode.

In seeking to understand what students saw as academic and social engagement, five patterns emerged.

Pattern 1: Students shared that attendance, participation, and building a relationship with faculty members are all important aspects of academic engagement. However, students also viewed studying or working on homework on-campus as academic engagement, even if they were working alone.

Students acknowledged that academic engagement was doing more than the bare minimum. Students' primary understanding of academic engagement was interacting with faculty members.

Attendance, class participation, and faculty interactions. Students shared that attendance, class participation, and faculty interactions were all equally important to academic engagement. Although 95% of students associated attendance, participation, and faculty interactions with academic engagement, less than 15% of students shared personal examples of academic participation in their first semester at a new institution. Of the individuals who did report personal experiences of academic participation, only one student described the benefits of attending faculty office hours. She shared, "I've been going to my professor's office hours, and he's been going over the class work and the tests and stuff with me, so that's been helpful. He's giving me more useful strategies on how I can study better for this class." It should be noted that students in the study were mostly enrolled in courses with 60-200 students, so class participation may have been challenging.

One student described engagement in terms of participation, sharing, "An engaged student does more than attend class and submit assignments on time, but goes

beyond the bare minimum; participating during class by taking notes and engaging in discussion.” He also reflected on his personal experiences and shared that “discussing a topic helps me remember it.”

Some students also noted the importance of participation in online discussion boards in eCampus. One student says, “The main connections I make through eCampus are through discussion posts. Having to reply and reflect on other thoughts and opinions is more of a connection than I make in large lecture halls.” Online discussions and participation are related to the next subcode of technology and elearning.

Technology and elearning. Another understanding was interacting in collaborative work--both face-to-face and in e-learning environments--with peers. 17% of students reported to experience academic engagement through technology and elearning, such as GroupMe and eCampus. Many students expressed how GroupMe, a group messaging app, helped them connect with peers. One student claims that participating in GroupMe for courses, “has been really helpful for me because I’ve been able to find other people who want to study, and study groups are so helpful for me because I feel like I learn better...than just going to lecture.”

Although eCampus has useful tools for students, such as the assignment tracker, it can cause difficulty for students transferring from an institution that used a different platform. One student shared that it took a few weeks to adjust to the new platform. Another student even expressed frustration from the learning curve because it resulted in missed assignments. This student shared, “I used blackboard at my other college, so eCampus was a totally new thing. I ended up missing two quizzes in one of my classes because I didn’t know how to find them.” Even though less than 10% of students

expressed negative feelings about eCampus, this may have contributed to feelings of disengagement.

Study groups and group assignments. When asked how they understood engagement, 46% of students associated study groups and group assignments with academic engagement. However, only two students provided examples of participating in study groups during the semester. One student shared, “I’ve been able to find other people who want to study, and study groups are so helpful for me because I feel like I learn better in a study group than sometimes just going to lecture.” The other student who participated in study groups said that even though she isn’t involved in student organizations, it helped her feel “connect[ed] to people in the class.”

For another student, working with her peers on a group assignment was an easy way to help her feel academically engaged. She shared, “I definitely think as the semester went on, I got more academically engaged. Especially when more things are happening, more projects, especially group projects, it’s a lot easier to become more engaged.” Yet, when students were completing school work alone, they also felt engaged, especially when they felt a sense of academic achievement.

Academic achievement. Students associated academic achievement with a feeling of accomplishment and earning good grades. 75% of students mentioned some type of academic achievement when discussing engagement. For some, academic achievement is the result of being an engaged college student. One student shared, “To me, being engaged consists of asking questions, forming study groups, and meeting with professors. This is how you get better grades.” Other students claim that academic achievement is engagement, in and of itself. “When I’m giving school my all, studying at

the library and making good grades, I feel like I'm engaged." Although the students had varying definitions of achievement, it was consistently linked to engagement.

Some students also understood engagement to be when their minds were engaged with their course content, even if they were not studying or attending class. Some examples that were provided include: applying communication theory to their relationships, calculating tax or interest, and sharing knowledge with friends or family. Students connected their course content to their personal lives and were able to identify how they can apply concepts they learned in class. Not only did this contribute to feelings of academic engagement, it helped them see that their experience in college was valuable.

Pattern 2: Students associated social engagement with student organizations and feeling a sense of community through formal and informal paths.

Students acknowledged the significance of relationship-building when discussing social engagement. An important aspect of social engagement was feeling a sense of community through formal (student organizations or religious groups) and informal (friendships or Aggie pride) paths.

Student organizations. 100% of participants associated student organizations with social engagement. 83% of students have either joined a student organization or explored the various options on campus. Students connected to organizations through a student organization open house, fliers, advertised events, email marketing, and their peers. The types of organizations varied, including Greek life, intramural athletics, preprofessional societies, and volunteer groups. Information sessions about the

organizations also led to establishing friendships and building their social network. One student shared:

I felt connected with others on campus when I was at [informational meetings] for organizations, or applying for organizations. The other students there had similar interests to me, so conversations and connections were quick to be made. Since we were all going after a common goal, we could connect on the basis of these similarities. Establishing relationships with other aggies allowed me to feel connected on campus.

This student explicitly stated that she had shared interests and goals with other students she met through the organizations. One of these similarities was being a student at Texas A&M and identifying as an Aggie.

Being an Aggie. Students also felt a sense of community through the Aggie identity, despite attending a campus with more than 60,000 students. Students reported feeling connected to others in their classes, on campus, and as being a member of the Aggie family. 58% of students mentioned feeling proud of the Aggie identity. One student shared, “Aggies make up one big community but also many small communities that offer relationships and resources to carry with you into your career or just into your personal life.” For another student, she experienced a sense of community prior to transferring to the institution. She expressed, “My parents and grandparents went to A&M. Being an Aggie is in my blood.” The Aggie identity fosters engagement that lasts beyond the typical four-year college experience.

Friendships. The next experience students associated with social engagement was friendships, both new and established. 100% of students described the importance of

friendships as a means of feeling socially engaged. Roughly 30% of students had established friendships with current Texas A&M students. One student shared her how her friendships made the transition easier: “I definitely think if I didn't have friends that already went here, it would have been so much harder coming to A&M. It’s definitely hard to meet people if you don’t know anybody.”

Making friendships and connecting with others can happen inside or outside the classroom. One student describes her experiences connecting with someone in her major:

On the second day of the NSC I met a girl in the computer lab and as we were talking, I learned that I went to Community College in the same town that she was from. We discovered several mutual friends from this. We made a connection and are becoming really good friends. It really proves to me that even though the world seems really large at times, it is also very small and you never really know who you could be talking to.

The foundation of this friendship was built on a shared educational path: attending a specific community college and transferring to Texas A&M University. Although the connection was established at orientation, it continued to grow through the semester through shared courses, including COMM 485.

Religious groups. Another source of feelings of social engagement was the participation in religious groups. 33% of students shared their experiences with specific religious groups in the community, how it contributed to their sense of social engagement, and how it assisted in the transition to Texas A&M. Students expressed that their religious beliefs have remained constant through the transition, and joining a

religious group was a way to establish consistency in their lives. A student discussed the difficulty of transferring and how she found solace in a religious group:

Being a transfer, it is definitely difficult to make friends, and it can be near impossible to truly feel connected to others on campus. I joined a home group at St. Mary's and the first meeting that we had really has been the only time that I didn't feel that alone. There were a couple of other people that transferred here this semester as well in my group, and it made me feel like I wasn't alone. I only meet with this group once a week for a couple of hours, so that is the only time that I really feel involved on campus.

This student initially met other individuals through a religious group, but ultimately found additional common ground through their transfer experiences. Depending on the group and the student, a religious organization may be enough for a student to feel socially engaged. However, this student “only” met with this group once a week and it was the “only” time she felt engaged. Based on her description of this experience, she may have needed more than a religious group to truly feel socially engaged.

Pattern 3: Students’ expectations of their first semester aligned with their definition of academic and social engagement.

During the first week of their first semester at Texas A&M University, students in COMM 485 were asked to identify self-expectations during their first semester. In examining what individual students listed as expectations--GPA achievement, extracurricular involvement, acclimating to a new institution, and personal wellness--and comparing those to how each student later defined engagement, I found that without

explicitly stating it, students expected themselves to be engaged at Texas A&M University. Table 6 exhibits three students' expectations of their first semester, along with their definition of student engagement. Parallels are indicated by underlined text. These responses were collected during two different weeks of the semester.

Table 6
Expectations of First Semester vs. Definition of Student Engagement

Expectations of First Semester (Week 1)	Definition of Student Engagement (Week 5)
"I hope to be able to be involved in developing <u>study groups</u> in at least one, if not all of my classes...I would also like to join at least <u>one student group</u> so as to <u>branch out</u> socially, though I have not decided which yet."	To be an engaged student is to not only attend class and submit coursework on time, but to go above and beyond the bare minimum; participate during class and <u>join study groups</u> . The engaged student gets involved in <u>student organizations</u> as they provide valuable opportunities for skill building, <u>networking, and learning outside the classroom</u> .
"Socially, I really want to <u>push myself to meet new people</u> and make good friends. <u>I want to join some kind of organization and really make sure I am involved in it.</u> I am shooting towards joining a woman's organization and maybe even something major specific. I want to make my presence known here at A&M and strive to be the best student, friend, and classmate I could possibly be."	"I think an engaged student is someone who truly does their best to be involved, get the best grades they can, and be a good example of an Aggie. For me it starts with <u>being involved and doing what you can to put yourself out there</u> . I want to try and do the best I can to join an organization to make new friends and have a sense of community here at Texas A&M."
"I have <u>set goals to get B's in all of my classes</u> . In response to the advice of respected friends and family, I have promised myself I will attend every class I possibly can. Academically, I would love to start study groups with other students in my classes. Socially, I plan to dive into the <u>community at St. Mary's Catholic Church</u> ."	"An engaged college student is fully dedicated to putting in 100% effort into his/her academic life and community. <u>In the academic department, setting high goals</u> and following through with them is the mark of an engaged student. On top of academia, a focused student takes an active role in <u>campus organizations and communities</u> ."

Other students acknowledged the difficulty with transitioning and gave themselves grace during their first semester. During the first week of classes, these students anticipated various challenges. One student quoted, “It’s kind of hard to get involved in the spring semester. I think there will be more opportunities to join organizations in the fall. This will also give me time to get used to the classes.” This mindset is important so that students do not overextend themselves during the transition to a new university, especially for those who have additional situational factors. Another student said, “I expect to spend much more time studying than I did at my previous institution. I also suspect that the quality of professors and instructors will be higher than the average community college (or so I hope).” Both of these students anticipated challenges of engagement while they were in their first week of the spring semester. They still expected themselves to be engaged in future semesters at Texas A&M, which suggests they intended on returning regardless of their level of engagement during the transition.

Pattern 4. Students understood engagement at their current institution in relation to their prior institution.

Transfer students, by definition, are experienced college students and can compare their experiences between institutions. Their previous experiences, whether positive or negative, influence their expectations and goals at their new institution. Even if a student was not academically or socially engaged prior to transferring, they still understood engagement and had related expectations during their first semester at Texas A&M University.

Students referenced their academic engagement at their previous institution and discussed how it changed now that they can freely explore personal academic interests. 42% of students mentioned the differences between previous institution and Texas A&M University, particularly how their engagement has changed. One student shared, “I feel like now I’m more academically engaged on campus because I actually know what’s offered here and things that suit my interests.” Although curricula may have been more difficult or demanding, students enjoyed content in their major courses more than general education courses they took at previous institutions. Students did not seem to be surprised with the increased workload in comparison to their previous institutions. One student shared, “I kind of expected it to be harder, especially coming from [a community college]. I mentally prepared myself for how things would be different.”

This is also the case for social engagement. Students shared how there are more opportunities to get involved at Texas A&M in comparison to where they transferred from. Another student expressed how increasing their engagement has helped improve their college experience:

Before I came to TAMU, I pictured myself the same way I was at [community college], studying and miserable all of the time. Now that I'm at TAMU, I am still studying all the time, but I don't dread school anymore! I'm very involved on campus and it has made life so much more enjoyable. I am involved in multiple organizations, I go to the rec center daily, and I spend a lot of time on campus studying. I didn't think my life would change that much after transferring but it definitely has but in a good way.

This student acknowledged similarities (“studying all the time”) but also alluded to possible differences that contributed to increased engagement (involvement in organizations and studying on campus).

Pattern 5: Students’ understanding of engagement remained consistent throughout their first semester, even if their level of engagement changed.

All three students who provided self-interviews understood engagement in the same way throughout their first semester. Table 7 shows a comparison of three students’ description of engagement at the beginning of the semester and at the end of the semester. Parallels are indicated with underlined text. Table 7 is below.

Table 7

Description of Engagement at Beginning vs. End of Semester

Beginning of Semester	End of Semester
“Being engaged would be to go above the most basic level of what is expected. In <u>group projects</u> , an engaged college student would contribute fairly instead of allowing everyone else to do the project. An engaged college student joins student <u>organizations</u> and puts themselves out there. Being an engaged college student instead of just being a college student is more difficult but overall, more rewarding in the sense of being successful.”	“I definitely think, as the semester went on, I got more academically engaged. Especially when more things are happening, more projects, especially <u>group projects</u> , it's a lot easier to become more engaged.”; “My friends and I really wanted to start our own women's <u>organization</u> , so I went to the meeting for the new student organization, last week. I think that that made me feel kind of engaged because there were other people starting these organizations and stuff.”
“I think full college engagement is your <u>interest</u> , the amount of time and effort you put into your course work, and many other factors such as if you're passionate about your area of study.”	“I feel like now I'm more academically engaged on campus because I actually know what's offered here and things that suit my <u>interests</u> .”
“Being engaged means keeping in touch with your peers, environment, work, and your studies and <u>spending</u> a lot of <u>time on campus</u> .”	“When I first transferred I <u>spent</u> so much of my <u>time on campus</u> , whether I was studying with friends or at the coffee shop, or in class, or at the library, or at the rec or anything. But now, I just don't want to be there on campus if I don't necessarily have to be there.”

However, two of the three students shared how they felt less engaged as the semester went on. During the fifth week of the semester, one student excitedly shared, “I have met so many people since I transferred to TAMU! Although I’m only actively involved in three clubs, attempting a fourth, I have gone to at least nine informational club meetings!” At the end of the semester, the same student reflected on how her engagement changed, “I was really engaged at the beginning of the semester. Now, not so much. I try not to spend a lot of time on campus because I feel like I’m there all the time.” Although this student did not discuss spending time on campus in her first reflection, she discussed how not wanting to be on campus contributed to her feelings of disengagement. This student felt more engaged when she networked with other Aggies through student organizations.

Another student shared similar experiences: participating in multiple organizations, spending most days on campus, and the importance of meeting new people. However, near the end of the semester, this student reflected on her journey sharing:

When I first transferred I spent so much of my time on campus, whether I was studying with friends or at the coffee shop, or in class, or at the library, or at the rec or anything. But now, I just don't want to be there on campus if I don't necessarily have to be there... I’m definitely not as social as I used to be.

Both of these students’ experienced a decrease in engagement, their understanding of engagement remained the same. Although the students never provided a specific cause for their disengagement, I will explore potential barriers in RQ2.

Pattern 6: Students identified a relationship between academic and social engagement.

Students were also cognizant of the delicate relationship between academic and social engagement, which may help explain why students experience decreased engagement over their first semester. According to Tinto's Model on Student Retention, excessive academic engagement or social engagement can negatively impact the other (1975). 33% of students in this study shared their experiences of trying to balance their academic and social lives. One student who felt like her engagement decreased over the semester also shared her experiences of trying to balance both: "If all I'm doing is hanging out with friends and going out every night, then my academic life is going to suffer, but if all I'm doing is academics, my social life's going to suffer. So, you have to find that happy medium."

Conversely, three students expressed difficulty trying to find a balance. One of these students shared, "It's a hard balance because I have always put my social life above my school life and find it more important to invest in friends and my well-being." Relating this pattern to one of the identified barriers, time management, one student shared, "I feel like it's so hard to balance my academics and my social life. It's hard to balance time between my studies, friends, family, and extracurriculars. I feel as though I can never keep up, and my anxiety is so high, which I did not expect."

Since students identified a relationship between academic and social engagement, this shows they understood how an excessive amount of engagement in one area has the potential to negatively impact the other. This relates to students feeling that they are suffering from a lack of time, which is a barrier discussed in the Summary of Findings

and Analysis for RQ2. If students overextend themselves, they can experience burnout even if they manage their time well.

Summary of Findings and Analysis for RQ1: How do students understand and experience academic and social engagement across the semester they participate in retention programming?

Students' understanding of academic engagement and social engagement remain consistent over their first semester at a new institution. However, the way in which they experience academic engagement and social engagement may change over their first semester at a new institution. Students also have the unique understanding of engagement in relation to their previous institution, which allowed them to compare their own experiences and growth.

Findings and Analysis for RQ2: What do students see as barriers and facilitators of engagement during the semester they participate in retention programming?

Students who shared perceived barriers during their first semester. Although 50% of students were not as engaged as they would have liked, they identified ways they could improve during future semesters.

Using Schlossberg's (1981) Transition Framework, I identified the theme of self during the coding process. This theme consisted of subcodes that students perceived as barriers or facilitators of academic and social engagement. The specific subcodes emerged naturally through reflection responses. Students discussed the subcodes in terms of how they affect academic and social engagement during the transition of their first semester. Table 8 represents subcodes of the theme of self, which includes barriers,

facilitators, and consequences of academic and social engagement. Table 8 can be found in Appendix E.

Since subcodes were closely intertwined, I chose to explicitly discuss four of the twelve codes from Table 8. However, all subcodes contributed to the patterns identified when addressing RQ2.

Pattern 1: The most common perceived barrier was a lack of time. 62% of students shared that they struggled with time management, did not have time to get involved, or felt overwhelmed due to lack of time. This barrier was also identified in previous cycles of this research study, which contributed to the Time Management Activity in COMM 485, assigned in the fourth week of the semester. The purpose of this activity was to help students schedule their week to be more productive. One student shared how his struggles with time management are affecting his first semester:

I have not been studying anywhere near the amount I expected because with all that I have going on around me now, time management is significantly more difficult. I now can hang out with my friends almost any time I want that I used to only get to see between 1 and 3 times a year; my commute takes much longer to get to and from school...Now have classes that I actually enjoy doing projects for and spend more time than I should working on those rather than reading/studying; I now have student groups to get involved with, etc. Hopefully working on the schedule assignment will help me visualize where my time goes and more efficiently allocate it.

This student shared different examples of his engagement (spending time with friends and enjoying certain courses/projects) and describes difficulty with time

management. Although certain aspects of engagement were flourishing, it resulted in a decline in his attention to academics. Another student described the dynamics of trying to balance social and academic engagement:

When I first imagined college, I didn't really imagine studying. I was more excited to join social clubs and organizations and get involved on campus. Every movie always shows college as a blast and people always tell you it's gonna be the time of your life in college and you will make friends of a lifetime. While college is really fun, I am not as involved as I thought I would be, socially. There is just not enough time if I want to succeed in school.

For this student, the need to balance social and academic engagement resulted in a lower level of social engagement than she would have liked. She expressed concern for adequately dividing her time to ensure academic success while being as socially involved as possible. The reality of her college experience did not align with her expectations.

Pattern 2: Multiple factors contributed to feelings of isolation or loneliness. The reflection prompt asked students to share a time when they have felt isolated or perhaps a time when their friend felt isolated. 70% of respondents provided self-reports of feeling isolated during some point of their first semester. Although the causes varied, 41% of students shared multiple factors contributed to these feelings. One student expressed, "I put school first before everything, so I normally don't have a social life because school takes up all my time. By the time the weekend comes, I have to do homework or I'm too tired from the week so I just sleep. So I am definitely not as social as I used to be." Excessive engagement in one area can negatively impact the other (Astin, 1984). This can be difficult for students who transferred from smaller institution

and are having to cope with the transition to more difficult coursework, along with a larger campus.

Another student experienced a particularly difficult living situation which affected all other aspects of her life and resulted in decreased engagement. This student shared:

I have felt isolated many times at Texas A&M. Being a transfer is hard, but I feel that it's been especially harder having been at home for the last semesters. I feel so comfortable at home, and I always have someone to hang out with or go do something with, but here, I don't. I have made a couple of good friends, but a lot of the time when I am not in class, I am in my room doing homework. I don't talk to my roommates at all, so just being in my apartment alone all the time feels incredibly isolating and it is really hard. I know that it will just take time, and after a while, I might just be more comfortable being alone and by myself, and it might be weird to always be going out and doing things with friends. Needless to say, there have been many tears and calls home to my mom.

In addition to transferring to a new institution, this student also experienced the shock of a new living situation. Taken together, these *situations* affected how the student coped with the transition (Schlossberg, 1981). Although this student was not a freshman, this was the first time she experienced living on her own. Being homesick resulted in feelings of isolation and became a barrier to engagement. Her feelings of isolation stemmed from the significant transition from living at home to living with people she does not interact with. This student also claims that she “might just be more comfortable being alone,” yet she described how she “always [had] someone to hang out with” when

she was living at home. Various situational factors contributed to a difficult transition to Texas A&M University.

Pattern 3: Students expressed ownership of their experiences, feelings, and engagement during their first semester. When these students decided to attend Texas A&M, they were required to take specific courses and maintain a high enough GPA to be accepted to the institution. This requires students to have a goal, make a plan, and stay motivated enough to follow through. Students attributed their success to personal characteristics or *self* (Schlossberg, 1981). One student shares, “I had to plan ahead for three semesters to prepare to come to A&M. The thought of being an Aggie motivated me. Now I’m working to get my Aggie Ring.”

Motivation and perseverance were referenced by 83% of students. The sources of motivation varied, including: the desire to earn a degree, family support, finances, and general enjoyment of classes (“area of interest”). One student, who has been in college for longer than expected, shared his motivation to persist in college: “I am dedicated to graduating because I just want to hammer down and get it done.” Students also expressed that they stayed motivated by studying their academic area of interest. One student shared, “It is already so much easier for me to stay motivated. I see myself actually interested in information because I feel it pertains to what I actually want to do.” Connecting her coursework to her future career helped motivate her during her first semester.

Another student discussed how his work ethic and desire to be a lifelong learner were motivating factors:

I think it's so easy to be a college student that just studies for the test, but does not really retain or care about the information. I think you need to make a real effort to be 'all in' with your coursework, and truly trying to become a lifelong learner. To me, it's sort of like your work ethic that you are presenting in your education and how you are trying to further it.

This student took ownership of his college experience, specifically the necessity of putting forth effort to further his education. In another reflection, this student also described being a student as his "full-time job," suggesting that most of his time and effort are spent on advancing his education.

Summary of Findings and Analysis for RQ2: What do students see as barriers and facilitators of engagement during the semester they participate in retention programming? Schlossberg's (1981) 4S Model describes four factors (*situation, self, supports, strategies*) that affect how students handle the transition to a new institution. In this study, although students described multiple barriers to engagement (*situation*), the most prominent barrier was time management (*self*). Students also described the outcomes of unbalanced engagement (too much or not enough), such as feelings of isolation or loneliness. Multiple factors contributed to these feelings, including personal situations that cannot be categorized as social or academic. Students also shared factors contributing to motivation and perseverance (*supports*), along with how they address challenges (*strategies*). A commonality among students was their ownership of their experiences and feelings during the transition, yet connected negative experiences to external factors.

Findings and Analysis for RQ3: What do students find helpful about retention programming?

The following section includes findings and analysis for RQ3 categorized by patterns. The findings showed a mixture of positive and negative feedback about COMM 485. Although some students offered criticism, they still acknowledged the benefit of retention programming, such as connecting to others and a sense of support.

Pattern 1: Students were surprised that the course was helpful. 92% of students explicitly stated that they found COMM 485 helpful. 41% of these students were surprised that COMM 485 was helpful, when they were expecting otherwise. Most of the feedback echoed the thoughts of the following student: “I think this class was actually helpful. I went into it not really thinking it would be helpful and kind of dreading it, but I think we learned a lot of things.” Another one of these students shared her surprise by saying, “[The academic advisors] helped answer questions that I didn't even know I needed to ask.”

Pattern 2: Students found it helpful to connect with on-campus resources at Texas A&M University. Half of participants explicitly shared that the most helpful part of retention programming was connecting them to on-campus resources. Perceived supports assist students in their transition to Texas A&M University (Schlossberg, 1981). One student shared, “This class help me ease the transition into A&M. I felt that I knew what to expect during my time at TAMU and what resources I could utilize if I ever needed help.” Although this student had college experience, she still found value in COMM 485 and how it acclimated her to the institution.

Another student also described resources as “hidden” in her reflection: “This class brought a lot of things to my attention I didn’t know we had as students. There is a lot of extra, hidden, services we get as students who attend A&M. For example, we get tutoring, counseling and things such as the career fair.” Although information on resources is online, it is ultimately the student’s responsibility to seek help. This may be a reason the student felt like resources are “hidden.” Since Texas A&M University is a large institution, resources are spread across campus and students are not given one specific building to go for help. Students found the connection to these resources helpful during their transition.

Pattern 3: Students found retention programming as a helpful tool for career planning. 71% of students found COMM 485 as a helpful tool for career planning. Two weeks of the semester were spent hearing from the Career Center (an on-campus resource connected to Pattern 2) and from former students who work in real estate. One student shared, “COMM 485 gave me a lot of insight on what I can do with my major, and got me very excited for my future career path I have chosen!” This links to certain facilitators of engagement, such as academic areas of interests and motivation. Students completed a career exploration assignment where they were required to look up information on possible career paths. When students researched future career opportunities, it provided them with a long-term goal to work toward while at Texas A&M. Another student described how the career assignment helped her:

This class gave me so many different career options to think about and be interested in. The career assignment made me actually research a certain job position I was most interested in and it allowed me to start thinking about possible

career choices in the future that I am excited about. I really enjoyed having a guest speaker come and talk about his success in the real estate business and then coming to A&M to get a degree.

Based on this student's reflection, considering future job opportunities motivated her during this semester. Prior to this assignment, the student may have never fully explored the depths of the job market and what she is interested in.

Pattern 4: Students felt a sense of support through connecting with other transfer students in COMM 485. According to Schlossberg's Transition Framework (1981, 2008, 2011), individuals must have a sense of support during a life transition. 38% of students mentioned an appreciation for the resources available on campus, as well as the consistent contact with academic advisors. Although can be difficult to build a sense of community in a lecture hall that seats 200 students, 30% of students claimed that COMM 485 made them feel at ease around other transfer students. One student shared, "It made me feel more comfortable because when I got [to class], there were a ton of people...It felt cool to not feel alone." Many students found that COMM 485 forced them out of their comfort zones and to connect with others they would normally never meet. One student shared, "This class was really helpful for me actually because I don't think on my own time I would have met other transfer students." When discussing COMM 485, another student shared, "Now I feel more comfortable than I was before."

Pattern 5: Content and assignments were not "one-size-fits-all." Although some students found COMM 485 helpful, they also offered critiques of the current program, specifically the content and assignments. One student shared, "There were

some days where I went to the lectures and it was stuff I already knew and I just felt like it was my time being wasted. I did learn a lot from the class though.” Another student also shared, “This class just adds on extra busy work...Just like the little assignments, I just feel like aren’t necessary but I kind of see why we need it.” Six students, or 25% of participants, were also not fond of the programming being mandatory for all transfer students. It should be noted that all six of these students transferred from 4-year institutions that required first-semester programming as well.

Summary of Findings and Analysis for RQ3: What do students find helpful about retention programming?

Retention programming contributed to academic and social engagement. Students found COMM 485 helpful in their transition to Texas A&M University, specifically providing an overview of the resources offered on-campus, an avenue to explore career options, and tips to help manage their time. Although students shared complaints about the program, the feedback was primarily positive.

Results in Relation to Theoretical Frameworks

In the following section, I discuss the results in relation to the theoretical frameworks: Model on Student Retention (Tinto, 1975), Theory of Student Involvement (Astin, 1984), and Transition Framework (Schlossberg, 1981).

Model on Student Retention

In this study, transfer students’ understanding of engagement was consistent with Tinto’s Model on Student Retention (1975). Some examples of academic integration present in the data are enjoyment of coursework and applying course content to daily life. Examples of social integration that were described by students include: joining clubs

or student organizations, engaging in study groups, and having a support group on-campus or closely associated to campus. Transfer students acknowledged that excessive engagement in one or both areas can lead to burnout. Since this action research project only studied students over the course of their first semester, I could not assess the effects of academic and social integration (such as GPA or withdrawing from the university).

Theory of Student Involvement

The findings of this study are also consistent with the Theory of Student Involvement (Astin, 1984). Students' experiences at their previous institution were considered inputs; their level of engagement at Texas A&M University contributed to their environment. Outputs (such as GPA, retention, graduation, or new perspectives) were not measured in this study. Based on the structure and methodology of this study, only the student's environment and certain inputs could be understood. One specific postulate of Astin's theory is that a student's degree of involvement can vary (1984).

Both the Model on Student Retention and the Theory of Student Involvement helped identify the students' understanding of academic and social engagement and how they experience engagement over their first semester (Tinto, 1975; Astin, 1984).

Transition Framework

Schlossberg's 4Ss System (situation, self, supports, strategies) explains how students handle the transition to a new institution and, to an extent, certain aspects of disengagement (1981). The first S represents *situation*, which can vary for each student. In this study, one student shared details of her unfavorable living arrangements. She was not friends with her roommates, which made her feel disconnected and alone. This situation made her transition to Texas A&M more difficult

and resulted in feelings of disengagement. Conversely, students who had established friend groups or who already lived in the area seemed to have a smoother transition during their first semester.

The next S represents *self*, or personal characteristics that can help with the transition. Specific attributes mentioned in the data were: perseverance, motivation, and work ethic. These characteristics assisted with their coping skills during the transition. Students took ownership of their engagement (*self*), yet identified causes of isolation as outside themselves (*situation*). Students felt connected to others through the Aggie identity, yet still experienced moments of loneliness.

Supports, the third S, also affect how students handle transitions. Students in the study identified supports (on-campus resources) offered in COMM 485 but also referenced other supports in their lives, such as family members or friends. Their support system also aligned with certain types of social engagement, such as connecting with others in their church communities. Students who shared having a support system seemed happier and able to cope with the transition to Texas A&M.

The final S represents *strategies* to cope. Although I did not specifically ask students about their coping strategies, their efforts to become academically and socially engaged helped them cope. Students who did not experience a healthy balance of academic and social engagement were probably more likely to participate in unhealthy coping strategies.

The Model on Student Retention and the Theory of Student Involvement served as rationale, but the Transition Framework helped explain the findings (Tinto, 1975; Astin, 1984; Schlossberg, 1981).

Summary of Findings

To summarize the findings, Table 9 provides an overview of the patterns and assertions associated with each research question. Table 9 can be found in Appendix F.

In the next and final chapter, I will discuss the alignment between students' barriers to engagement and the intervention, lessons learned about implementation of the intervention, results in relation to my theoretical frameworks; limitations, and implications for practice.

Chapter 5

Discussion

Overview of Study and Research Questions

The purpose of this qualitative action research study was to understand how first-semester transfer students experience academic and social engagement across the semester they participate in retention programming and to examine their experiences of the intervention. The intervention was a restructuring of COMM 485 by combining online modules, in-person activities, and lectures. The goal of the intervention was to increase academic and social engagement of first-semester transfer students enrolled in COMM 485. The research questions were:

- RQ1: How do students understand and experience academic and social engagement across the semester they participate in retention programming?
- RQ2: What do students see as barriers and facilitators of engagement during the semester they participate in retention programming?
- RQ3: What do students find helpful about retention programming?

In this final chapter, I discuss the alignment between students' barriers to engagement and the intervention, lessons learned about implementation of the intervention, results in relation to my theoretical frameworks; limitations, and implications for practice. I end with a brief conclusion.

Alignment of Barriers, Facilitators, and Intervention

The purpose of the intervention was to use retention programming address students' perceived barriers to academic and social engagement. In this study, one of the biggest perceived barriers to engagement was a lack of time. Similarly, one of the most

popular assignments in COMM 485 was the time management activity. Students were required to account for every hour of time for an entire week to reflect on how they spent their time. Moving forward, students created a time management spreadsheet to plan how they could use their time more wisely. Students shared that this activity helped them visualize how much time they should be spending studying and how much time they are actually wasting. One student shared, “Working on the schedule assignment helped me visualize where my time goes and more efficiently allocate it.”

Two other significant barriers to engagement were isolation and loneliness. Although my intention for online and in-class discussions was to facilitate engagement, these activities may have addressed feelings of isolation and loneliness. Of the barriers that emerged, the content of COMM 485 addressed one barrier directly (lack of time; time management) and two barriers indirectly (isolation and loneliness; online and in-class discussions). Although it was not possible to address individual concerns in large group settings, I provided students with on-campus resources to assist with other barriers, such as Student Counseling and Psychological Services. Table 10 represents how the intervention addressed perceived barriers and facilitators.

Table 10
Alignment of Barriers, Facilitators, and Intervention

Barrier / Facilitator	Intervention Aspect
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of Time (barrier) • Being Organized (facilitator) 	Time Management Activity
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Area of Interest (facilitator) • Motivation (facilitator) • Perseverance (facilitator) 	Career Exploration Activity
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Isolation (barrier) • Loneliness (barrier) 	Online and In-Class Discussions

One difficulty with a structured intervention, such as COMM 485, was that this study showed that barriers and facilitators to engagement are often unique to the individual. This aligns with previous studies that focus on individual student needs (DeWine et al., 2016; Ellis, 2013). One of the most significant examples from the data was a student who expressed challenges of her living situation and how it affected all aspects of her life, including academic and social engagement. Barriers such as these cannot easily be addressed through formal retention programming.

Although students did not share that retention programming directly affected their engagement, the intervention allowed students to reflect on their experiences during their first semester. Students may not have realized they were academically or socially engaged until they were enlightened by the reflection activities. Through teaching COMM 485, I intended to address the adage “they don’t know what they don’t know.” No student in the Department of Communication was overlooked during their first semester at Texas A&M University. By disseminating information on policies and resources through mandatory first-semester programming, every new transfer student in

the Department of Communication received accurate and useful information during Spring 2019.

Lessons Learned about Implementation of the Intervention

Through all of the cycles of this action research project, I learned lessons about implementing the intervention. These lessons include usefulness of retention programming, adapting to the context, and accommodating student needs.

Usefulness of Retention Programming

It is assumed that transfer students are adults who know how to succeed in college. They put forth time and effort to reach their goal of transferring to a new institution. For some students, two-year institutions can serve as a necessary bridge between high school and university. Regardless of where they transferred from and classification, intervention programming should remain available at Texas A&M University to ease the transition to policies, resources, traditions, and expectations.

Intervention programming needs to be tailored to the specific context and student population. Although some of the content can be applied to college students at other institutions (time management and university involvement), most of the content was specific to students in the Department of Communication at Texas A&M University. This was an effort to individualize their transfer experience and make them feel acknowledged as students. The overall feedback from COMM 485 was positive; students felt that the course was useful.

Adapting to the Context

The Department of Communication is a large department and typically has a significant amount of incoming transfer students each semester. Due to the size of the

department and limited resources in the College of Liberal Arts, it is difficult to provide some services to students. For example, I am unable to teach smaller sections of COMM 485 since my primary role is academic advising rather than teaching. We also have limited access to classrooms on campus. By creating alternative assignments, such as online discussion boards and encouraging participation at on-campus events, students felt engaged even though COMM 485 was a large class. Fostering an environment that promotes student engagement can help students combat the feeling of being lost in a crowd at a large institution (Davies & Casey, 1999; Townsend & Wilson, 2006). This sense of community can lead to increased GPA and student retention (Townley et. al, 2013).

Accommodating Student Needs

The last lesson I learned about implementing the intervention was remaining flexible to modify the program to meet student needs. Although this study was performed during spring 2019, the program was modified over the duration of six semesters. After each semester I identified the strengths and weaknesses of the program and adjusted the content, if necessary. The spatial resources available have also varied each semester, which contributed to the classroom environment. For higher education professionals who are wanting to create new programming, they should consider their local context, administrative support, resources, and student population. Before implementing a program, think about the best way to address the needs of the student population. It is important to remain flexible and revise plans as necessary.

Lessons Learned for Research

In the following section, I identify characteristics of the study and methodology that impacted the findings. The limitations are timeline of the study and interview data.

Timeline of the Study

This study was conducted during the spring semester of 2019. Typically, there is a significantly larger transfer student population during fall semesters. The study may have yielded a richer dataset if I began collecting data in a fall semester and continued through the spring. I would be able to assess student success (GPA and retention) in addition to qualitative data.

Interview Data

Another limitation to this action research study was related to methodology. Although students were more likely to provide open and honest responses to self-interview questions, I did not have the opportunity to ask follow-up questions. When reviewing the interview data, I found myself wanting more from the interviewee. Perhaps this could have been avoided if I would have created additional questions for students to elaborate.

Discussion of Implications for Practice

Through this process, I identified multiple implications for practice. In this section I will discuss an elective-only model, understanding the needs of transfer students, and retention programming based on classification.

Elective Retention Programming

Students seemed to find the intervention useful, even if it did not drastically increase their academic and social engagement. For the students who did not enjoy

COMM 485, they felt that they already knew the information presented in class. For future practice, students should have the option to opt out of retention programming (Baylock & Bresciani, 2011; Dewine et. al, 2016). Forcing students to participate in a graded non-academic course may not benefit those who previously completed college skills courses.

Understanding the Needs of Transfer Students

Through the cycles of this study, I explored the needs of transfer students at their target institution, Texas A&M. By understanding how students experience academic and social engagement and what are considered barriers and facilitators, higher education administrators can better support transfer student populations through directed programming and access to on-campus resources (Lichtenberger & Dietrich, 2016). Practitioners can conduct their own cycles of action research to determine the needs of their student populations. Depending on resources and support structures, practitioners can develop retention programming tailored to their students' needs. This particular program was implemented to address the needs of a student population within a specific program of study at Texas A&M University. For future practice, administrators should identify the needs of their student population and create a unique program for their local context.

Classification-based retention programming

The final implication for practice is to create three smaller sections of retention programming for freshmen, sophomores, and juniors based on total earned hours. The needs of students may be different within these populations, especially considering the timeline to graduation. Juniors may need more guidance for finding internships, whereas

freshmen may need assistance with core curriculum planning. This implication aligns with previous studies (Duggan & Pickering, 2008; Townsend, 2008).

Discussion of Findings in Relation to Literature

The findings of this study align with the literature, specifically the barriers and facilitators to engagement and the usefulness of intervention programming. The significant barriers to student engagement, time management, isolation, and loneliness, align with numerous studies (Duggan & Pickering, 2008; Green & Maggs, 2015; Laanan, 2007; Peel, 2000). Facilitators also align with the literature, specifically perseverance and motivation (Ellis, 2013; Laanan, Starobin, & Eggleston, 2010).

The intervention addressed the needs of transfer students emerged through previous studies and cycles of action research (Dewine et. al, 2016; Townsend & Wilson, 2006). This aligns with findings regarding the usefulness of intervention programming and the impact of intervention programming on student engagement (Baylock & Bresciani, 2011; Duggan & Pickering, 2008; Grites & Farina, 2012; Kuh, 1996; Tinto, 1998; Zhao & Kuh, 2004).

In the literature that explores transfer shock, researchers claim that the decline in GPA is caused by a lack of academic skills (Duggan & Pickering, 2008; Mondal & Galbraith, 2014). Poor time management skills are not cited as a barrier to engagement or student success (D'Amico et al., 2013; Hills, 1965; Rhine, Milligan, & Nelson, 2000). However, transfer students in this action research study referenced poor time management skills as a specific barrier to both academic and social engagement. Since the findings of this study did not include quantitative data (GPA, retention rates, graduation rates), the findings cannot contribute to literature regarding the relationship

between engagement, student success, and transfer shock (Astin, 1984; Hills, 1965; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Rhine, Milligan, & Nelson, 2000; Tinto, 1975)

Another way the findings of this study contradicted a previous study was through the definition of social engagement. This particular population of transfer students understood traditional socialization and joining student organizations as an important aspect of engagement. This is contrary to findings from Lester, Leonard, and Mathias (2013), who found that transfer students are already established and do not place significance on socialization or extracurricular activities.

Both the Model on Student Retention and Theory of Student Involvement served as rationale for this study, while the Transition Framework helped explain the findings (). (Tinto, 1975; Astin, 1984; Schlossberg, 1981). Although there is a disjuncture between Tinto/Astin and Schlossberg, all three theories served as important lenses to explore the problem of practice.

Discussion of Implications for Research

If I were to conduct another cycle of this action research project, I would expand the project over two or three semesters. This would give me the opportunity to explore the concept of “Transfer Shock” by collecting quantitative data (GPA trends) and asking students to reflect on their transition after they fully acclimated to Texas A&M University (Hills, 1965). Although I collected thousands of words of qualitative data that answered three research questions, I am still left wanting more. In future cycles, I would try to conduct more self-interviews ask additional open-ended questions. The main questions I was left asking at the end of this process were directed to transfer students: “What do you need from me? How can I help you?”

Future Directions

For future studies, I would recommend member-checking to improve accuracy and credibility. Part of this member-checking could occur during follow-up second interviews by summarizing the responses. If I would have allowed participants to review the findings, I could have corrected any possible errors or inconsistencies. Due to structural barriers, such as the timeline of the study and time of the year, I could not complete these tasks for my action research study. I would also like to expand the study to follow a cohort of students across their academic careers, including pre- and post-transfer. I could also incorporate additional lenses to frame the study. For example, Beard and Bale explore how Generation Z students learn in various environments and that simply being in the same space as other students is considered social engagement (2008). Future iterations could also include specializing the program for other departments and student populations at Texas A&M University or beyond.

Based on the findings from this study, it is clear that none of the three theories entirely explain the experiences of transfer students during transition. Another direction for future studies is to create a theory that connects all three of the frameworks used in this study (Tinto, 1975; Astin, 1984; Schlossberg, 1981). Tinto and Astin's theories are excellent for understanding what makes college students achieve success. However, there is a missing piece of ecological factors that affect students going through transition in college. By combining these three theories, we can better understand how ecological factors affect students' level of academic and social engagement. The findings suggest there is a need for theory that can relate to this specific population of first-semester transfer students during their transition to a new institution.

Conclusion

Since transfer students in the Department of Communication are experienced college students, they have a general understanding of academic and social engagement. Their level of engagement largely depends on personal experiences, awareness of resources, and other supports. Retention programming can assist students during the transition to a new institution, but there are more factors to be considered when studying engagement, such as *self*, *situation*, *support*, and *strategies*. Due to the cyclical and iterative nature of action research, I intend on continuing my research on the engagement of transfer students and how academic advisors can assist throughout their academic career. I plan on disseminating the findings of this action research project to help other higher education professionals improve their practice and invest in the growing population of transfer students.

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APPENDIX A
SYLLABUS FOR COMM 485

COMM/JOUR 485
Directed Studies for Transfer Students and Spring Freshmen

We can't begin to tell you how excited we are that you are here at Texas A&M University in the College of Liberal Arts, and especially in the Department of Communication! We are here for you! We look forward to partnering with you for your success! Gig 'em!

As Dean Oberhelman previewed to you, you will participate in a one hour Transfer Student Success Initiative course. For COMM and TCMS, you will enroll in COMM 485. For Journalism students, you will enroll in JOUR 485.

Required materials and practices

Access Ecampus for this class each day.

Check TAMU email each day

Student Learning Outcomes

The class meetings, discussions, and activities are designed so that students will meet these Student Learning Outcomes:

1. Describe, interpret and evaluate human communication phenomena with accurate evidence, justification, support and reasoning.
2. Explain the importance of connecting with faculty and staff members
3. State the names of the Undergraduate Director and Academic Advisors in Communication
4. Explain how to make an appointment for academic advising in Communication.
5. Achieve the learning outcomes established by TAMU for Academic Advising.

Student Learning Outcomes for Academic Advising at Texas A&M
Campus Resources

- Recognize high impact educational experiences, such as internship, externship, study abroad opportunities, field experience, etc.
- Identify participative opportunities in student and professional organizations on campus.
- Distinguish resources for assistance, such as the academic and career support, counseling services, and transfer course equivalency guides

Problem Solving

- Identify opportunities that support their ambitions and aspirations.
- Appraise their academic performance and its contribution to their educational and personal goals.
- Employ critical and creative thinking to make informed decisions regarding their educational and personal goals

Degree Requirements

Recall their degree requirements.

Identify the courses required for their degree plan.

Generate and interpret a degree evaluation.

Propose courses in degree planner that satisfy degree requirements

GRADING & LATE WORK POLICY

In-Class Activities

30%

Complete activities at all 6 COMM 485 meetings (@ 5% each)

You will meet six times during the spring semester, which is already set on your schedule. Reference the calendar on the syllabus for meeting dates.

You won't want to miss a minute of the classes. Make sure that you arrive early and stay for the entire time. Make-up activities will be provided only for students with University excused absences for their meeting time. See Student Rule 7:

<http://student-rules.tamu.edu/rule07> Each meeting and activity is worth 5% of your course grade.

Online Discussions

15%

Participate in 3 online discussion forums in eCampus (@ 5 % each)

You will participate in three online discussion forums in eCampus during the spring semester. You will need to create an original post and respond to at least two classmates. Reference the calendar on the syllabus for due dates. A grading rubric can be found in eCampus. Each post is worth 5% of your course grade.

Assignments

40%

You will complete five assignments during the spring semester. Assignments will be located in eCampus. All assignments must be uploaded in the correct format. Each assignment is worth 8% of your course grade

Digital Portfolio

15%

Using Wix, you will complete a simple digital portfolio that features artifacts of what you've learned this semester in all of your COMM classes. We envision that you will update this portfolio throughout the time that you are at TAMU.

This project is worth 15% of your course grade.

Late work is accepted for up to one week after the due date for up to 50% credit unless documentation of a University excused absence is presented within the time frame set in Student Rules. Students with excused absences may make up work within 30 days of the last day of their excused absence. See Student Rule 7: <http://student-rules.tamu.edu/rule07>

A = 89.5-100 B = 79.5-89.4 C = 69.5-79.4 D = 59.5-69.4 F = 0-59.4

Calendar

Week	What's Happening	What's Due and When
New Student Conferences, week before classes start	Meet your academic advisors Register for classes Receive syllabus via TAMU email and in eCampus	
Week One Jan. 14 – Jan. 20	Attend Meeting 1 Introductions, Course Expectations, and Overview of Resources	Discussion Post + Responses due by 11:59 p.m. on SUN Jan. 20
Week Two Jan. 21 – Jan. 27	Attend Meeting 2 Topic: Career Exploration and the Career Center	
Week Three Jan. 28 – Feb. 3	Attend Meeting 3 Topic: Time Management and the Academic Success Center	Career Assignment due by 11:59 p.m. on SUN Feb. 3
Week Four Feb. 4 – Feb. 10	Attend Meeting 4 Topic: High Impact Experiences and Study Abroad	Time Management Assignment due by 11:59 p.m. on SUN Feb. 10
Week Five Feb. 11 – Feb 17	Attend Meeting 5 Topic: Self-Care, Student Counseling Services, and Student Assistance Services	
Week Six Feb. 18 – Feb 24	Attend Meeting 6 Topic: Academic Advising	
Week Seven Feb. 25 – March 3	*Reminder* No class for the remainder of the semester!	
Week Eight March 4 – March 10		
March 11 – March 17	***Have a fun and SAFE Spring Break!***	
Week Nine March 18 – March 24		Discussion Post + Responses due by 11:59 p.m. on SUN March 24
Week Ten March 25 – March 31		
Week Eleven April 1 – April 7		Advising Assignment due by 11:59 p.m. on WED. April 3rd
Week Twelve April 8 – April 14		University Involvement Assignment due by SUN April 14

Week Thirteen April 15 - 21		Learning Outcomes Assignment due by 11:59 p.m. on SUN April 21
Week Fourteen April 22 - 28		Digital Portfolio due by 11:59 p.m. on SUN April 28 Final Discussion Post due by 11:59 p.m. on SUN April 28

Read and re-read this section, please

Academic Integrity An Aggie does not lie, cheat or steal or tolerate those who do. These words are not to be taken lightly. Any violation of this code, such as cheating on exams or plagiarizing papers or presentations, or anything covered under Academic Dishonesty, will result in an immediate report to the Honor Council Office and a recommendation that the student earn an F* in COMM 485. Please see <http://aggiehonor.tamu.edu/>

Furthermore, since this class features some group work, group plagiarism is also taken seriously. If one of your group members has plagiarized or committed academic dishonesty, and you and your group turn in that work, you have committed academic dishonesty. It is your duty to be aware of what is turned in under your name. If you have ANY questions about what constitutes academic dishonesty, please ask me.

Special Accommodations:

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) is a federal anti-discrimination statute that provides comprehensive civil rights protection for persons with disabilities. Among other things, this legislation requires that all students with disabilities be guaranteed a learning environment that provides for reasonable accommodation of their disabilities. If you believe you have a disability requiring an accommodation, please contact Disability Services, currently located in the Disability Services building at the Student Services at White Creek complex on west campus or call 979-845-1637. For additional information, visit <http://disability.tamu.edu>.

Title IX Duty to Report: As a result of Title IX rulings, and as an employee of the State of Texas, I have a duty to report anything you tell me about sexual abuse or sexual violence, even if you ask me not to tell anyone. Therefore, if you disclose anything of this nature to me, I'll know that you want me to report it. If you would like to talk to someone who does not have to report your disclosure to the university authorities, please talk with campus mental-health counselors, pastoral counselors, social workers, psychologists, health center employees, or any other person with a professional license requiring confidentiality.

If you have questions, concerns or comments about anything related to your time here at Texas A&M University, please reach out to us in person, by phone or via email.

Office: BLTN 107 Bolton Hall is on Main Campus right behind the Century Tree

Office Hours: You may meet with an academic advisor by appointment or during walk-ins

Undergraduate/Advising Office phone 979-862-6968

Department website: comm.tamu.edu

Email: Prof. Street n-street@tamu.edu Instructor of Record, Undergraduate Director
Mrs. Kristy Kulhanek-Stockmoe kristy@tamu.edu Instructor, Academic Advisor
Mrs. Valerie Wilson vfwilson@tamu.edu Academic Advisor
Ms. Haley Meyer hmeyer3@tamu.edu Academic Advisor
Mr. Joe Recio jxr007@tamu.edu Academic Advisor

APPENDIX B
RECRUITMENT LETTER

Dear Student:

My name is Kristy Kulhanek and I am a doctoral student in the Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College (MLFTC) at Arizona State University (ASU). I am working under the direction of Dr. Katie Bernstein, a faculty member in MLFTC. We are conducting a research study on the effects of mandatory intervention programming on first-semester transfer students. The purpose of this study is to assess your level of engagement during your first semester at Texas A&M University.

We are asking for your help, which will involve your participation in filling out brief reflection activities throughout the semester. Each reflection activity will take no more than 10 minutes. As a student in COMM 485, you will be required to completed reflection activities for a participation grade. If you would like your responses to be used in this study, please indicate your consent at the bottom of the reflection activity.

Your participation in this study is voluntary. If you choose not to participate or withdraw from the study at any time, there will be no penalty whatsoever. Your choice to participate or not participate will not affect your grades or standing at the university. You must be 18 years of age or older to participate.

The benefit to participation is the opportunity for you to reflect on and think more about how engaged you are during your first semester at Texas A&M University. Your responses may also contribute to future iterations of this course. Thus, there is potential to enhance the experiences of first-semester transfer students. There are no foreseeable risks or discomforts to your participation.

Your responses will be confidential. Results from this study may be used in reports, presentations, or publications but your name will not be used.

If you have any questions concerning the research study, please contact the research team – Katie Bernstein at kbernstein@asu.edu or Kristy Kulhanek at kristykulhanek@tamu.edu or (979) 733-3255.

Thank you,

Kristy Kulhanek, Doctoral Student
Katie Bernstein, Faculty Member

If you have any questions about your rights as a participant in this research, or if you feel you have been placed at risk, you can contact the Chair of Human Subjects Institutional Review Board through the ASU Office of Research Integrity and Assurance at (480) 965-6788.

APPENDIX C

SELF-INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What made you decide to transfer to Texas A&M? Was it always your plan?
2. Overall, how would you describe your first semester transitioning to Texas A&M?
3. How was the transfer experience in comparison to what you expected?
4. Compared to your first few weeks here, do you feel like you are more academically engaged on campus?
5. What are some barriers you face when trying to become academically engaged on campus?
6. What has been helpful for you becoming academically engaged on campus?
7. What courses are most challenging for you? What measures have you taken to ensure your success?
8. Describe how your academic and social life affect each other, if at all.
9. Compared to your first few weeks here, do you feel like you are more socially engaged on campus?
10. What are some barriers you face when trying to become socially engaged on campus?
11. What has been helpful for you becoming socially engaged on campus?
12. Describe a time where you felt really engaged.
13. What are your future academic goals at Texas A&M?
14. Do you plan on graduating from Texas A&M in your current degree program? If not, what are your plans?
15. Overall, how do you feel about your decision to transfer to Texas A&M?
16. Please explain, to the best of your ability, how to be a successful transfer student at Texas A&M?
17. What are the advantages of being a transfer student? Disadvantages?
18. How useful was COMM 485 for you?
19. What parts were most helpful?
20. What parts were not so helpful? Why or why not?

APPENDIX D

TABLE 5

Table 5
Social Engagement Subcodes

Subcode	Frequency	Example
Social Engagement / <i>General</i>	11	“Oddly enough, I have connected the most with people on aggie spirit buses. I have noticed that most people commute with earbuds and are largely uninterested in small talk. However, if someone is not absorbed in a phone or music, they are typically willing to hold a conversation.”
Student Organizations	52	“I felt connected with others on campus when I was at informationals for organizations, or applying for organizations. The other students there had similar interests to me, so conversations and connections were quick to be made. Since we were all going after a common goal, we could connect on the basis of these similarities. Establishing relationships with other Aggies allowed me to feel connected on campus.”
Sense of Community	19	“I was able to attend the men's and women's Basketball game and I was able to experience both games and being able to connect with other students make everything different because you can feel how we are all connected with the school spirit.”
Friendships	16	“I want to make new friends while I am here so I can have an awesome college experience and make good memories.”
Religion	13	“I would also like to join an organization such as Aggie Catholics so I can meet people with the same interests as myself.”
No Involvement	9	“Honestly I don't feel engaged at all. I think it is because I haven't had the chance to be, and I am also in my first semester at this university.”

Table 5 (continued)

Subcode	Frequency	Example
More Than the Classroom	5	“To me personally, being an engaged college student means to be involved more with the school other than just the classroom. An engaged college student looks for other activities with the school besides studying. A term I heard when I first started college was a ‘parking lot’ student, someone who goes to class and that’s it. No involvement or anything. This pushed me to get more engaged and be more involved. Being engaged in the school is possibly one of the most important things you can do as it can make college life so much better.”
University-Sponsored Events	4	“Everyone around you is wearing the same colors, cheering for the same team, and yelling the same yells. The unity within the community shown during the warm hymn is a really cool thing to see.”
Already Established Social Life	2	“I already have a strong social group in the College Station area, so it will take a concerted effort to step outside my comfort zone and not get complacent with it, but that is something I aim to do.”
Volunteering	2	“Taking time out of a busy schedule to help others really appeals to me and I think it would be a great experience as well as very rewarding.”

APPENDIX E

TABLE 8

Table 8
Self Subcodes | Barriers, Facilitators, and Consequences

Subcode	Frequency	Example
Isolation	18	“Most times on campus I feel somewhat isolated. I never really felt like I belong in college station due to my personal views and style.”
Loneliness	15	“When I first started at Texas A&M I honestly felt alone mainly because I was starting something new all by myself. I didn't know where a single thing was or where my classes were, I was terrified from the start.”
Time Management	13	“Proper time management is a MUST for the engaged student, because while seeking opportunities to learn outside the classroom, it is easy to overextend yourself, at which point everything begins to deteriorate.”
Motivation	10	“...one of the most important ones is being motivated about what you are doing. Make sure you are motivated to go to your classes. You will get a better knowledge and it will benefit you for your future career.”
Area of Interest	9	“I’m interested in what I’m learning in my comm classes so far. They’re things that directly affect me and can improve my ability to communicate competently.”
Self-Care	9	“I would be useless if I could not enjoy sometime to myself and with my friends. I plan to enjoy my time simply by cooking and working out regularly to keep my mind sharp and to give myself a break from working so hard 7 days a week.”
Perseverance	7	“Maintaining good grades throughout the semester takes a lot of work and mostly a great amount of perseverance. Staying strong by sticking to goals each semester will help make that bachelor's degree seem much more attainable.”
Mental Health	7	“I feel quite disconnected whenever I am struggling with stress and anxiety. Even though so many other students struggle with the same problems, it still feels like I am the only one. Getting out of the house is usually the best approach to shut down negative thoughts and feelings.”
Skills / Work Ethic	7	“...staying engaged builds up your work ethic and your all around skill abilities.”

Table 8 (continued)

Subcode	Frequency	Example
Being Organized	6	"I enjoy keeping a planner with important assignment due dates, class/work times, and a study schedule. Being organized also plays a huge role in staying prepared and up to date in classes."
Employment	5	"I haven't had the chance yet to get involved on campus because I also work a part time job, but I do know that's no excuse."
Overwhelmed	4	"As far as getting involved, I feel overwhelmed. A&M offers so much academic and social involvement."

APPENDIX F

TABLE 9

Table 9
Summary of Findings and Patterns

RQ	Patterns	Assertions
How do students understand and experience academic and social engagement across the semester they participate in retention programming? (continued)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students shared that attendance, participation, and building a relationship with faculty members are all important aspects of academic engagement. However, students also viewed studying or working on homework on-campus as academic engagement, even if they were working alone. Students associate social engagement with student organizations and feeling a sense of community through the Aggie identity, friendships, and religious groups. Students' goals and expectations of their first semester aligned with their definition of academic and social engagement. Students understood engagement at their current institution in relation to their prior institution. Students' understanding of engagement remained consistent throughout their first semester. Students identified a relationship between academic and social engagement. 	<p>Students' understanding of academic engagement and social engagement remain consistent over their first semester at a new institution.</p> <p>However, how they experience academic engagement and social engagement may change over their first semester at a new institution.</p>
What do students see as barriers and facilitators of engagement during the semester they participate in retention programming?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The most common perceived barrier was lack of time. Multiple factors contributed to feelings of isolation or loneliness. Students expressed ownership of their experiences, feelings, and engagement during their first semester. 	Schlossberg's (1981) 4s System (situation, self, supports, strategies) affect how students handle the transition to a new institution.
What do students find helpful about retention programming?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students were surprised that the course was helpful. Students found it helpful to connect with on-campus resources at Texas A&M University. 	Retention programming contributed to academic and social engagement.

Table 9 (continued)

RQ	Patterns	Assertions
What do students find helpful about retention programming? (continued)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students found retention programming as a helpful tool for career planning. • Students felt a sense of support through connecting with other transfer students in COMM 485. • Content and assignments were not “one-size-fits-all.” 	Retention programming contributed to academic and social engagement. (continued)

APPENDIX G

ARIZONA STATE UNIVERSITY IRB

IRB Outcome Letter from Arizona State University



EXEMPTION GRANTED

Katherine Bernstein
Division of Teacher Preparation - Tempe
kbernstein@asu.edu

Dear Katherine Bernstein:

On 2/5/2019 the ASU IRB reviewed the following protocol:

Type of Review:	Initial Study
Title:	Transfer Student Engagement: The Effects of Intervention Programming on First-Semester Transfer Students
Investigator:	Katherine Bernstein
IRB ID:	STUDY00009435
Funding:	None
Grant Title:	None
Grant ID:	None
Documents Reviewed:	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Reflection questions.pdf, Category: Measures (Survey questions/Interview questions /interview guides/focus group questions);• Interview questions.pdf, Category: Measures (Survey questions/Interview questions /interview guides/focus group questions);• Self Interview Letter.pdf, Category: Consent Form;• IRB Protocol.docx, Category: IRB Protocol;• Reflection Letter.pdf, Category: Consent Form;

The IRB determined that the protocol is considered exempt pursuant to Federal Regulations 45CFR46 (1) Educational settings, (2) Tests, surveys, interviews, or observation on 2/5/2019.

In conducting this protocol you are required to follow the requirements listed in the INVESTIGATOR MANUAL (HRP-103).

Sincerely,
IRB Administrator
cc: Kristy Kulhanek

APPENDIX H
TEXAS A&M UNIVERSITY IRB

IRB Outcome Letter from Texas A&M University

DIVISION OF RESEARCH



HUMAN RESEARCH, NOT ENGAGED DETERMINATION

February 01, 2019

Type of Review:	External Investigator Project
Title:	Transfer Student Engagement: The Effects of Intervention Programming on First-Semester Transfer Students
Investigator:	Kristy Kulhanek
Investigator's Institution:	Arizona State University
TAMU IRB ID:	IRB2019-0015
Documents Received:	IRB Application Scope of Work IRB Attachments from ASU Local Approval Self-Interview Letter Reflection Letter Outcome_Letter IRB Protocol
Risk Level of Study:	Minimal

Dear Kristy Kulhanek:

This Institution determined that the proposed activity is research involving human subjects as defined by DHHS regulations but that this organization is not engaged in the research.

IRB review and approval by this organization is not required. This determination applies only to the activities described in this IRB submission and does not apply should any changes be made. If changes are made and there are questions about whether these activities are research involving human in which the organization is engaged, please submit a new request to us for a determination.

Before you conduct the research, you should consult with Dr. Street and/or the TAMU Registrar to ensure that you are properly following FERPA regulations regarding the use of student records for research purposes.

When necessary, this determination letter and your organization's IRB approval letter will be forwarded to other officials for further approval when the research targets faculty, staff, or students belonging to this organization.

If you have any questions, please contact the HRPP Administrative Office at 1-979-458-4067, toll free at 1-855-795-8636.