THE TRANSITION EXPERIENCE: UNDERSTANDING THE TRANSITION FROM HIGH SCHOOL TO COLLEGE FOR CONDITIONALLY-ADMITTED STUDENTS USING THE LENS OF SCHLOSSBERG'S TRANSITION THEORY

by

Samantha E. DeVilbiss

A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Faculty of

The Graduate College at the University of Nebraska

In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements

For the Degree of Doctor of Education

Major: Education Studies

Under the Supervision of Professor James V. Griesen

Lincoln, Nebraska

May, 2014

THE TRANSITION EXPERIENCE: UNDERSTANDING THE TRANSITION FROM HIGH SCHOOL TO COLLEGE FOR CONDITIONALLY-ADMITTED STUDENTS USING THE LENS OF SCHLOSSBERG'S TRANSITION THEORY

Samantha Elizabeth DeVilbiss, Ed.D.

University of Nebraska, 2014

Adviser: James V. Griesen

Higher education in the United States is both a public good, providing educated, critical-thinking, prepared, and productive citizens; as well as a private good, giving individuals opportunities to improve their financial situation and possibly their statuses in society. In order for these goods to be earned, students need to be retained by colleges and complete their degrees. However, many students, especially conditionally-admitted students, are not retained by colleges and universities. Further, there is a lack of qualitative research on the transitional experiences of conditionally-admitted students as well as a lack of studies utilizing Schlossberg's transition theory to make sense of these students' experiences. When colleges better understand the experiences, coping assets, and coping liabilities of their students, they will be better able to assist these students and retain them.

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenology was to understand the transition experience of traditional-age, first-time, full-time, conditionally-admitted students, attending a mid-size, four-year public university in the Southeastern region of the United

States through the lens of Schlossberg's transition theory. Using Schlossberg's transition theory (Anderson, Goodman, & Schlossberg, 2012) as the theoretical framework and the phenomenological data collection and analysis process presented by Moustakas (1994), six themes characterized participants' transition experiences: (a) increasing independence, (b) intensifying demands and difficulty, (c) learning what works and what doesn't, (d) leaving loved ones behind but keeping some in one's life, (e) uncovering support, and (f) finding one's place. Additionally, textural descriptions and structural descriptions of each participant's transition experience are presented along with a composite textural-structural description of the transition from high school to college for this group of students. These findings could be used to help colleges and universities to understand more fully the transition experiences of traditional age, first-time, full-time, conditionally-admitted students. They could also help to inform student affairs professionals, university administrators, and faculty as they make policy and programming decisions related to conditionally-admitted student populations.

Acknowledgements

A project as large as a dissertation cannot be completed without the help and support of many individuals, so I would like to take a brief amount of space to thank those who made this accomplishment possible. First and foremost, I would like to thank the study participants. Without their time and willingness to share their experiences, there would be nothing to fill these pages. I would also like to thank my committee members, Dr. Brent Cejda, Dr. Corey Rumann, Dr. Linda Shipley, and especially my advisor Dr. Jim Griesen for treating me as a colleague and helping me to produce the best final piece possible in an efficient time frame. I would also like to thank Dr. Rita Kean for encouraging me to pursue this degree and supporting me academically and professionally along the way. Additionally, thanks are owed to the many professors and student affairs professionals who inspired me to enter the field of student affairs and to make it a career as well as to pursue advanced degrees and continued growth and learning. I also want to thank all of the friends and colleagues who have served as sources of support during this journey. But most importantly, I would like to thank my parents. Since childhood, these individuals helped me to develop a love of learning and a belief in education. They read and commented on drafts of things they previously knew little or nothing about. They served as sounding boards and gave suggestions, advice, and perspective. Most meaningfully, however, they always believed in me and my ability to accomplish anything I set my mind to; they helped me believe in myself.

Table of Contents

List of Tables

List of Appendices

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Throughout the years, many different purposes have been attributed to American education and to the attainment of a college degree, ranging from viewing educational institutions as warehouses for surplus workers and places to train future employees to places to foster personal empowerment and healthy social development (Apple, 1982; Aronowitz & Giroux, 1985; Boyer, 1987; Connell, Ashenden, Kessler, & Dowsett, 1982; Cusick, 1992; de Lone, 1979; Fullan, 1991, 1993; Goodlad, 1979, 1984; Gutmann, 1987; Kozol, 1991; Labaree, 1997; Paris, 1995; Tyack & Cuban, 1995). One author who, to me, summarizes and categorizes the far-reaching purposes of higher education is Labaree. Labaree discusses what he views as the three goals of higher education in the United States that have competed for prominence throughout history: 1) democratic equality, 2) social efficiency, and 3) social mobility. Labaree explains the goal of democratic equality as a public good, where colleges prepare students to be productive members of a democratic society. He describes the social efficiency goal as another public good, where colleges are places that prepare students for the various careers we, as a society, need to have filled. The third goal of social mobility is viewed as a private good, where colleges assist individuals in a climb up the social and financial ladders through the attainment of a college degree and the professions that can be procured with such a degree.

While many might argue the specific purposes or goals of a higher education, the idea that a college education is important has become more and more prevalent in our society. This is illustrated by articles discussing the idea of "college for all"

(Rosenbaum, 1997) as well as President Obama declaring it a national priority to increase college attendance. Included in the president's rationale are filling the increased number of jobs that require a college degree, allowing degree-earners to earn a higher income, and returning the United States to the top of the list of higher education degree earners among other countries (White House, 2013). In fact, research has shown many private and public benefits to college degree attainment (Hess & Squire, 2007; Perna, 2005; Pascarella, & Terenzini, 2005; Paulsen, 2001; Perna, 2005; Perna, Steele, Woda, & Hibbert, 2005).

When people think of the benefits of a college education, they often think in terms of money. An individual who earns a Bachelor's Degree will, on average, earn more than individuals with only a high school education or even with an Associate's Degree, certificate, or some college completion without degree. In fact, on average, those who earn baccalaureates will earn one million dollars more than individuals with only a high school education over the course of their lifetimes (Hess & Squire, 2007). However, there are other personal benefits as well. In the short-term, these individuals will experience pleasure from things like learning new information and skills, participating in extracurricular activities, and attending cultural events (Perna, 2005). In the long-term, these individuals will enjoy benefits including higher lifetime earnings, participating in a more fulfilling work environment, enjoying better health and a longer life, and experiencing lower rates of unemployment, among other benefits (Perna).

Additionally, college-educated individuals provide a great amount of benefits to society. A college education positively influences the following.

- receptivity, inclination, and adaptability to change
- the development of attitudes in support of public programs
- increased awareness and involvement in political affairs
- a citizenry with greater cognitive, emotional, and moral development
- increased participation in voting
- greater involvement in public service and volunteer work
- increased charitable giving
- lower unemployment
- a reduction in criminal activities
- improved health for both educated parents and their children
- lower public expenditures for unemployment, welfare, Medicaid, incarceration, etc., which would save the government great amounts of money
- lower poverty rates

(Pascarella, & Terenzini, 2005; Paulsen, 2001; Perna, 2005; Perna, Steele, Woda, & Hibbert, 2005). Further, according to Paulsen, a citizenry with higher education leads to innovations on the job that lead to increased productivity, an increase in the number of jobs available, and general economic growth. Meanwhile, based on their review of research on economic growth, Leslie and Brinkman (1988) found that 15-40% of economic growth in the United States can be attributed to investments in education.

Statement of the Problem

Due to all the individual and societal benefits a college education produces, it is clearly important for citizens to earn degrees and for colleges to retain these students

once they are accepted and enrolled. However, many students leave college without ever earning a degree. According to the National Center for Higher Education Management System (NCHEMS, 2013), only 55.5% of students earn a baccalaureate degree within six years of starting their college education. NCHEMS further reports that only 77.1% of students return for their second year of college. This means that of the 44.5% of students who fail to earn a college degree within six years, over half of them, 22.9% are lost within their first year. This indicates that more needs to be done to retain these students in their first year.

This study is not the first to point out the need to increase retention in the first year. In fact, a search in *Dissertation Abstracts International* using the keywords "first year experience" and "college" produces over 2,000 results. Further, there is a plethora of articles and books devoted to the first year experience (i.e. Upcraft, Gardner, & Associates, 1989; Upcraft, Gardner, Barefoot, & Associates, 2005; Colella & Schweitzer, 2004; Seidman, 2005; Ward-Roof, 2010; and many more). Additionally, the University of South Carolina hosts a National Resource Center for the First Year Experience and Students in Transition that holds conferences every year and produces publications including *The Journal of the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition*.

However, while much work has been produced on the first year in general, there is a lack of deep qualitative research on the transition experience of today's student, as well as a lack of research on different subsets of the population. One subset of the college population that is consistently retained at rates lower than the general student population is the set of conditionally-admitted students. According to Noel-Levitz (2013), just looking at retention rates from first semester to second semester, rates for

conditionally-admitted students were markedly lower than for non-conditionally-admitted students for all types of four-year institutions, as illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1

Persistence Rates from Term 1 to Term 2, 2011-2012 Academic Year

	Four-Year Private Institutions		Four-Year Public Institutions	
	Conditionally-Admitted First-Year Undergraduates	Non-Conditionally-Admitted First-Year Undergraduates	Conditionally-Admitted First-Year Undergraduates	Non-Conditionally-Admitted First-Year Undergraduates
25th Percentile	66.7%	85.4%	75.4%	85.9%
Median	78.4%	90.8%	84.4%	89.5%
75th Percentile	88.9%	95.1%	90.9%	93.0%

Note. Percentile ranks describe the selectivity of the institution. Institutions with the lowest selectivity, at the 25th percentile, have a median ACT for their entering freshmen class of 21 or below. Institutions at the mid-range of selectivity have a median ACT of 23 or above. The most selective institutions, those at the 75th percentile, have a median ACT of 24 or above.

Heaney and Fisher (2011) state that provisionally-admitted students feel less confident in their ability to succeed in academic settings and need additional help in developing habits of mind and behavior conducive to college success, while Cohen and Brawer (2003) assert that at-risk students are less likely to persist than traditional students when faced with obstacles. Further, the population of conditionally-admitted students includes a disproportionately high percentage of minority students and those from low socioeconomic backgrounds, making the increased retention of conditionally-admitted students important to the retention of these other groups and to guaranteeing access to a higher education (Knopp, 1995; Hrabowski III, 2005; Arendale, 2001; Boylan & Saxon,

1998; Dalaker, 1999; Heaney & Fisher). As a result, Larin and Hyllegard (1996) and McCabe and Day (1998) assert that failing to retain these students can harm the economic prosperity of entire states and regions. These data indicate an increased obligation to understand the characteristics and needs of this population and to produce programming to better fit their experiences and needs.

Additionally, educators and authors striving to ease the transition and increase retention of first year students, have drawn from a number of different student development theories, including, but certainly not limited to, psychological development (Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Sanford, 1967), cognitive development (Perry, 1970; King & Kitchener, 2002), moral development (Kohlberg, 1976), holistic development (Keegan, 1982; Baxter Magolda, 2001), typologies (Myers, 1980; Holland, 1985; Kolb, 1976), campus environments (Kuh & Whitt, 1988; Strange & Banning, 2001; Astin, 1993; Astin, 1984; Schlossberg, 1989), and student success (Tinto, 1993; Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt, & Associates, 2005). However, one theory that has not been systematically integrated into an understanding and a way to improve the first year experience and first-year retention is Schlossberg's transition theory (Anderson, Goodman, & Schlossberg, 2012).

Due to its creation with "adults" in mind, Schlossberg's transition model is generally used to understand adults transitioning between careers, relationships, education, etc., but is not usually applied to 18 or 19 year olds transitioning into college. In fact, taking the *Dissertation Abstracts International* search discussed above, which yielded over 2,000 results, and adding the search terms "Schlossberg's transition theory" or "Schlossberg's transition model", only twelve results remain. These results include examinations of community colleges, nontraditional/older students, transfer students, and

some specific populations including veterans, students with learning disabilities, and those in certain degree programs. It is my belief that a deep understanding of the transition experience for traditional-age, first-time, full-time, conditionally-admitted students attending a four-year institution viewed through the lens of Schlossberg's transition model will greatly increase our ability to aid these students through their first year of college and retain them into their second year.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenology was to understand the transition experience of traditional-age, first-time, full-time, conditionally-admitted students, attending a mid-size, four-year public university in the Southeastern region of the United States (to be referred to as Southeastern University or SU) through the lens of Schlossberg's transition theory.

Theoretical Base

The theoretical base through which I set out to view and make meaning of the data I collected for this study is Schlossberg's transition theory (Anderson, Goodman, & Schlossberg, 2012; Goodman, Schlossberg, & Anderson, 2006; Schlossberg, 1981; Schlossberg, 1984; Schlossberg, 1985b; Schlossberg, 2011; Schlossberg, Waters, Goodman, 1995). Briefly described, Schlossberg views transitions in an integrated way. As she understands it, we are all involved in a transition at any point in time, whether we are moving in, moving through, or moving out of a situation. Sometimes we can even be in different places in various transitions at one time. For example, if I accept a job and move to another state with my partner, I would be *moving in* to my role in the new job and my new state, possibly moving into new friendships and coworker relations as well.

I would be *moving out* of the role I had at my last job, possibly moving out of friendships and relationships with coworkers, established routines, and expectations. Because I am moving with my partner, I would be *moving through* my relationship.

While the moving in and moving out positions are typically easy for most to understand, it sometimes takes individuals a little more effort to understand what moving through involves. Anderson, Goodman, and Schlossberg (2012) describe this time as one of groping for new roles, relationships, routines, and assumptions; a neutral zone or period of emptiness and confusion; a cycle of renewal; and a time of hope and spirituality. So essentially, when one is not moving in or out of a situation, Schlossberg views this as a time when we are revitalizing our situation or getting bored with it. Because students transitioning from high school to college, are inevitably involved in multiple stages of various transitions, I chose to listen for cues to tell me if they focused more on one part of the transition cycle, such as moving in or moving out, than the others.

In order to assist someone in successfully navigating through a transition, Anderson, Goodman, and Schlossberg (2012) envision three steps: 1) Approaching Transitions – This involves identifying the transition and how much it will change a person's life as well as where the individual is in the transition process. 2) Taking Stock of Coping Resources: The 4 S System. 3) Taking Charge: Strengthening Resources. The resources that Schlossberg describes fall under four categories, and in any given situation, can be viewed as assets to a successful transition or liabilities, depending on how they are viewed by the individual and how they assist in her transition or make the transition more difficult.

The 4 S System includes examining the situation, the self, support, and strategies. An understanding of the situation includes an examination of elements such as the trigger for the transition, the timing, the source or level of control over the situation, whether a role change is involved, the duration of the transition, previous experience with similar transitions, concurrent stress, and one's assessment of the transition as positive or negative. An understanding of the self in terms of coping assets and liabilities includes an understanding of one's personal characteristics and psychological resources, including socioeconomic status, gender and sexual orientation, age and stage of life, state of health, and ethnicity/culture as well as psychological resources, including ego development, outlook – optimism and self-efficacy, commitment and values, and spirituality and resilience. Support can be varied and can include family, friends, neighbors, coworkers, classmates, strangers, organizations, institutions, etc. Lastly, strategies can vary greatly as well, but can be viewed in three categories, according to Anderson, Goodman, and Schlossberg (2012). Responses that modify the situation to alter the source of strain include negotiation, optimistic action, self-reliance versus advice seeking, and exercise of potency versus helpless resignation. Responses that control the meaning of the problem to cognitively neutralize the threat include positive comparisons, selective ignoring, and substitution of rewards. Finally, responses that help the individual manage stress once it has occurred include emotional discharge, self-assertion, and passive forbearance. The ratio of assets to liabilities helps to explain "why individuals react differently to the same type of transition and why the same person reacts differently at different times" (Schlossberg, Waters, & Goodman, 1995, p. 57).

Grand Tour Question

How do traditional-age, first-time, full-time, conditionally-admitted students experience the transition from high school to college?

Research Questions

1. What coping assets do traditional-age, first-time, full-time, conditionally-admitted students describe?
2. What coping liabilities do traditional-age, first-time, full-time, conditionally-admitted students describe?
3. On what phase(s) of the high school to college transition do traditional-age, first-time, full-time, conditionally-admitted students focus: moving in, moving through, or moving out?
4. In what ways do the students describe the university as helping or hindering their transition?
5. How can institutions of higher education better assist traditional-age, first-time, full-time, conditionally-admitted students in their transition from high school to college, taking into account their coping assets and liabilities?

Definitions of Terms

Access – Access means the accessibility of higher education, the ability to gain admittance, especially for minority students and students of low socioeconomic status.

At-Risk Student – An at-risk student is a student considered to be at risk of leaving an institution of higher education without completing a degree. Students can be termed at-risk for a number of reasons, including the following statuses: low socioeconomic, first generation, minority, conditional-admit, remedial, and more. Because different

universities classify students in different ways, the terms conditionally-admitted, remedial, developmental, underprepared, and even at-risk are used in different universities and different studies to discuss comparable groups of students. For this reason, these terms are used interchangeably throughout this study.

Attrition – Attrition is the process of losing or failing to continue to enroll students at the same institution from one semester to the next and from one year to the next. Attrition can be viewed as the opposite of retention.

Conditionally-Admitted Student – A conditionally-admitted student is a student who is admitted to a college or university, but on a conditional basis, because he or she fails to meet all admission standards. Conditional admission status means different things at different institutions and could be the result of the student having a low high school GPA; class rank; and/or SAT, ACT, or Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) scores. The student could also have failed to take a class in high school, or failed to take the proper number of classes in a certain subject, that is a standard for admission at the university. In the context of this study, a conditionally-admitted student means a student who failed to earn a minimum of 440 on each sub-section of the SAT or a minimum of 17 for English on the ACT, 18 for Reading, and 19 for Math. Because different universities classify students in different ways, the terms conditionally-admitted, remedial, developmental, underprepared, and even at-risk are used in different universities and different studies to discuss comparable groups of students. For this reason, these terms are used interchangeably throughout this study.

Coping Assets – Coping assets are any resources as described by Schlossberg under the categories of situation, self, support, or strategies, which assist an individual in coping with, or successfully managing, a transition (Anderson, Goodman, & Schlossberg, 2012).

Coping Liabilities – Coping liabilities are any resources as described by Schlossberg under the categories of situation, self, support, or strategies, which inhibit an individual's ability to cope with, or successfully manage, a transition (Anderson, Goodman, & Schlossberg, 2012).

Developmental Class– A developmental class is a course a student is required to take before he or she will be allowed to take related college material. Students typically test into developmental classes through standardized tests where students fail to score at a level that would qualify them for college level coursework.

Developmental Student – The term "developmental student" is a way of referring to students required to take remedial/developmental classes before they will be allowed to take some or all "college level" coursework. Status as a developmental student is typically based on standardized test scores that demonstrate the student needs further growth in a certain subject before he or she will be able to successfully complete related college material. It is seen as a more positive term than "remedial student." Because different universities classify students in different ways, the terms conditionally-admitted, remedial, developmental, underprepared, and even at-risk are used in different universities and different studies to discuss comparable groups of students. For this reason, these terms are used interchangeably throughout this study.

First Year Experience – The first year experience is a term that has been widely used to discuss the experiences of first-year college students and the programming designated

specifically for them. In some institutions, the first year experience is the title of a series of programs, an office focusing on the needs of first year students, or a seminar class designed specifically for first-year students.

First-Time, Full-Time – This descriptor of students indicates a discussion of students who are attending college on a full-time basis for the first time after graduating high school. In order to be full-time, students must be enrolled in at least 12 credit hours during a fall or spring semester. In order for this to be students' "first-time;" though students can already have college credit through devices such as dual enrollment (DE), Advanced Placement (AP), International Baccalaureate (IB), Advance International Certificate of Education (AICE), etc.; the student must be in his or her first semester of full-time coursework after graduating from high school.

Persistence – Persistence is the process of continuing through college until a degree is earned.

Programming – Throughout this study, the terms programming and programs are used to discuss any interventions performed by the university, outside of classroom experiences, intended to produce educational or developmental benefits and/or increase retention of students.

Remedial Student – A remedial student is a student who is required to take remedial/developmental classes before he or she will be allowed to take some or all "college level" coursework. Status as a remedial student is typically based on standardized test scores that demonstrate the student needs further growth in a certain subject before she will be able to successfully complete related college material. Because different universities classify students in different ways, the terms conditionally-admitted,

remedial, developmental, underprepared, and even at-risk are used in different universities and different studies to discuss comparable groups of students. For this reason, these terms are used interchangeably throughout this study.

Remediation – Remediation is the process of removing the condition under which a student was conditionally admitted. Depending on the situation, remediation can involve taking and passing one or more certain classes, earning a required score on a placement test, or something else, as determined by the university.

Retention – When discussed in this study, retention is the process of retaining or continuing to enroll students at the same institution from one semester to the next and from one year to the next. Retention is often discussed in terms of the percentage of students who were enrolled at the institution during their freshmen year, who enrolled at the same institution for their sophomore year. Retention can also be discussed looking at the percentage of students who continue onto their junior and senior year as well as students who are retained from one semester to another.

Student Affairs – Student Affairs is a professional field of individuals working in staff roles in institutions of higher education with a focus to support the academic mission of the institution and encourage the holistic development of each student.

Traditional-age Students – Traditional-age students are students who are the "traditional" age to graduate from high school, and move directly to college. Often, a traditional-age student is considered to be a student who is below the age of 25. However, because this study focused on first-year students coming directly from high school to college, in this study, traditional-age students primarily means 18 or 19 year olds who graduated from high school between May and June 2013 and began college enrollment in August 2013.