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Exploring Community College Stigma:
A Phenomenology of the Lived Experience for Community College Transfer Students Attending
the University of Massachusetts Amherst

By
Eric M. Michael, MPA, JD

Claremont Graduate University
2020

APPROVAL OF THE DISSERTATION COMMITTEE

This dissertation has been duly read, reviewed and critiqued, by the committee listed below, which hereby approves the manuscript of Eric Michael, MPA, JD, as fulfilling the scope and quality requirements for meriting the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Education with a concentration in Higher Education/Student Affairs.

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Abstract

Exploring Community College Stigma:

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By

Eric M. Michael, MPA, JD

Claremont Graduate University: 2020

Despite impressive statistics related to community college transfer student achievement, negative perceptions and stigma attached to attending community college persist. The problem addressed by this phenomenological study is the community college stigma experience for transfer students attending the most highly-ranked public university in Massachusetts: UMass Amherst. This dissertation pioneers use of a conceptual framework built from the elements of stereotype threat to illustrate experienced community college stigma; Specifically, it begins to address the forty-year-old unsubstantiated contention of William Neumann and David Riesman, that there is less stigma attached to attending community college in California than in Massachusetts.

Broken down to its core elements, the situational phenomenon of stereotype threat includes 1.) existence of a stigmatized group, 2.) a situational “trigger” causing members of the stigmatized group (“targets”) concern about being judged or treated negatively on the basis of that stigma, and 3.) a consequential impact on a target’s immediate performance, self-perception, identity, and/or sense of belonging. Phenomenological analysis of interview data for 20 current students found the lived experience for community college transfer students attending UMass spans three distinct periods: Pre-UMass, the Community college-to-UMass transition, and Being

a UMass community college transfer student. Elements of the stereotype threat framework presented themselves during each period of students' lived experience, suggesting community college transfer students attending UMass are a stigmatized group susceptible to potential consequences of chronic stereotype threat. (i.e. domain dis-identification and domain abandonment). This examination of students' stigma experience in Massachusetts justifies replication at a highly-ranked public university in California, so as to definitively support or contradict Neumann and Riesman's decades old contention.

Dedication

To my beautiful wife, Christina: full-time attorney, full-time mommy of three, full-time super hero. We never could have expected all 2020 had in store for us. This work would not be complete had it not been for your love, encouragement, and unyielding support. Thank you. I love you.

To my daughters, Amelie, Luna, and Juliet. You are a constant reminder of what's important in life. Thank you for all our bike rides at the lake fields, pauses to confirm it's still, "like looking into a mirror," and serenades of "Once Upon a Dream" and "Into the Unknown." I hope this work finds its way to improve the future generation to which you belong.

To my parents, Jerry and Teri, who after meeting each other as two young twenty-somethings at Fullerton College gave everything of yourselves to raising and providing for your four children. I now understand, relate to, and appreciate all you did and continue to do for us.

To my three sisters, Natalie, Heather, and Lauren. I couldn't have asked for a more unique set of siblings to have positively influenced my lived experience and perspective. Thanks for keeping me on my toes.

This work is also dedicated to my community college transfer participants, and all those whose lived experiences have been marginalized for far too long.

Acknowledgements

I owe a tremendous debt of gratitude to my committee chair and members, Drs. Linda Perkins, Gilda Ochoa, and Mary Poplin. Dr. Perkins provided the critical support needed of a PhD candidate seeking to complete a degree during the thick of a global pandemic. Dr. Ochoa showed me that addressing the challenges confronting marginalized individuals requires actively bringing their stories and experiences to the forefront. Through her tremendous wealth of knowledge, Dr. Poplin, my first education professor at CGU, enlightened me to the vast opportunities for scholarship within the field. Thank you, all.

This dissertation would not have been possible without the assistance received from several unnamed UMass faculty and staff members. Their willingness to help a PhD candidate from southern California with participant recruitment in their various colleges, departments, and programs was an invaluable contribution to this study. They understood the importance of these students' lived experiences and I hope this dissertation provides the insight they hoped to achieve.

Finally, reaching into the past, I owe immense appreciation and gratitude to Tom Mertes, former administrator of the Center for Social Theory and Comparative History at UCLA. You were the first institutional agent to make this community college transfer student turned research assistant feel like he had an academic space on campus to which he belonged. Thank you.

Well you're in your little room, and you're working on something good, but if it's really good, you're gonna need a bigger room. And when you're in the bigger room, you might not know what to do. You might have to think of how you got started sitting in your little room. - Jack White

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Chapter One: Introduction to the Study

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to complete the first step in addressing the forty-year-old unsubstantiated contention of Harvard's William Neumann and David Riesman (1980), that "there is, no doubt, less stigma" for attending community college in California than in Massachusetts (54). This was achieved by exploring the lived experience of twenty community college transfer students attending the most highly-ranked public university ("receiving institution") in Massachusetts, the University of Massachusetts Amherst ("UMass") (U.S. News and World Report, 2018). Specifically, the researcher was interested in what, if at all, the community college stigma experience is for students along this journey. Pioneering a conceptual framework constructed from the elements of "stereotype threat" to examine students' community college stigma experience, this phenomenological study achieves what it set out to accomplish. Mainly, it found that the journey for community college transfer students attending UMass encompasses experienced community college stigma resembling elements of stereotype threat.

Context and Background

Approximately 9 million students attend more than one thousand public community colleges in the United States (Teachers College Columbia University, 2018; U.S. Department of Education, 2018). A partial explanation for this vast enrollment is that community colleges generally maintain an open admissions policy and welcome students from wildly diverse socioeconomic backgrounds (Cohen & Brawer, 2003). Other reasons for attending these institutions include convenience and relatively inexpensive cost, vocational skills training and remedial academic skills development, and as a springboard to transfer to a four-year institution. It is students' experience along this transfer journey which this study aimed to address.

Community colleges welcome individuals of all academic skill levels, including highly intelligent students who demonstrate an exceptional degree of academic success. This is evidenced by the tremendous achievement of these students after transferring to four-year institutions, as forty-nine percent of graduates from four-year colleges in 2015-2016 began their post-secondary education at a community college (Teachers College Columbia University, 2018). Further, while community college transfer students recently made up only fifteen percent of new undergraduate enrollments at U.S. bachelor's degree-granting institutions, including a mere five percent at those ranked in the top one-hundred, they performed exceptionally well, meeting or exceeding graduation rates of non-transfer students at these elite universities seventy-five to seventy-three percent, respectively (Harris, 2019). As a group, community college transfer students also outperformed the sixty-one percent graduation rate for horizontal transfers from four-year institutions (Sanchez, 2019). Yet, despite these impressive statistics related to community college transfer student academic achievement, existing community college transfer literature suggests, "...the public perception of community colleges as being generally inferior to four-year institutions persists." (Neumann & Riesman, 1980, 54).

Both quantitative and qualitative studies have identified a negative perception of community colleges and their students, and existence of a community college stigma (Alexander, Ellis, & Mendoza-Denton, 2009; Bahr, Toth, Thirolf, & Massé, 2013; Laanan, 2004; Neumann & Riesman, 1980; Tobolowsky & Cox, 2012; Townsend, 2008). A key factor in predicting the existence and extent of community college stigma is the institutional culture of a receiving institution (Bahr et al., 2013), influenced in part by its size, selectivity, competitiveness, and location (Laanan, 2007). Considering regional differences between California and Massachusetts, including the concentration of "elite" private institutions in the northeast,

Neumann and Riesman's contention there is less of stigma for community college transfer students in California than in Massachusetts may be reasonable; Until this study, however, research addressing this specific contention is non-existent.

In this chapter, a statement of the problem along with its rationale and significance are presented. This is followed by important implications of this study for future research, literature, and practice, and notable deficiencies in the community college stigma literature. The research purpose and research question are then highlighted, followed by an introduction to stereotype threat as a conceptual framework for this study. Lastly, a brief discussion of the research design, potential limitations of the study, and a definition of key terms are provided.

Rationale and Significance

As will be demonstrated in chapter two's review of the literature, stigma experienced by community college transfer students is an important problem to explore as, "a student's perception of social support among peers and faculty has shown to be associated with a sense of campus belonging and academic success" (Edman & Brazil, 2009, 372). Moreover, experienced stigma potentially impacts other important college student aspects, such as student participation and engagement (Edman & Brazil, 2009; Laanan, 2007), and persistence (Berger & Malaney, 2003). Despite growing calls for additional research into the prevalence and impact of experienced community college stigma for transfer students at receiving institutions, the literature in this area remains limited (Bahr et al., 2013). Further, Zhang, Laanan, and Adamuti-Trache (2017) note inadequate research into comparative perspectives of the college transfer phenomenon, in general. Anecdotally, it seems this could be a result of the seemingly underwhelming attention paid to the community college student experience in contemporary higher education curriculum. This study begins to address these needs.

Problem Statement

The problem addressed by this phenomenological study is the community college stigma experience for students attending the most highly-ranked public university in Massachusetts: UMass Amherst. Specifically, the three elements comprising the situational phenomenon of stereotype threat were employed as a conceptual framework to examine the extent to which the lived experience of community college transfer students encompasses a community college stigma. As will be introduced at greater length later in this chapter, stereotype threat can be broken down into three elements including: *existence of a negative stereotype* (“stigma”) about a person’s group, situational “*triggers*” causing members of the stigmatized group concern about being judged or treated negatively on the basis of that stigma, and a *consequential impact* of those triggers on a target’s immediate performance, self-perception, identity, and/or sense of belonging (Spencer, Logel, & Davies, 2016, 416).

Importance of the Study

This phenomenological study has important implications for community college transfer student literature, future community college stigma research, and for institutional practices related to community college transfer students on campus.

This study answers the call to utilize the concept of stereotype threat as a framework from which to study community college transfer students at receiving institutions (Whitfield, 2005). Insight into experienced community college stigma for students attending UMass, illustrated via the three elements of stereotype threat, completes the first step in addressing the forty-year-old unsubstantiated contention of Harvard’s William Neumann and David Riesman, that “There is, no doubt, less stigma...” for attending community college in California than in Massachusetts (Neumann & Riesman, 1980, 54). Not only do findings from this study begin to

close this long-standing gap in the community college transfer literature, but they justify replicating this study at a similarly highly-ranked public university in California in order to definitively support or contradict this decades old contention.

In addition to justifying replication at a receiving institution in California, this study is a starting point for future related community college stigma research. For example, should a difference in the community college stigma experience for students in California and Massachusetts be demonstrated, examination into why state-based differences in students' stigma experience exists would be warranted. Another area of potential research influenced by this study is the intersectionality of experienced community college stigma with common student identities and characteristics within the community college transfer population (Crenshaw, 1989). A non-exhaustive list of potential identities/characteristics for comparison include commuter, under-represented minority, first-generation, undocumented, and post-traditional-aged college students. Further, this study could be a starting point to explore the extent to which experienced community college stigma impacts student decisions to pursue a post-bachelor degree education, or to what extent community college stigma influences the graduate school admission decisions of university personnel.

An additional potential implication of these findings is they may jumpstart scholars into exploring methods to address the negative perception of community colleges and community college students. For example, greater attention to the history and contribution of community college and community college students within higher education coursework and literature.

Lastly, a potential practical implication of this study is that UMass may better understand the lived experience of its community college transfer students and stigma-related challenges faced by this population. Findings may be utilized to explore methods for reducing the

occurrence and impact of experienced community college stigma on campus. For example, whether increased funding of transfer specific services, resources, and events are justified and necessary.

Deficiencies in the Evidence

This study explored the prevalence and character of community college stigma within the lived experience of community college transfer students at a highly-ranked public receiving institution in Massachusetts. This stigma experience has been called upon for thorough examination by several scholars in the literature (Bahr et al., 2013; Laanan, 2007; Townsend, 2008), but until this study had gone largely overlooked. Additionally, by relying on interviews with current community college transfer students this study used a qualitative research tool underutilized in the literature, but called upon for gaining a better understanding of the needs and challenges facing community college transfer students at receiving institutions (Laanan, 2007; Townsend, 2008).

Research Purpose and Questions

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to use structured interviews to examine the lived experience of community college transfer students attending the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. Specifically, the researcher was interested in what, if at all, the community college stigma experience is for students along this journey. The research question used to guide and inform the direction of this study was:

- 1.) What is the lived experience for community college transfer students attending University of Massachusetts, Amherst (“UMass”)?

Specifically, this study utilized the three elements comprising the situational phenomenon of stereotype threat as a conceptual framework from which to explore the extent to which the lived experience of community college transfer students encompasses a community college stigma.

Conceptual Framework

A conceptual framework has been defined as a network of interlinked concepts, taken together to provide a comprehensive understanding of a phenomenon (Jabareen, 2009). Steele and Aronson's (1995) concept of "stereotype threat" and the three elements it encompasses were used as a conceptual framework for this study.

Stereotype Threat

Originally introduced by Claude Steele and Joshua Aronson to explain a disparity in standardized test performance between Black participants and White participants (1995), stereotype threat occurs when a group attached with a particular stigma or negative stereotype ("targets") find themselves in a situation where "he or she is concerned about being judged or treated negatively on the basis of [that] stereotype" (Spencer et al., 2016, 416). Stereotype threat is not an unfamiliar framework within the field of education, used to explain academic "underperformance phenomenon," where those who experience high levels of stereotype threat perform worse than when the stereotype threat experience is low, thus found to contribute to race and gender academic achievement gaps (Spencer et al., 2016; Woodcock, Hernandez, Estrada, & Schultz, 2012). With stereotypes rampant on college campuses (King, 2011), scholars have specifically called for research applying stereotype threat to community college transfer students at competitive research universities. For instance, to determine whether it explains academic performance disparities between transfer and non-transfer students (Whitfield, 2005).

The dangers associated with stereotype threat are not limited to racial and gender stereotypes (Spencer et al., 2016; Whitfield, 2005), instead extending to a variety of social identities or groups of individuals stigmatized based on association to that group (King, 2011; Whitfield, 2005). This is particularly true in “domains of more value to one’s self-perceptions, in which individuals highly identify” (King, 2011, 35). Further, “neither a history of stigmatization nor internalized feelings of intellectual inferiority’ are required for stereotype threat” to have adverse effects (32). As a result, some community college transfer students may never have previously considered themselves members of a stigmatized or intellectually inferior cultural group, yet find themselves to be so in the context of the university domain.

There are a number of ways stereotype threat is shown to be induced. “Triggers” include overt stereotypic statements (Woodcock et al., 2012), situational cues “[reminding] targets of culturally held stereotypes” ...[or] “alert[ing] targets that their group is devalued in a particular situation” (Spencer et al., 2016, 417-18), and interpersonal interactions with the prejudiced attitudes and/or behaviors of the “high-status” group or learning about those prejudiced beliefs from others in the targeted group (418).

In addition to the potential for negatively impacting targets’ immediate performance (Woodcock et al., 2012), stereotype threat is associated with non-performance related consequences to one’s self-perception, identity, and sense of belonging (Spencer et al., 2016). “[Fostering] negative emotions in the stereotyped domain,” stereotype threat “diminishes targets’ perceptions of their own abilities” within it (424). Self-perception is critical to college student identity development (King, 2011), and because stigmatized groups within academia already tend to question their social bonds, these students become “especially sensitive to signs that they do not belong” (Spencer et al., 2016, 424). Once chronic stereotype threat undermines a sense of

belonging, it can lead to withdraw, loss of motivation and/or domain commitment. This could be detrimental to community college transfer students who feel unwelcome at receiving institutions, as “chronic exposure to stereotype threat can lead...to [dis-identification] from their programs and [eventual abandonment from] those programs of study entirely” (425). Domain dis-identification is marked by “members of negatively stereotyped groups progressively plac[ing] less importance on their performance in the stereotyped domain,” while domain abandonment is demonstrated by a target no longer linking one’s self-worth to performance within the domain (Woodcock et al., 2005, 635).

Application of Conceptual Framework to Study

As discussed, the conceptual framework for this study is based on the social psychology concept of stereotype threat. In using stereotype threat to illustrate students’ community college stigma experience, the researcher borrowed the legal profession’s practice of breaking statutes down to their core elements to create a framework for analyzing the applicability of relevant facts to the law. Broken down, the three elements of stereotype threat include existence of a stigmatized group, situational “triggers” causing members of that stigmatized group (“targets”) concern about being judged or treated negatively on the basis of that stigma, and a consequential impact of those triggers on the target’s immediate performance, self-perception, identity, and/or sense of belonging. Those elements that emerged across the lived experience of community college transfer students attending UMass are presented in a discussion of the findings in chapter five.

Overview of Research Design

The qualitative methodology employed by this study was phenomenology: the study of “the meaning, structure, and essence of the lived experience of [a] phenomenon for [a] person or

group of people” (Patton 2002, 482). This was appropriate as the aim of the study was to understand the lived experience (the phenomenon of interest) for community college transfer students attending UMass, the highest-ranked public receiving institution in Massachusetts (U.S. News and World Report, 2018), where its fall 2019 undergraduate enrollment of 22,726, included 1,085 new transfer students accounting for roughly 16% of the entering 2019 class (University of Massachusetts Amherst, 2020b).

In a phenomenological study, “what is important to know is what people experience and how they interpret the world” (Patton, 2002, 107). The best way to gain an accurate understanding of that experience and interpretation is by engaging in an in-depth, personal interview with them. In this study, structured interviews with 20 currently enrolled UMass community college transfer students provided insight into this lived experience. 19 interviews were conducted in person on the UMass campus; The other was conducted via Zoom. Participants ranged in age from 20 to 50 years-old. They represented 9 of 15 Massachusetts community colleges, 3 out-of-state community colleges, and 8 academic disciplines. A brief document analysis of participants’ current resume was conducted prior to each interview to identify whether participants disclosed their community college experience. The specific design of this study will be discussed in greater detail in chapter three.

Definition of Terms

Community College: “Any institution regionally accredited to award the associates in arts or the associates in science as its highest degree” (Cohen & Brawer, 2003).

Community College Transfer Student: “Students initiating studies at a 4-year institution whose previous college attendance includes attendance or completion of a degree at a 2-year institution” (D’Amico, Dika, Elling, Algozzine, & Ginn, 2014, 378).

First-Generation College Student: "...Students from families in which their parents did not earn a four-year degree" (Moody, 2019).

Horizontal Transfer Student: "A student who transfers from one institution to another institution at the same level" (Whitlock, 2018, 23).

Institutional Agents: "In the educational literature, the term institutional agents refer to non-family individuals who hold positions of power and authority over educational resources (often, most importantly, their own time)." (Dowd, Pak, & Bensimon, 2013, 6)

"Non-transfer" Student (also referred to as "native students" in the literature (Flaga, 2006, 15)): "Students at the receiving institution who arrived as freshmen" (Bahr et al., 2013, 479).

Phenomenology: Study of "the meaning, structure, and essence of the lived experience of [a] phenomenon for [a] person or group of people" (Patton, 2002, 482).

Post-Traditional Student: "...Aged 25 and over, but also include those under 25 who have characteristics indicative of adult responsibilities, such as working full-time, being financially independent, having non-spousal dependents, being a single parent, as well as having a nontraditional educational trajectory, such as delayed enrollment into higher education or did not complete high school" (Iloh, 2018, 26).

Receiving Institution: The institution to which a student transfers to from a previously attended college or university.

Social Stigma: "A negative attribute or identity that devalues a person within a particular context or culture" (Levin & Van Laar, 2006, 83).

Stereotype Threat: "Refers to the 'predicament' in which members of a social group...must deal with the possibility of being judged or treated stereotypically, or of doing something that would confirm the stereotype" (Nguyen & Ryan, 2008, 1314).

Transfer Receptive Culture: "...An institutional commitment by a 4-year college or university to provide the support needed for students to transfer successfully." (Jain, Bernal, Lucero, Herrera, & Solorzano, 2016, 1014).

Transfer shock: The drop in a student's grade point average upon transferring to a receiving institution (Flaga, 2006, 3).

Vertical Transfer: "A student who transfers from a 2-year institution to a 4-year institution" (Whitlock, 2018, 25).

Conclusion

This chapter provided the contextual setting for this qualitative phenomenological study, including a problem statement with rationale and significance of the problem addressed.

Potential implications of this study were highlighted, and an introduction to stereotype threat as a conceptual framework for exploring experienced community college stigma was given. A brief discussion of the research design, potential limitations of the study, and a definition of key terms were also provided.

Four additional chapters are to follow. Chapter two consists of a comprehensive literature review providing context for the community college transfer student transition to receiving institutions. A focus of chapter two is to highlight evidence of negative perceptions and existing stigma associated with community college that are found in the literature. Chapter three offers a detailed discussion of the research design for this study, including a description of the sample of UMass students interviewed. Study findings are then presented in Chapter four with a discussion of those findings offered in chapter five.

Chapter Two: Review of the Literature

The current phenomenological study explored the lived experience of community college transfer students attending the most highly-ranked public university in Massachusetts: UMass Amherst; Specifically, the researcher was interested in what, if at all, the community college stigma experience is for students along this journey. The following research question guided this study:

1. What is the lived experience for community college transfer students attending University of Massachusetts Amherst (“UMass”)?

This study utilized the three elements of stereotype threat as a conceptual framework for exploring experienced community college stigma along students’ transfer journey. The purpose of this literature review is to provide background on the development of community colleges as institutions of higher education in the United States and in Massachusetts, context for the community college transfer student transition to receiving institutions, and detail some of the negative perceptions and stigma associated with community college and community college students found in the literature. Finally, examples of stereotype threat and gaps in the existing community college stigma literature are discussed.

Establishment of the Junior College

The nation’s first junior college was established in Joliet, Illinois in 1901 (Rudolph, 1977). By 1910, two additional public junior colleges were established, with fourteen of these institutions founded by 1914 (Drury, 2003). Community colleges were created as a means to facilitate the potential for universal higher education, “...giving thousands of worthy students who would otherwise have been excluded a chance to attend.” (Brint & Karable, 1989, 10). Also

playing a significant role in early expansion of community colleges was a desire to promote cultural and social mobility for farm families (Drury, 2003). This was especially prominent in the American West, where much of the land remained sparsely populated in the early twentieth century (Cohen, Brawer, and Kisker, 2014, 5). The California community college system is an example of this development (Drury, 2003).

Defining and Classifying Community Colleges

Community colleges are defined as, “Any not-for-profit institution regionally accredited to award the associates in arts or the associates in science as its highest degree.” Several names have applied to community colleges over the years, with the term “community college” not becoming a prominent label until the 1970s. Previously, the term “junior college” was most commonly used, while the names “city college,” “county college,” and “branch college” are still in use today (Cohen et al., 2014, 5).

Contrary to early literature on the topic, community colleges are not homogeneous; Yet, a classification scheme for these institutions did not exist until 2003, introduced by prolific community college scholar, Stephen Katsinas (2003). Criteria used by Katsinas to classify community colleges included institutional control, geography, size, and governance. Classifications included small rural (enrollment below 2,500) and large rural (enrollment above 2,500) public community colleges, public suburban, public urban, and special-use institutions. The Carnegie classification system has since modified this scheme, adding a classification for medium rural public community colleges, with enrollment between 2,500 and 7,500 students, and modifying the classification for large rural institutions to include institutions with student enrollment greater than 7,500 (Rural Community College Alliance, 2019). By meeting the growing demand for such a scheme in the community college field, it has helped scholars make

significant contributions to the advancement of community college research and policy development. It has also provided state policymakers a useful tool for developing strategies to address specific needs of public institutions within a particular classification (Katsinas, 2003).

Massachusetts Community Colleges

Established in 1960, Berkshire Community College became Massachusetts's first community college. The Massachusetts legislature approved this action in 1958 following a state audit recommendation of increased access and diversity within the Commonwealth's system of higher education. Today, the state is home to fifteen public community colleges, accounting for roughly forty-nine percent of the state's public higher education student enrollment ("Massachusetts Community Colleges," 2020). These institutions, along with nine state colleges and five University of Massachusetts campuses (Massachusetts Department of Higher Education, 2020b), combine to form the state's three-tier higher education system (de la Torre & Wells, 2014).

More than a decade following inception of Massachusetts' community colleges, the mission of these institutions arguably centered around student occupational skill development, with an eye towards fulfilling the labor needs of local business. The focus of this mission shifted, however, when the state began actively facilitating a pathway from its community colleges to its state colleges and universities, enacting its first transfer policy in 1974 (de la Torre & Wells, 2014).

Massachusetts's Commitment to Community College Transfer

Prior education scholarship contended that between the 1960s and 1980s, the Massachusetts community college mission was geared towards local occupational education interests and the diversion of students away from transfer (Brint and Karabel, 1989). In

revisiting this contention, de la Torre and Wells's (2014) qualitative exploration of evolving statewide transfer policies succinctly laid out the evolution of Massachusetts transfer between 1974 and 2011. While the authors contended higher education in Massachusetts, "is dominated by elite and private academic traditions," (a contention largely supported by both scholars and higher education commentators alike (Marcus, 2015; Neumann & Riesman, 1980) and seemingly accepted the premise that the commonwealth's public higher education system is, "perceived as less prestigious," their summation of Massachusetts's evolving transfer policies demonstrates a state dedicated to facilitating community college transfer to its public four-year institutions (5).

The Commonwealth Transfer Compact

The first Massachusetts transfer policy, the Commonwealth Transfer Compact, was enacted in 1974. Initially an articulation agreement between UMass Amherst and local community colleges, this policy certified a block of general education coursework completed at the community college as comparable to the general education requirements of UMass Amherst. While the Commonwealth Transfer Compact would be revised ten years later, expanded to include all Massachusetts public colleges and universities, it did not guarantee students admission to any public four-year institution in the state. This limitation would later be addressed through the enactment of Massachusetts's Joint Admissions policy (de la Torre & Wells, 2014).

Joint Admissions

The policy of Joint Admissions was a bold step taken by UMass Amherst in support of increasing the university's enrollment of community college transfer students. Enacted in 1992, a major benefit of Joint Admissions was that it guaranteed community college transfer students admission to UMass Amherst; The first Massachusetts articulation agreement to make such a

promise, provided students complete an associate degree program at the community college with a minimum GPA of 2.5. The Joint Admissions policy would be expanded in 1995 and 1996 to include all UMass and state college campuses, respectively, along with a guarantee of junior status (de la Torre & Wells, 2014).

MassTransfer

In 2009, the Massachusetts Department of Higher Education (“MDHE”) replaced Joint Admissions with its MassTransfer policy (Massachusetts Department of Higher Education, 2020a). Through MassTransfer, students who completed an approved associates degree program with a minimum GPA of 2.5 received a full transfer of credits, waiver of general education requirements, and guaranteed admission to a Massachusetts state college or university (de la Torre & Wells, 2014). Further, community college transfer students with a minimum GPA of 3.0 qualified for a thirty-three percent waiver of in-state tuition, with UMass Amherst and UMass Lowell awarding their community college transfer students a full waiver of tuition.

Commonwealth Commitment

In 2016, MDHE supplemented MassTransfer with the Commonwealth Commitment (Massachusetts Department of Higher Education, 2020a), increasing the state’s effort to expand college education access by making public colleges and universities more affordable via student earned tuition rebates. Under the Commonwealth Commitment, students who began higher education at a Massachusetts community college qualified for a ten percent tuition rebate following each term throughout the course of their college education, provided they complete an associate’s degree within two and a half years, maintain a minimum of twelve and fourteen units at the Massachusetts community college and four-year public institution, respectively, maintain a 3.0 cumulative GPA, and obtain a bachelor’s degree within another two years. While the state’s

effort to make college more affordable is commendable, Commonwealth Commitment has not gone without criticism. For instance, critics note its potential to inequitably favor students who are most academically prepared at the outset of their college pursuit, and those who do not have to work while earning their degree (Hildreth, 2017).

The Community College Transfer Student Transition

Community college transfer student transition into receiving institutions is a two-part process: the transfer process and the adjustment process. The transfer process includes steps taken by students to move from a two-year community college to four-year institution, such as determining where to apply and completing any prerequisite course sequences (Townsend, 2008). This literature review relates to the second part of the transfer transition: the adjustment to becoming a student at a receiving institution.

“Transfer Shock”

The predominate lens through which community college transfer student adjustment at receiving institutions has been viewed is the phenomenon known as “transfer shock” (Laanan, 2004). Early community college transfer student research was primarily concerned with students’ academic adjustment to a new institution. Transfer shock described the temporary dip in GPA typically found to accompany community college transfer students’ first term at the new institution (Laanan, 2004). In addition to this GPA dip, early transfer shock research focused on the academic achievement gap between an institution’s community college transfer students and non-transfer students (those who enroll directly to the institution as freshmen), related to such measures as bachelor degree attainment and time to degree completion (Whitfield, 2005). While meaningful in its identification of discrepancies between non-transfer and transfer student

achievement, early academic adjustment research largely failed to consider social adjustment factors contributing to the transfer shock experience (Laanan, 2004).

Social Adjustment

At the outset of the twenty-first century, researchers began questioning how contributing social factors impact community college transfer student adjustment to receiving institutions (Laanan, 2004). Community college transfer students' social adjustment has since been acknowledged as an integral part of the community college transfer transition (Bahr, P., Toth C., Thirolf K., and Massé J., 2013).

A pioneer in the expansion of transfer shock research to include social adjustment factors, Frank Laanan (2004) was one of the first to investigate transfer shock beyond the discussed GPA dip and academic achievement disparity between community college transfer and non-transfer students. Measuring community college transfer student adjustment as a function of both academic and social involvement, Laanan developed a survey titled the Laanan Transfer Students' Questionnaire ("LTSQ"), which considered potential social, emotional, and psychological contributing factors to academic and social adjustment at receiving institutions (Bahr et al., 2013; Laanan, 2004). Sections of the LTSQ include student social demographics, community college experiences, and university experiences (Laanan, 2004; Laanan, 2007). While, Laanan asserts, "The academic and social experiences of a student uniquely depend upon what a student brings to the college environment" (2007, 38), studies demonstrate neither student social demographics nor level of involvement in community college have a significant impact on social adjustment or overall satisfaction with a receiving institution (Berger & Malaney, 2003; Laanan, 2007). Instead, what is crucial to facilitating or impeding student social adjustment are

students' university experiences (Laanan, 2007), the role and importance of which will be discussed in detail next.

University Experiences and Student Social Adjustment

Studies demonstrate that of the three LTSQ components used to measure community college transfer student adjustment, university experiences are the most significant contributing factor (Berger & Malaney, 2003; Laanan, 2007). The university experiences section of the LTSQ seeks information regarding student major, GPA, reasons for attending, participation in transfer specific orientation programs, and experiences with faculty. Notably, university experiences also include “students’ general perceptions of the university, adjustment process, and overall satisfaction” (Laanan, 2004, 339).

In addition to having a positive relation to college persistence (Berger & Malaney, 2003), crucial to the community college transfer student transition are university experiences encompassing greater involvement with social activities and peers (Laanan, 2007), that include interactions with supportive institutional agents (faculty and staff) (Nuñez & Yoshimi, 2017), and foster relationships with non-transfer students who can act as both an important social connection and informal learning resource (Flaga, 2006). Despite the importance of meaningful interactions and relationships to one’s university experiences, community college transfer students are found to be less engaged with a receiving institution than non-transfer students (Ishitani & McKittrick, 2010). Seemingly contributing to this is that transfer students from both community colleges (“vertical transfers”) and four-year institutions (“horizontal transfers”) have difficulty making friends during the adjustment process, as most students at receiving institutions formed friendships during their freshman year (Townsend, 2008). Townsend (2008) asserts this process is particularly challenging for community college transfer students, often finding

themselves devalued as a result of some people's negative perceptions of community college; A negative perception prevalent across the community college transfer student literature (Alexander, S., Ellis, D., & Mendoza-Denton, R. (2009); Neumann & Riesman, 1980; Tobolowsky & Cox, 2012; Townsend, 2008).

Community College Perceptions

A negative perception of community college is established in the community college transition literature, found to be held by important institutional agents including non-transfer students, faculty, and staff. In contrast, the self-perception of current and former community college students is that they are both academically driven and career minded.

Self-Perceptions

Qualitative research on the self-perceptions of community college transfer students is scant. As a result, colleges and universities have been called upon to ascertain detailed self-perceptions and subjectivities of the experience for their community college transfer students to determine specific needs, issues, and concerns (Castro & Cortez, 2017; Laanan, 2007; Townsend, 2008). Existing findings related to the self-perceptions of current and former community college students are discussed.

In a survey of 475 current community college students, Edman and Brazil (2009) found seventy-five percent of students had no participation with campus clubs or activities, twenty-four percent reported a poor social life, and a substantial thirty-four percent believed campus social life was simply not very important. Generalizations that could be made from these findings about community college *transfer* students are notably limited. Participants were not only still enrolled in community college, but they were taking introductory level courses, suggesting they were potentially several academic terms away from transfer.

Findings from a phenomenological study on self-perceptions of community college transfer students at a public research university in western United States found the downplay in importance of social involvement persists post-transfer as well (Nunez & Yoshimi, 2017). Through interviews with eleven former community college transfer students, (seven graduates, and four “drop-outs,”) Nunez and Yoshimi (2017) found students believed themselves to be more concerned with personal academic and post-graduation career success than with co-curricular activity involvement; A self-perception participants perceived to be distinct from the interests of non-transfer student peers.

These studies suggest the self-perception of community college transfer students as being driven by academic and post-transfer career goals with little regard for the social aspect of the college experience. However, additional qualitative studies utilizing interviews and focus groups are needed if a more complete understanding of the self-perceptions of community college transfer students is desired (Townsend, 2008). This is particularly necessary considering perceptions of the transfer student experience likely varies with the particular culture of an institution (Laanan, 2007). This study’s findings related to self-perceptions of UMass community college transfer students will begin to fill this void.

Public Perceptions

While community colleges are home to numerous highly intelligent individuals demonstrating a high degree of academic success, “the public perception of community colleges as being generally inferior to four-year institutions persists.” (Neumann & Riesman, 1980, 54). Sadly, this 1980 contention of William Neumann and late Harvard sociologist, David Riesman, is echoed in contemporary literature (Alexander et al., 2009; Braxton, Doyle, & Lyken-Segosebe, 2015; Townsend, 2008).

In a mixed-methods study, Alexander et al. (2009) uncovered three characterizations of transfer rejection occurring at the University of California, Berkeley, all of which related to how participants believed their academic ability or the fact they transferred from a community college to be negatively perceived by others. Examples included being perceived as intellectually inferior or not academically capable, the perception that it is easy to be accepted to the university as a transfer student, and the perception transfer students had it easy in community college. Additional studies underscore this negative perception of community college and their students, even citing lack of faculty scholarship in the mission and expectations of community colleges as contributing to the weak professional identity of these institutions and their faculty (Braxton et al., 2015).

Faculty and Staff Perceptions

While Alexander et al. (2009) did not ascertain who specifically at UC Berkeley harbored the negative perceptions of community college transfer students, (i.e. non-transfer students, faculty or staff), faculty and staff at receiving institutions have indeed been found to harbor negative perceptions of community colleges and students who transfer from them. Tobolowsky and Cox (2012) conducted semi-structured interviews of seventeen faculty and staff members regarding perceptions of institutional efforts affecting the transfer transition at their receiving institution. Interviews uncovered faculty and staff attached a negative stereotype to the academic abilities of community college transfer students, and perceived those students as “less prepared” than non-transfers (21). Further, interviewees perceived institutional policies to reinforce the idea community college transfer students are not a priority, marked by a late-date transfer student orientation and these students being left to register last for first-term courses.

With negative perceptions of community colleges and community college transfer students demonstrated to be held by important institutional agents of receiving institutions, it becomes crucial to understand the extent to which community college transfer students' lived experiences are influenced by a community college stigma.

Community College Stigma

A stigma is defined as, “a negative attribute or identity that devalues a person within a particular context or culture” (Levin & Van Laar, 2005, 83). While research into the community college stigma experience for community college transfer students is notably lacking (Bahr et al., 2013), some of the earliest community college transfer transition literature identifies a link between the discussed negative perceptions of community college and an associated stigma experience for students who transferred from them (Neumann & Riesman, 1980).

In *The Community College Elite*, Neumann and Riesman (1980) warned of the dangers in generalizing about community colleges due to large variety and clear regional differences. Subsequently contradicting themselves, the authors contended not only that a stigma for having attended community college exists, but “there is, *no doubt, less stigma*” for those who attended in California than those in Massachusetts (*emphasis added*) (54). While this unsubstantiated contention is troubling, contemporary studies support the notion that a community college stigma experience exists for community college transfer students (Alexander et al., 2009; Bahr et al., 2013, Laanan, 2004; Whitfield, 2005). In fact, perceiving “stigma as a transfer student” was identified as a contributing factor to transfer students' general perceptions of the university in Laanan's LTSQ (Laanan 2004, 341).

Perhaps contributing to students' community college stigma experience is that they often do not fit the demographic of a “typical college student,” frequently portrayed in movies as,

“young, White, middle-class, usually male, full-time, supported by parents, and concerned with ideas of success” (King, 2011, 33). In contrast with much of this socio-demographic stereotype is that among first-time college goers in 2014, forty-eight percent of “Hispanic” students attended a public two-year or community college institution, opposed to only thirty percent for White students (Krogstad, 2016). However, even when these socio-demographically diverse students demonstrate academic success by attending and graduating from competitive receiving institutions, they have not been immune from experienced community college stigma (Alexander et al., 2009).

Transfer Rejection

The previously discussed Alexander et al. (2009) study examined community college stigma and psychosocial experiences of community college transfer students at UC Berkeley. In this mixed-methods study, Alexander et al. examined whether “transfer rejection” occurs, and whether it makes a students’ subsequent “transfer concealment” more likely. Based on open-ended question responses from graduating community college transfer students, twenty-six and a half percent [of 211 respondents], “reported experiencing rejection as a result of being a transfer student [‘transfer rejection’]” (5). As discussed, characterizations of experienced transfer rejection included, being perceived as intellectually inferior or not academically capable, the perception it is easy to be accepted to the university as a transfer student, and the perception transfer students had it easy in community college. A noted limitation of this study, however, was that it did not ascertain whether experienced transfer rejection was based on interactions with peers and/or faculty members (Bahr et al., 2013).

Transfer Concealment

The second component of the Alexander et al. (2009) study examined students' response to experienced transfer rejection. Specifically, the study explored whether experienced transfer rejection made one more likely to conceal their community college transfer student status. Of 191 respondents "18.8% reported that they had concealed being a transfer student at least once in the past ["transfer concealment"]," with sixty-eight percent of those who concealed having previously experienced transfer rejection (6). Ninety-one percent of those who did not previously experience "transfer rejection" ever engaged in transfer concealment. Alexander et al. (2009) determined experiences of transfer rejection to be a predictor of subsequent transfer concealment, with transfer concealment six times more likely for students who previously experienced transfer rejection. The authors concluded these results, "support the notion that concealment of a stigma 'is likely to be motivated by fears of negative evaluation and avoidance of rejection'" (8).

Community college transfer students concealing transfer status as a means of avoiding negative evaluation and/or rejection may be explained by the process of students moving through the "five dimensions of transition," identified by Catherine Flaga (2006). Flaga contends community college transfer students move through five dimensions of transfer transition as they cross the academic, social, and physical environments of a receiving institution. Based on interviews with thirty-five community college transfer students at the beginning and end of their second term at Michigan State University (MSU), Flaga identified five dimensions of transition: learning resources, connecting, familiarity, negotiating, and integrating. Of particular importance to this review, "the "negotiating dimension [occurs] when students [adjust] their behavior and surroundings as necessary in order to be successful within the academic, social, and

physical environments” (8). Through the lens of the five dimensions of transfer transition, community college transfer students may conceal transfer identity as a way to adjust (“negotiate”) behavior within university surroundings in order to achieve Flaga’s fifth dimension of transfer transition, “integrating” into the university, which “often [includes] a shift in perception or identity” (Flaga 2006, 8).

Potential Impact of Experienced Stigma

Beyond stress associated with concealing one’s social identity (Alexander et al., 2009), other potential problems with experienced community college stigma exist as well. These include susceptibility to stereotype threat (Spencer et al., 2016), diminished sense of institutional support lessening satisfaction with university experience (Zhang, Y. L., Laanan, F. S., & Adamuti-Trache, M., 2018), restricted access to non-transfer students as an informal learning resource (Flaga, 2006), and deterrence from campus social participation (Laanan, 2007).

Community college transfer students attached with a community college stigma may become targets for the incidence of stereotype threat, the conceptual framework used for this phenomenological study. As discussed at length in chapter one, stereotype threat occurs when a group attached with a particular stigma or negative stereotype (“targets”) find themselves in a situation where “he or she is concerned about being judged or treated negatively on the basis of [that] stereotype” (Spencer et al., 2016, 416). Potential “triggers” inducing stereotype threat for students attached with community college stigma include overt stereotypic statements (Woodcock, A., Hernandez, P. R., Estrada, M., & Schultz, P. W., 2012), situational cues “[reminding] targets of culturally held stereotypes” ...[or] “alert[ing] targets that their group is devalued in a particular situation” (Spencer et al., 2016, 417-18), and interpersonal interactions with the prejudiced attitudes and/or behaviors of the “high-status” group or learning about those

prejudiced beliefs from others in the targeted group (418). Potential consequences for those inflicted with stereotype threat include diminished immediate performance (Woodcock et al., 2012), as well as non-performance related consequences to one's self-perception, identity, and sense of belonging (Spencer et al., 2016). Each of these non-performance related consequences have the potential to seriously undermine community college transfer student social adjustment to a receiving institution.

Another potential impact of experienced community college stigma is a diminished sense of institutional support. This is important as the more community college transfer students perceive themselves to have institutional support, both academic and social, the more likely they are found to be satisfied with their overall university experience; An important factor in assessing "students' adjustment to a new academic and social environment" (Zhang et al., 2017, 881). Based on this pattern, students experiencing community college stigma at receiving institutions may simultaneously report lack of overall institutional support, and subsequent dissatisfaction with their university experience.

Additionally, non-transfer students are found to play a crucial role in the community college transfer student transition (Flaga, 2006). A community college transfer student's relationship with a non-transfer student can establish an important connection across the university's social environment, and act as an informal resource for learning about the university's academic, social, and physical dynamics. Alternatively, interactions with non-transfer peers reflecting the "transfer rejection" experiences of some students at UC Berkeley (Alexander et al., 2009), may be simultaneously cut off from these individuals as an invaluable informal learning resource. They may also be less likely to participate on campus.

Students comfortable with their social ability are more likely to seek participation in university student groups and campus organizations (Laanan, 2007). Experienced community college stigma could have adverse consequences for one's self-perceived social ability, potentially deterring participation in campus social organizations and events. This lack of participation could hinder student access to a network of individuals and/or organizations who could open future doors to valuable post-transfer opportunities, including research and employment, volunteer work, and free or low cost graduate school admission preparation services.

Efforts to Alter Perceptions and End Community College Stigma

Important institutional agents, such as faculty and staff, are found to be largely unaware of the unique social challenges facing community college transfer students in their colleges and universities (Tobolowsky & Cox, 2012). However, within the past decade, educators representing both community college and four-year institutions have made suggestions and taken up efforts to address negative perceptions and end the stigma attached to community colleges and students who transfer from them.

Community College Faculty Scholarship

In an effort to tweak the community college culture by strengthening the professional identity of community college faculty, educators from Vanderbilt University suggested adding scholarship to the mission of community colleges; A mission historically centered around teaching as a primary focus for its faculty. Seven actions were suggested to facilitate a shift towards community college faculty scholarship, including: 1) altering the community college mission to “include some statements about scholarship focused on application, integration, and teaching [as] goals of the institution,” 2) making the production of scholarship an expectation for

promotion, 3) creating the title of “Professor of the College” for faculty who have shown effectiveness in both teaching and scholarship, 4) allowing faculty to enter into creativity contracts of three to five years, with freedom at its conclusion to alter career focus, 5) providing funding to faculty for attending and presenting at professional conferences, 6) providing faculty ways to alter their teaching load to devote more time to teaching effectively, and 7) establishing centers for faculty research in furtherance of the local community (Braxton et al., 2015, 79).

Though not yet widely adopted, incorporating faculty scholarship is an innovative idea for tweaking the culture of community colleges and potentially altering the negative perception of their students and faculty as academically inferior to four-year counterparts. Fostering faculty scholarship may not only enhance the professional identity and respect of those producing it, but may go a long way towards ending the community college stigma for those educated by them.

#EndCCStigma

Community college administrators have started a movement to attack the community college stigma head-on via social media. Steve Robinson, President of Owens Community College in Toledo, Ohio initiated the #EndCCStigma campaign as a means for administrators to share resources related to the benefits of community college, provide links to student stories about their transfer journey, detail stories of transfer alumni who successfully “[overcame] the stigma of attending a community college,” and locate testimonials from famous former community college students (Jaschik, 2019). The hope of these leaders is to change the perception of their institutions, particularly in the minds of high school counselors who they believe to be locked into thinking the only successful pathway out of high school is going directly to a four-year institution.

Transfer Receptive Culture

Beyond the effort of community college administrators, transfer transition literature has turned its focus to the role four-year institutions play in fostering “transfer receptivity” to increase community college transfer student success (Bahr et al., 2013). Some argue this shift is necessary because institutional policies towards community college transfer students, such as late orientation dates, routinely being last to register for classes, and not being included in meaningful university admission statistics, suggest transfer students are not a priority of the institution (Tobolowsky & Cox, 2012). To address this perception, educators argue it is receiving institutions who must take the lead in improving the community college transfer student experience (Jain, Bernal, Lucero, Herrera & Solorzano, 2016).

To facilitate community college transfer student transition to four-year institutions, universities are being encouraged to foster a transfer receptive culture. The five elements of a transfer receptive culture include: "(a) establishing transfer of nontraditional students as a high institutional priority;...(b) providing outreach and resources that focus on the specific and unique needs of transfer students;...(c) offering of financial and academic support; (d) acknowledging the lived experiences that students bring and the intersectionality between community and family; and (e) creating an appropriate framework of assessment and evaluation that can lead to future scholarship on transfer students (Jain et al. 2016, 104)." The idea behind these elements is to foster transfer students' sense of being a legitimate member of the campus community. Examples of transfer student outreach to help receiving institutions foster a transfer receptive culture include implementing a transfer student orientation and/or hosting summer transfer student enrichment programs.

Transfer Student Center

In addition to implementing transfer student-specific enrichment programs promoting a transfer receptive culture, some four-year institutions have established a transfer student center to facilitate the unique needs of its transfer students. Perhaps setting the bar in this area is the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), referred to by scholars as the “flagship transfer-receiving institution” of the University of California system (Jain, Bernal, Lucero, Herrera & Solorzano, 2011, 259).

The UCLA Transfer Student Center operates within a designated space on campus, housing a full-time staff consisting of a Transfer Center Program Director and Program Coordinator (University of California, Los Angeles, n.d.). In addition to weekly events and activities targeted to campus transfer students, the UCLA Transfer Student Center provides resources relating to prospective transfer students, commuters, academics, health and wellness, non-traditional students, finances, housing, professional and student organizations, and campus libraries (University of California, Los Angeles, n.d.). Of note, the UCLA Transfer Student Center maintains the university’s Transfer Mentorship Program, in which new transfer students are coupled with current transfer students to ease the campus transition through shared knowledge, creating community, and empowering students’ sense of agency (UCLA Transfer Student Center, n.d.). While a transfer student center and transfer mentorship program may not single handedly eliminate the negative perceptions or stigma associated with community college found on campuses, they are powerful examples of transfer student initiatives that send the message community college transfer students are valued and prioritized by the university; A message that is key to fostering a transfer receptive culture (Jain et al., 2016.)

Conceptual Framework in the Literature

While the concept of stereotype threat is not unfamiliar to the broader education literature, previously used to explore the impact of race (Steele & Aronson, 1995; Woodcock et al., 2012) and gender stereotypes (McGlone, Aronson, & Kobrynowicz, 2006) on academic performance and knowledge surveys, its specific application to the study of community college transfer students, to this point, has only been suggested.

Examining the academic achievement gap between non-transfer and transfer students in organic chemistry and biochemistry courses at a four-year university, Whitfield (2005) found a significant disparity in mean course grades between these groups while taking the same beginning course of a required course sequence. A significant disparity in grade distribution was also found, with transfer student grade distribution, “noticeably shifted towards the low end of the scale” (538). Whitfield concluded that “transfer shock,” which as previously discussed is often used to explain transfer students’ temporary GPA dip during their first term, appeared inapplicable as transfer student grades during their second term declined further. Asserting that stereotype threat could apply to any group of individuals stigmatized based simply on their association to that group (543), Whitfield explicitly called on future research to examine whether stereotype threat might explain performance disparities between transfer and non-transfer students.

Echoing Whitfield’s sentiments, King (2011) contended stereotype threat should not be considered limited to racial or gender stereotypes, instead having potential to impact various social identities and groups, including those considered to be within “culturally dominant” groups (which college-going-students might justifiably be considered) (32). King highlighted the persistence of stereotypes on college campuses, and the need for educators to be aware of the

prevalence of stereotype effects, such as stereotype threat, within the college domain. Citing Aronson et al. (1999) as support for this contention, King noted, “that ‘neither a history of stigmatization nor internalized feelings of intellectual inferiority’ are required for stereotype threat to disrupt performance” (32). Beyond stereotype threat’s potential to negatively impact students’ academic performance, King stressed the importance of students’ self-perceptions to identity development, and how an incidence of stereotype threat could negatively impact those self-perceptions. This is important because, as previously discussed, diminishment of students’ self-perceived social abilities could subsequently deter participation in campus groups or activities (Laanan, 2007).

While they did not apply the concept of stereotype threat directly to community college transfer students themselves, King (2011) and Whitfield (2005) provide valuable literature support for using stereotype threat as a framework to explore the community college stigma experience of students attending UMass.

Gaps in the Community College Stigma Literature

In a comprehensive review of the community college transfer transition literature, Bahr et al. (2013) suppose, “differences in the institutional cultures at receiving four-year institutions will emerge as a key factor in predicting the prevalence of stigma” (499). Scholars have supported this contention, adding that institutional culture is likely to be influenced by the large variety and regional differences (Neumann & Riesman, 1980), size, and selectivity of the institutions (Laanan, 2007). Yet, exploration of this topic remains limited, leading many to call for additional research addressing the prevalence and character of stigma experienced by community college transfer students at receiving institutions (Bahr et al., 2013; Laanan, 2007; Townsend, 2008). Citing the limited information ascertained via quantitative survey

instruments, interviews and focus groups aimed at gaining a detailed understanding of how community college transfer students perceive their own needs, issues, and concerns within an institution are specifically called for (Laanan, 2007; Townsend, 2008).

Comparative studies of the community college transfer phenomenon have also been called for in the literature (Zhang et al., 2017). The fact no studies have tested the four-decades-old hypothesis of Neumann and Riesman (1980), that “there is, *no doubt, less stigma*” for those who attended in California than those in Massachusetts, supports this notion (54). Lack of institutional comparisons are also cited as limiting the ability to generalize from existing studies, as examining the community college transfer experience from the perspective of individuals associated with only a single institution, “[reflects] only the climate, culture, and practices of a single campus” (Tobolowsky & Cox 2012, 10). This leaves a long-standing deficiency in the literature regarding state-specific differences in the stigma experience of community college transfer students. While this study’s exploration of students’ experience also reflects only a single, highly-ranked public receiving institution located in Massachusetts, this dissertation is a first step towards addressing these significant gaps in the community college stigma literature.

Literature Review Conclusion

While the first community college was established in Joliet, Illinois in 1901, Massachusetts did not follow suit until 1960. Since that time, the Commonwealth has enacted several transfer policies making it easier and more affordable for Massachusetts community college students to transfer to a public Massachusetts college or university. Once students transfer from community college, contemporary literature acknowledges that in addition to an academic adjustment typified by the occurrence of “transfer shock,” successful transition to a receiving institution encompasses students’ ability to socially adjust (Baher et al., 2013; Laanan,

2004; Laanan, 2007). A key component to successful social adjustment are students' university experiences, highly influenced by students' general perceptions of the university (Laanan, 2004). Potentially impacting student perceptions of themselves and the university is experienced community college stigma (Alexander et al., 2009; Laanan, 2004; Neumann & Riesman, 1980), associated with the negative perceptions of community college often held by important institutional actors, including non-transfer students, faculty, and staff (Alexander et al., 2009; Tobolowsky & Cox, 2012; Townsend, 2008).

In addition to the potentially stressful experience of concealing one's transfer identity (Alexander et al., 2009), experienced community college stigma makes students susceptible to the effects of stereotype threat. Harmful effects of stereotype threat may include diminished immediate academic performance (Woodcock et al., 2012), or negatively impacting self-perceptions, identity, and/or sense of belonging (Spencer et al., 2016). Experienced community college stigma could also potentially diminish student perceptions of institutional support (Zhang et al., 2018), restrict access to non-transfer students as an informal learning resource (Flaga, 2006), and deter participation in campus student groups and/or events (Laanan, 2007).

With these negative consequences in mind, suggestions and efforts have been made to address the negative perceptions of community college and end the associated stigma. This includes induction of community college faculty scholarship (Braxton et al., 2015), social media attention to stories and accomplishments of community college transfer students (Jaschik, 2019), and fostering a transfer receptive culture at receiving institutions (Jain et al., 2016), with establishment of a transfer student center as an example (Jain et al., 2011).

A key factor underlying stigma experienced by community college transfer students is the particular environment and culture of a receiving institution (Bahr et al., 2013; Laanan, 2007;

Neumann & Riesman, 1980). While scholars suggest interviews and focus groups are the best way to ascertain specific perceptions and stories of stigma at receiving institutions (Laanan, 2007; Townsend, 2008), qualitative research using these methods of inquiry remain limited (Bahr et al., 2013). Additionally, comparative research into the transfer phenomenon is significantly lacking, (Zhang et al., 2018), as demonstrated by studies identified in this review, each focusing on individuals from only a single institution. These significant gaps in the community college stigma literature make a qualitative study exploring the stigma experience of community college transfer students attending UMass acutely necessary. Further, along with an anticipated follow-up study on the stigma experience for community college transfer students attending UCLA, this study is the first step towards finally testing the forty-year-old contention of William Neumann and David Riesman (1980), that “there is, no doubt, less stigma” for those who attend community college in California than for those in Massachusetts (54).

Chapter Three: Research Methods

The current phenomenological study explored the lived experience of community college transfer students attending UMass Amherst; Specifically, the researcher was interested in what, if at all, the community college stigma experience is for students along this journey. The following research question guided this study:

- 1.) What is the lived experience for community college transfer students attending University of Massachusetts Amherst (“UMass”)?

Research Design

Qualitative inquiry was used to ascertain personal perspectives on the lived experience of community college transfer students attending the most-highly ranked public university in Massachusetts: UMass Amherst (Patton, 2002; U.S. News & World Report, 2018). Qualitative inquiry was needed as in-depth insight into the individual perceptions of students is something quantitative studies, “and their view of the social world as a concrete structure,” simply cannot achieve (Morgan & Smircich, 1980, 498).

Phenomenology

The qualitative inquiry approach used for this study was phenomenology: study of “the meaning, structure, and essence of the lived experience of [a] phenomenon for [a] person or group of people” (Patton 2002, 482). Phenomena best suited to a phenomenological approach are those most important to understand from the perspective of several individuals who experienced it, “...in order to develop practice or policies, or to develop a deeper understanding about the features of the phenomenon” (Creswell, 2007, 60). A phenomenological approach was appropriate for this study as its aim was to understand the lived experience for community college transfer students attending UMass; A phenomenon of interest that cannot be fully

understood through the perspective of only a single individual. Further, unlike sociological phenomenology, which focuses on group experiences with a phenomenon, this study employed a psychological perspective of phenomenology, focusing on individual experiences to understand the phenomenon of interest (Creswell, 1998, 53). Moutstakas (1994) explained this process of using individual perspectives to derive the structure of an experienced phenomenon:

The aim is to determine what an experience means for the persons who have had the experience and are able to provide a comprehensive description of it. From the individual descriptions general or universal meanings are derived, in other words the essences or structures of the experience (13).

However, before researchers can begin interviewing participants about their individual experience with a phenomenon of interest, the phenomenological approach requires they first acknowledge their own phenomenon-related biases and preconceptions via the practice of bracketing (Creswell, 2007).

A key first step to employing a phenomenological approach is the researcher's engagement with the process of bracketing any personally held biases related to the phenomenon under investigation (Creswell, 1998). The purpose of bracketing is to reduce any potential impact of these preconceptions on the research at hand (Tufford & Newman, 2010). A method of bracketing commonly used is the researcher's writing of memos throughout data collection that reflect on the researcher's connection to the data, "including observational comments that allow the researcher to explore feelings about the research endeavor" (Tufford & Newman, 2010, 86).

Written memos incorporated within the researcher's interview field notes were the method of bracketing used for this study. For example, in interview field notes prepared prior to

a participant's interview, the researcher recorded preconceptions as to why a participant might have concealed community college education from their resume based on the researcher's personal experience doing so. This was helpful to the data analysis process, at times illustrating a sharp contrast between the researcher's preconceptions and participants' stated rationale for excluding it. For example, in contrast to the assumption students would admit to having concealed community college out of fear of being judged negatively by potential employers, this was never reported by the participants. Additional insight into the researcher's personal lived experience related to this study's phenomenon of interest (the lived experience of community college transfer students) is provided in the "researcher positionality" section later in this chapter.

Other methods of bracketing used to raise researcher awareness to any preconceived notions or biases include interviews with an outside source, such as a colleague or research associate, or maintenance of a reflexive journal to identify preconceptions prior to and during data collection (Tufford & Newman, 2010).

The next step to using a phenomenological approach is engaging in data collection from individuals who have experienced the phenomenon of interest (Creswell, 1998). In a phenomenological study, "What is important to know is what people experience and how they interpret the world" (Patton, 2002, 107). The best way to gain an accurate understanding of that experience and interpretation is by engaging in interviews with those who have experienced the phenomenon of interest (Creswell, 1998). As the purpose of this study was to gain deep insight into community college transfer student perceptions of their lived experience, structured interviews were used as a primary tool for data collection. While focus groups can be an effective qualitative tool for ascertaining student perceptions about their experience (Townsend,

2008, 76), they can also deter participants from sharing sensitive lived experiences in a group setting where privacy and confidentiality cannot be ensured; A known potential limitation to the use of focus groups to explore sensitive topics (Wellings, Branigan, & Mitchell, 2000).

The researcher's data collection process, including use of a pre-interview demographic survey, development and employment of structured interviews, recording of field notes, and interview transcription process will be discussed at length in the "data collection" section to come. Following the described data collection process, the phenomenological approach provided a guideline for the researcher's data analysis.

Phenomenological Data Analysis

The process of phenomenological data analysis guided this study's analysis of participant interview data. Following the data collection process, the practice of horizontalization was undertaken in which all twenty participant interview transcripts were read by the researcher multiple times to identify "significant statements" depicting the participant's individual experience with the phenomenon of interest (experience as a community college transfer student) (Creswell, 2007). During this process, the researcher carefully read each participant's interview transcript with an open mind, giving each comment equal value, thus minimizing the potential for influence by the researcher's bracketed preconceptions and biases related to being a community college transfer student (Eddles-Hirsch, 2015). Participant comments identified as significant statements ("horizons") and providing insight into the individual's lived experience as a community college transfer student were then pulled from the transcript and recorded (Creswell, 2007; Eddles-Hirsch, 2015). Numerous examples of participants' significant statements are presented throughout the presentation of findings in chapter four of this dissertation.

Phenomenological data analysis required the researcher then review each participant's significant statements and cluster them into groups that formed the structure of each individual's experience as a community college transfer student (Creswell, 2007; Eddles-Hirsch, 2015). In this study, participant "clusters of meaning" commonly illustrated individual perceptions or feelings related to a significant event or occurrence that took place during their experience as a community college transfer student; For example, attending UMass transfer student orientation.

Continuing with the phenomenological data analysis process, the clusters of all twenty participants were evaluated together, used by the researcher to develop descriptions of *what* the experience is for community college transfer students attending UMass (a textural description), and *how* community college transfer students experience it (a structural description) (Creswell, 1998, 55). From this process of reviewing clusters as a group, three distinct periods spanning the lived experience of community college transfer students attending UMass were identified, with significant events or occurrences found common among participants taking place during one of these three periods. Used as the organizational structure for chapter four, the three periods include: Pre-UMass, The Community college-to-UMass Transition, and Being a UMass Community College Transfer Student.

Lastly, the researcher's textural and structural descriptions combined to form a composite of the underlying structure and general idea for the common lived experience of community college transfer students attending UMass (the "essence" of the experience) (Creswell, 2007, 62). This composite of participants' experience is presented as this study's findings in chapter four. It also forms the basis of chapter five's discussion of what the community college stigma experience is for community college transfer students attending UMass, using the three elements of stereotype threat as a conceptual framework.

Research Site

This phenomenological study was conducted at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. The rationale behind selecting a receiving institution in Massachusetts was to take the first step in addressing Neumann and Riesman's still unsupported contention that, "there is, no doubt, less stigma attached to attending one of the...community colleges in California than there is to attending one...in Massachusetts" (1980, 54). A public university was chosen as these institutions are found to enroll four times more community college transfer students than privates (Glynn, 2019). Additionally, U.S. News and World Report's National University Rankings (2018) were used to identify the most highly-ranked public university in Massachusetts. Such criterion provides a basis from which to select a public receiving institution in California for an anticipated future study comparing the lived experience of community college transfer students in California with findings from this study in Massachusetts.

The Commonwealth of Massachusetts is home to five University of Massachusetts institutions, nine state universities, and fifteen community colleges (Massachusetts Department of Higher Education, 2020b). As discussed in chapter two of this dissertation, since 1974, Massachusetts has demonstrated increased effort to facilitate a pathway from its community colleges to its state colleges and universities (de la Torre & Wells, 2014). Its Mass Transfer program, supplemented by the Commonwealth Commitment, provides guaranteed admission to a Massachusetts state college or university with potential for tuition waivers and rebates to qualifying Massachusetts community college associate's degree earners (de la Torre & Wells, 2014; Massachusetts Department of Higher Education, 2020a).

UMass Amherst is the Commonwealth's flagship campus, established in 1863 under the Morrill Land-Grant Colleges Act (University of Massachusetts Amherst, 2020d). UMass

maintained a fall 2019 undergraduate enrollment of 22,726, including 1,085 new transfer students, accounting for roughly 16% of the entering 2019 class (University of Massachusetts Amherst, 2020b). In addition to a transfer-specific orientation for newly enrolled transfer students (University of Massachusetts Amherst, 2020c), UMass offers a number of services and resources available to all students through its Office of Student Affairs and Campus Life. Examples include the Student Learning Center, Off Campus Student Center, Campus Recreational Center, and the Student Legal Services Office. Several centers offering support for often underrepresented students are also available, including a Center for Women and Community, an Office of Religious and Spiritual Life, The Stonewall Center for LGBT and allied students, and a Veteran Student Resource Center. Notably, UMass does not appear to house a dedicated transfer student center.

Data Collection

Upon approval from the UMass Amherst Human Protection Office, participant recruitment was initiated via a UMass Faculty/Staff outreach email to 60 individual faculty and staff members representing 50 UMass academic departments, colleges, centers, and programs identified on the UMass Amherst website (See APPENDIX Figure 1). These sixty UMass-affiliated individuals represented a variety of critical academic and administrative roles including academic advisors, department chairs, college deans, associate provosts, and program directors and coordinators. The UMass Faculty/Staff outreach email functioned to introduce the researcher and purpose of the study, highlight approval to recruit prospective UMass student participants by the UMass Amherst Human Protection Office, and request assistance with forwarding a pre-drafted student recruitment email to UMass students within the faculty or staff member's network by a targeted date. Of these sixty UMass-affiliated individuals, 21 agreed to,

and confirmed following through with, forwarding the pre-drafted UMass student recruitment email (See APPENDIX Figure 2) on the researcher's behalf. An additional UMass administrator provided the researcher with a list of known transfer students within the department and requested this group of students be contacted by the researcher directly. The same pre-drafted student recruitment email was sent directly to this group of UMass transfer students.

As displayed in Appendix Figure 2, the pre-drafted student recruitment email played a critical role introducing the researcher and importance of the study to prospective participants, outlining participant selection criteria, explaining participant interview expectations (30-60-minute interview), highlighting receipt of a \$15 Target gift card as reciprocity for participating, and identifying how interested participants should contact the researcher about completing a requisite Pre-Interview Demographic Survey.

Pre-Interview Demographic Survey

Prior to being selected for this study, interested participants who contacted the researcher in response to the UMass student recruitment email were required to submit responses to a Pre-Interview Demographic Survey. The purpose of this survey was to ensure prospective participants met the student participation criterion (community college transfer student currently attending UMass *and* completed at least one academic term at UMass). Those who did not meet this criterion were immediately removed from consideration as a study participant (See APPENDIX Figure 3).

Participant survey responses provided important demographic background information for the 20 community college transfer students who participated in this study. Demographic background information related to participants' self-identified gender, ethnicity, community college attendance, and first-generation college student status were captured by the survey.

Additional information related to participants' enrollment at UMass, pursued major, employment status, university housing or commuting status, anticipated UMass graduation term and post-graduation plans, and parent/veteran status were also obtained. A description of participants' demographics is provided in this chapter in the section entitled, "Sample."

Research Instruments

The research instruments utilized in this study were the current resume and structured interview of each participant.

Current Resume

A brief document analysis of each participant's current resume was conducted prior to each interview to identify whether it referenced the student's community college experience. The resumes of 15 (75%) participants referenced their community college experience; The resumes of 5 participants did not (25%). The majority of participants emailed their resume to the researcher just prior to the interview; Others opted to bring a hard copy for the researcher to review at the time of interview. Each participant's emailed resume was immediately deleted following the researcher's brief document analysis. During the interview, the researcher used this information to ask participants about their rationale in deciding whether or not to disclose their community college experience.

Structured Interviews

Structured interviews were used to gain insight into participants' lived experience as a community college transfer student (See APPENDIX Figure 4). Interviews were scheduled to last up to an hour, with most taking approximately 50 minutes. Each interview was recorded using both the standard voice memo recording application on the researcher's iPhone and an Olympus handheld recording device. Upon completion of each interview the researcher

downloaded the audio recordings to a password protected Cloud storage space located on the researcher's MacBook Pro laptop computer. The iPhone and Olympus audio recordings were promptly deleted from both the researcher's iPhone and handheld recording device.

When interviewing for a phenomenological study, two broad general questions must be asked of participants: "What have you experienced in terms of the phenomenon," and, "what context or situations have typically influenced or affected your experiences of the phenomenon" (Creswell, 2007, 61). In addition to these questions, participants were asked scripted open-ended interview questions aimed to secure a robust depiction of the lived experience for community college transfer students attending UMass. Questions probed participants' thoughts about college during high school and subsequent decision to attend community college, experience as a community college student and motivation to transfer to UMass, and post-transfer perceptions of the culture towards community college transfer students at UMass. Scripted open-ended questions also enquired into participants' experiences participating in student groups on campus, use of available services and resources, perceived advantages or disadvantages for having attended community college, and general perceptions of how their post-transfer lived experience has been impacted, if at all, by their status as a community college transfer student.

Participants displayed great eagerness in discussing their transfer journey. While many were a bit timid upon introducing themselves, the majority of students appeared comfortable discussing their personal experiences with the interviewer. This may have been aided by the fact participants were aware of the researcher's own community college background going into the interview. Several participants shared thinking it was "cool" and even unique that a researcher would be interested in specifically examining the experience of community college transfer students. This sentiment was captured by Jerry who shared,

...It's pretty cool to talk about a very specific experience. One that, I don't think anyone, I don't know. I mean I think there's a richness to it, piece or grandiose. But it is a pretty complicated experience, and hearing someone is studying it for their PhD's cool. So I wanted to contribute to it.

It should be noted that several students were so motivated by the opportunity to share their story hoping for it to have some positive impact on the future of UMass, they even offered to forego receipt of their promised Target gift card.

Field Notes

As "...qualitative field notes are an essential component of rigorous qualitative research" (Phillippi & Lauderdale, 2018, 381), the researcher maintained field notes both during and just after each participant's interview. These memos were used to provide both contextual information needed during the subsequent data analysis process, and to document researcher interview observations not otherwise captured in an audio recording of the interview. Additionally, this was a method for the researcher to acknowledge and reflect upon any personally held preconceptions or biases that arose throughout the data collection process, with the intention of reducing any potential impact they could have on the data analysis and eventual findings (Tufford & Newman, 2010.)

Interview Transcription

While transcription is often said to be taken for granted, "transcription is a practice central to qualitative research..." (Davidson, 2009, 35). Rev.com transcription service was used to convert interview audio recordings into a tangible interview transcript that would be read and re-read throughout the researcher's data analysis process. While Rev guarantees 99% accuracy of its audio transcriptions, the researcher engaged in spot-checking each transcript, listening to

the audio recording while simultaneously reading the transcription text as a means to ensure transcript accuracy, thus confirming transcript trustworthiness (Davidson, 2009). Once deemed accurate and trustworthy, the transcripts were used by the researcher to conduct the discussed phenomenological data analysis.

Purposeful Criterion Sampling

Purposeful sampling in a qualitative phenomenological study is the inclusion of the most information-rich cases who can provide an in-depth story related to the phenomenon of interest (Patton, 2002). For this study, purposeful sampling was used to secure enough information-rich participants to gain an accurate depiction of the lived experience for community college transfer students attending UMass. The specific form of purposeful sampling employed was criterion sampling, which involves examining all cases that meet a set criterion of importance (Suri, 2011). “This approach is frequently employed by research synthesists to construct a comprehensive understanding of all the studies that meet certain pre-determined criteria” (Suri, 2011, 69). The participant demographic criterion used for this study were individuals who self-identified as a community college transfer student currently attending UMass and completed at least one academic term of study at the university. This demographic was necessary as individuals with less than one academic term completed may not have developed a requisite understanding of what it means to be a community college transfer student attending UMass, therefore offering a less information-rich transfer story. As a result, a number of students who expressed interest in participating were not selected for the study because they did not meet set criterion. For example, they were enrolled in only their first academic term at UMass or they transferred to UMass from another four-year institution having never previously attended community college.

Sample

The suggested number of interview participants for a phenomenological study is between 5 and 25 (Creswell, 1998, 54). For this study, 20 participants were interviewed over the course of one week in October during the fall 2019 semester. Many of these interviews were scheduled more than a month in advance, with the researcher sending a series of reminder emails to participants prior to their scheduled interview. As many as four and as few as two in-person interviews were conducted over the course of a single day, allowing the researcher significant time to get to know the UMass campus. All twenty participants interviewed for this study self-identified as a community college transfer student, and each completed at least one academic term at UMass prior to the interview; 17 had previously completed two or more academic terms at UMass at the time of interview.

19 participants were interviewed in-person on the UMass Amherst campus, with 1 additional participant interviewed using Zoom video conferencing. On-campus interviews were conducted in either a study room of the W.E.B. Du Bois Library learning commons, or in the common area of the Integrative Learning Center (ILC), located near the center of the UMass campus. Additionally, 1 participant was interviewed in the lobby of the library while another interviewed in an available ILC classroom.

Demographically, participants ranged between 20 and 50 years of age, with a mean of 25.2 and median of 23.5. This is considerably older than most undergraduates at UMass, 82% of which are between the ages of 18 and 21. Representative of the overall UMass undergraduate population consisting of 50% “women,” 11 participants (55%) self-identified as female/woman, 8 as male (40%), and 1 as “agender.” “White” or “Caucasian” was reported as the only ethnic identity of 13 participants (65%), two identified as “Hispanic” or “Latina” (10%), one as

“Chinese” (5%), one as “African American” (5%), and one as “Indian” (5%). Two additional students identified as having a mixed ethnicity that includes “Native American” (10%). This study’s combined 25% Hispanic/Latina, African American, and Native American representation is slightly higher than representation of this group within the greater undergraduate population (15%), which UMass lumps together in the category of “underrepresented group.” A significant majority of participants (75%, 15 students) reported working while attending UMass, slightly less than half (9 students, 45%) currently lived in university housing, and eleven students (55%) identified as a commuter student. Additionally, 1 participant identified as a parent (with two adult children), and 1 as a former member of the Army National Guard. While only 4 participants (20%) identified as first in their family to attend college (“first-gen”), this mirrors the representation of first-generation college students within the fall 2018 entering undergraduate population (21%) (University of Massachusetts Amherst, 2020a). Given roughly half first-generation college students attend community colleges nationally (EAB, 2018), the low percentage of first-generation students enrolled at UMass, as represented in this study, is surprising. Perhaps this suggests Massachusetts has work yet to do in ensuring its community colleges are a viable pathway to earning a college degree for the commonwealth’s first-generation students.

Participants represented 9 of 15 Massachusetts community colleges and 3 out-of-state community colleges. 13 students (65%) earned an associate’s degree prior to transferring to UMass. Represented UMass academic disciplines include animal sciences, astronomy, biology, communications, comparative literature, English, informatics (data science), and physics. The current resume of 15 participants (75%) disclosed their prior community college experience, and

16 participants (80%) identified an intention to pursue graduate or professional school after they graduate. Participant characteristics are illustrated in Table 1 below.

	<i>Age</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Ethnicity</i>	<i>Major</i>	<i>Assoc. Degree</i>	<i>First-Gen</i>	<i>Employed</i>	<i>Lives in UMass Housing</i>	<i>Commute</i>	<i>CC On Resume</i>
<i>Christina</i>	20	Female	English/ Turkish	Animal Science	NO	NO	YES	NO	YES 15 min	YES
<i>Luna</i>	20	Female	Latina	Biology	YES	NO	YES	YES	NO	YES
<i>Max</i>	33	Male	Caucasian, African American, Native American	Physics	YES	NO	YES	NO	YES 45 min	YES
<i>Amelie</i>	21	Female	Caucasian	Animal Science	YES	NO	YES	YES	NO	YES
<i>Adam</i>	23	Male	Caucasian/ White	Astrono my/ Physics	YES	NO	YES	YES	NO	YES
<i>Teri</i>	26	Female	Caucasian	Biology	YES	NO	YES	NO	YES 55 min	YES
<i>Andre</i>	25	Male	White, Western Euro., Native American	Animal Science	YES	YES	YES	YES	NO	YES
<i>Cheryl</i>	21	Woman	White, Caucasian	Biology	NO	NO	YES	NO	NO	NO
<i>Maria</i>	21	Female	Chinese	Biology	YES	NO	NO	YES	NO	NO
<i>Natalie</i>	22	Female	White	Biology	NO	NO	YES	NO	YES 11 min	YES

<i>Hal</i>	27	Male	Hispanic	Animal Science	YES	YES	YES	YES	NO	YES
<i>Andrew</i>	22	Male	No Response	Communication/English	YES	NO	YES	NO	YES 15 min	NO
<i>Heather</i>	20	Female	Indian	Biology	YES	YES	YES	NO	YES 15 min	YES
<i>Scott</i>	26	Male	White	Biology	NO	NO	NO	NO	YES 25-30 min	YES
<i>Jerry</i>	20	Male	White	English/Comp. Lit.	NO	NO	NO	NO	YES 5 min	NO
<i>Mark</i>	24	agender	White/Caucasian	Physics	YES	NO	NO	NO	YES 10 min	YES
<i>Lauren</i>	50	Female	Caucasian	Biology	NO	NO	YES	YES	NO	YES
<i>Emily</i>	33	Female	African American	English	YES	YES	NO	NO	YES 120 min	YES
<i>Juliet</i>	24	Female	Caucasian	Communication	YES	NO	YES	NO	YES 10-15 min	YES
<i>Michael</i>	25	Male	White	Informatics (Data Science)	NO	NO	YES	YES	NO	NO

Table 1 Participant Characteristics

Participant Descriptions

Individual participant descriptions as self-reported in pre-interview demographic survey and interview responses are provided with each participant's name and community college identified by pseudonym.

Christina, Age 20

Majoring in animal sciences on the pre-veterinary track, Christina attended high school at a private boarding school and subsequently enrolled in a private liberal arts college in Massachusetts. Due to personal reasons, Christina withdrew from the college spring of 2018 and enrolled at Southie City College. She transferred to UMass spring of 2019 without an associate's degree. Christina works 22 hours a week and has a 15-minute bus commute to campus. She expects to graduate spring of 2021 and to then attend veterinary school. Noting the broad spectrum of reasons why people attend and transfer from community college, Christina wanted to share her story because, "It's good to get this information, get the stories out there."

Luna, Age 20

Luna identifies as a Latina female majoring in biology. After graduating from high school, Luna moved to Massachusetts and attended Village Center College. She transferred to UMass with an associate's degree via the Mass Transfer program fall of 2018. Luna lives in university housing, works 4-6 hours a week, and plans to attend medical school after graduating spring of 2020. Luna was interested in being interviewed because she wants to help others, and believes people do not really know what it's like to be in community college: "...They don't realize that it's basically just college with less people."

Max, Age 33

Majoring in physics, Max transferred to UMass with an associate's degree from Castille Community College spring of 2019. Max identifies as a non-traditional male student of Caucasian, African American, and Native American ethnicity. After high school, Max worked as a metal roofer for several years until the company he worked for went out of business. He currently works 20 hours a week with a commute to campus of approximately 45 minutes. Max expects to graduate spring of 2021 and subsequently attend graduate school. He was interested in being interviewed to both learn more about himself and to make UMass aware of how difficult it is for community college transfer students to, "Come from a small community...to something that's as large as a city."

Amelie, Age 21

Amelie is majoring in animal sciences on the pre-veterinary track. She identifies as a Caucasian female who lives in university housing and works approximately 20 hours a week. She started at UMass fall of 2018 after transferring with an associate's degree from Castille Community College. Amelie expects to graduate fall of 2021 and to then attend veterinary school. Amelie loved community college and thinks that if people are, "Considering it or if they're kind of confused and split between decisions, they should definitely just go and you can really transfer whenever you want to."

Adam, Age 23

Double majoring in astronomy and physics, Adam identifies as a Caucasian male who transferred to UMass spring of 2018 with an associate's degree from Cambridge College. Nearly finished with his second year at UMass, Adam lives in university housing and works

approximately five hours a week. Adam expects to graduate spring of 2020 and to subsequently attend graduate school.

Teri, Age 26

Teri is a biology major who transferred to UMass fall of 2018. She identifies as a Caucasian female, and because of her age, considers herself a non-traditional student. Prior to UMass, Teri transferred with an associate's degree from Dilworth Community College to a state university in Massachusetts. She attended that institution for one year before transferring again to UMass. Teri commutes 55-minutes to campus and works 25 hours a week. Teri plans to attend graduate school after graduating from UMass spring of 2020.

Andre, Age 25

Andre is an animal sciences major on the pre-veterinary track. He transferred to UMass fall of 2018 with an associate's degree from Village Center College. After high school, Andre attended a private music college for two and a half years before withdrawing and enrolling in community college. A first generation college student, Andre identifies as a male with white/western European and Native American ethnicity. Andre lives in university housing and works 30 hours a week. He plans to attend veterinary medical school after graduating fall of 2020.

Cheryl, Age 21

Cheryl is majoring in biology and identifies as a white, Caucasian woman. Directly out of high school, Cheryl attended a private university before withdrawing after one week. She then enrolled at Bunker Hill Community College for one semester before transferring without an associate's degree to UMass spring of 2017. She lives in university housing, works 8-10 hours a week, and expects to attend graduate school after graduating from UMass spring of 2020.

Cheryl does not disclose her community college experience on her resume. She finds the social aspect of being a UMass community college transfer student, “literally the worst and the hardest part...When [UMass is] not even trying to help students in that way, it’s just, you’re not really setting them up for success.”

Maria, Age 21

Maria is majoring in biology and identifies as a female with Chinese ethnicity. She transferred to UMass fall of 2018 with an associate’s degree from North Costigan College via the Mass Transfer program. Maria lives in university housing and expects to attend graduate or medical school after graduating from UMass spring of 2020. Maria’s resume does not disclose her community college education. Dismissive of several questions throughout the course of her interview, Maria shared she was interested in participating because she would be interviewing individuals for her own research and wanted the experience.

Natalie, Age 22

Majoring in biology, Natalie transferred from Southie City College without an associate’s degree fall of 2016. She identifies as a White female and has a learning disability. Natalie works 9 hours a week with an 11-minute commute to campus. She expects to graduate spring of 2020 and to then attend graduate school. Natalie expressed a “hatred” for UMass and stated she wanted to be interviewed because: “For the sheer amount of time I spend complaining about stuff, it’s good for that to actually maybe help other people that have to do this.”

Hal, Age 27

Hal is majoring in animal sciences with a focus in biotechnology. He identifies as a Hispanic male and transferred with an associate’s degree from Village Center College fall of 2017. Hal is the first in his family to attend college. He lives in university housing and works 10

hours a week. Hal is in his last term at UMass, expecting to graduate fall of 2019 and to then attend graduate school. Hal was interested in sharing what he has gone through, believing that if more people knew what to expect they would be more likely to attend community college.

Andrew, Age 22

Andrew identifies as a male who transferred to UMass fall of 2018 with an associate's degree from East Skylar Community College. He is majoring in communications and minoring in English. Andrew works part-time, and after living in university housing his first year at UMass has a 15-minute commute to campus. Andrew expects to graduate spring of 2020. He does not disclose his community college education on his resume, but he does reference his on-campus community college work experience. Andrew wanted to be interviewed for his own personal exploration, explaining that at times he questions why he chose to take the community college transfer route.

Heather, Age 20

Heather is a pre-med student majoring in biology. She identifies as an Indian female and is first in her family to attend college. Heather transferred via the Mass Transfer program with an Associate's degree from Dilworth Community College summer of 2019. She works 30 to 40 hours a week and has a 15-minute commute to campus. Heather expects to graduate from UMass spring of 2021 and to subsequently attend medical school. She was interested in being interviewed because she feels students need to know that going to community college doesn't mean they are not going to "achieve college."

Scott, Age 26

Scott identifies as a White male who attended high school overseas. Scott is majoring in biology after transferring to UMass fall of 2018 without an associate's degree from Abanico

College in California. He commutes 25 to 30 minutes to campus. Scott expects to graduate fall of 2020 and to then attend graduate school, but is unsure about which specific field or discipline he will pursue. Scott wanted to be interviewed because he feels nobody talks about the social aspect of being a community college transfer student, and how much more difficult it is to make friends than he thought it would be.

Jerry, Age 20

Identifying as a White male, Jerry is double majoring in English and comparative literature. Jerry transferred to UMass fall of 2018 without an associate's degree. He made clear several times throughout his interview that he only attended Ted Kennedy College for one semester, having first attended a communications arts college his first semester out of high school. His commute to UMass is a 5-minute walk and he does not reference his community college education on his resume. Jerry expects to graduate spring of 2021 and to then attend graduate school. Jerry wanted to contribute because he thinks it is "cool" someone is studying what he thinks is a very specific and complicated experience.

Mark, Age 24

Identifying as "agender," Mark is a White/Caucasian individual majoring in physics. Mark began taking classes at RFK City College while being homeschooled at 14 years of age. Mark left his community college to attend a private technological institute, but unhappy after one year he returned to community college where he eventually earned an associate's degree and transferred to UMass fall of 2018. Mark expects to graduate spring of 2021 and has no plans to attend graduate school. In addition to feeling it was important to complain about the mishandling of his community college transcripts by UMass, Mark wanted to share his individual experience stating: "There's definitely some standardized routes that people take and I

want to provide something a little bit different, you know? I don't meet many people who [have] taken the path that I've taken...”.

Lauren, Age 50

Lauren identifies as a Caucasian, female, pre-med student majoring in biology. After high school, Lauren worked numerous years in retail management and eventually attended a community college in California during the 1980s. After returning to Massachusetts, she found herself at Longfellow Deeds Community College from where she eventually transferred without an associate’s degree to UMass fall of 2018. After commuting an hour and a half to campus her first year, Lauren lives in university housing while working 8 hours a week. She has two adult children and plans to attend medical or graduate school after graduating spring of 2021. Of all the interviews conducted for this study, Lauren was the only participant routinely flippant in her answers, frequently re-wording interview questions to make a tangential point to the purpose of the interview. Lauren was interested in being interviewed because she felt most participants would be younger and, “... that it would be interesting in a study to have someone who doesn’t fit the norm.”

Emily, Age 33

Majoring in English, Emily is an African-American female and former member of the Army national guard. She is also the first member of her family to attend college. Emily transferred to UMass with an associate’s degree from Castille Community College fall of 2018. Prior to Castille, Emily attended another Massachusetts community college where she was unhappy with her experience. She commutes approximately 2 hours to UMass by bus, and she plans to attend graduate school after graduating spring of 2020. Emily felt it was important to be interviewed asserting, “A lot of people do look down on community college. When you’re going

to high school you're supposed to say, 'Oh, I want Harvard,' or, 'I want to go to one of those big schools,' you know, and it's okay to go to community college."

Juliet, Age 24

Juliet identifies as a Caucasian female majoring in communications. After graduating from high school, Juliet took one year off before attending a private college. Juliet then withdrew from the college after her first year and enrolled at Southie City College. She transferred to UMass with an associate's degree fall of 2018. She works 15 to 20 hours a week, has a 10 to 15-minute commute to campus, and expects to graduate spring of 2020. Juliet wanted to be interviewed to talk about the implications of being a transfer student and what it feels like at UMass. She hopes UMass will listen to their transfer students and understand, "They're not just made out of freshmen," because they are "alienating a whole, like part of [the] college."

Michael, Age 25

Michael identifies as a White male majoring in informatics on the data science track. He completed his course requirements summer of 2019 and is currently finishing a final writing assignment to complete his UMass bachelor's degree. Michael attended Castille Community College before transferring without an associate's degree to a four-year college in a neighboring state. He attended the institution for one year before transferring to UMass fall of 2017. Michael works 25 hours a week, lives in university housing, and has no plans to attend graduate school. Michael was interested in being interviewed about his experience because he, "Just like[s] doing interviews to help people out."

Reciprocity

Participants volunteered valuable time to be interviewed about a personal, and at times, sensitive lived experience. "...Good research ethics practice requires that researchers consider what they take from research participants as well as what they give to them" (Given, 2008, 739). In this study, participants set aside a valuable hour of their busy schedule, giving it to a PhD candidate from the opposite side of the country seeking to incorporate their personal stories into a published dissertation. So as to avoid any appearance of exploitation for the personal ambitions of the researcher, reciprocity to participants was made in the form of both attentive and respectful listening throughout each interview and via a \$15 Target gift. This gift card provided a tangible way to thank participants for their time and contribution to the study. It should be noted that several participants attempted to refuse the gift card, citing the opportunity to share their personal story as the only form of reciprocity needed. The hope expressed by many of these participants was that UMass will hear and learn from their frustrations, sparking increased institutional efforts to address them. While the researcher politely declined these offers, these sentiments were much appreciated and speak to the importance of this study.

Protection of Human Subjects

This study encompassed research into the perceptions of human subject participants whose protection was imperative to preserve. Specifically, research on human subjects should respect participants' autonomy, secure their well-being, and be in the interest of justice (United States, 1978). Prior to undertaking participant recruitment, a protocol for the human subject research conducted in this study was subject to review by human subjects protection staff at Claremont graduate University ("CGU"). CGU human subjects protection staff determined the study to be "exempt" from Institutional Review Board supervision. Additionally, the protocols

and determination of CGU IRB were submitted to the UMass Amherst Human Protection Office, which approved the researcher's request to recruit student participants at UMass in accordance with the reviewed protocol.

To protect human subjects involved in this study, participants were required to review and sign acknowledgement of informed consent (See **APPENDIX Figure 5**). Only participants who read and signed the informed consent form were included in this study. The informed consent form notified participants their participation was voluntary and they may withdraw from the study, without penalty, at any time. Additionally, the consent form assured participants of secured ongoing anonymity and confidentiality both during and after the study, with pseudonyms rather than personal identifiers to be used in any written or oral reports related to this study. Additionally, all interview data was stored in password protected cloud storage on a personal, password protected MacBook Pro laptop only the researcher had ability to access.

Researcher Positionality

The researcher's acknowledgement of their own personal experience with the phenomenon of interest, including context and situations influencing that experience, is a key component to the bracketing process required of phenomenological studies (Creswell, 2007). As a former UCLA community college transfer student, I possess my own account of experienced community college stigma attending the most highly-ranked public university in California: UCLA. The year before beginning my college education at Saddleback College, a friend of mine was a year ahead and in his first year at UCLA. I visited the campus and expressed that only in my dreams would I have the chance to attend such an elite university. About a month later, when that same friend visited over winter break, he jokingly gifted me a UCLA Alumni license plate frame from student store. At the time I laughed as any self-conscious high school senior

would, but instead of placing it on my car, I put it on my bedroom wall. That frame hung on my wall as motivation to not only prove a friend wrong in doubting I could be admitted, but to one day proudly and deservedly place it on my car upon graduating from UCLA; A goal achieved four years later when I graduated *cum laude*.

During and after my two-year enrollment, I found myself in situations trying to conceal I was admitted to the university as a community college transfer student. Looking back, I know I did this in response to micro-aggressions endured immediately following my acceptance, continuing through graduation and beyond. Other's verbal and nonverbal communications suggested how lucky I was to not have to try in high school, that it was too late for me to meaningfully participate in campus student organizations or clubs, and that *of course* I am graduating with Latin honors since I only had to work hard for two years. As a result of this personal journey through higher education, I developed a deep interest in exploring whether the same community college stigma I experienced extends to the lived experience of community college transfer students today. My set aside preconceptions were that the experiences uncovered in this study would demonstrate community college transfer students attending UMass being reminded they "back-doored" their way into the institution, or were only admitted to fill some unspoken university quota. The findings and discussion presented in Chapters 4 and 5 of this dissertation largely suggest a different story.

Limitations

While this study could result in several contributions and implications for future research and practice, some notable limitations exist that must be acknowledged. Residing across the country in southern California, the researcher had no prior experience or connections to UMass Amherst with no direct means of recruiting participants for this study. Instead, the researcher's

access to prospective participants was limited to UMass community college transfer students who received the student recruitment email from those UMass faculty and staff members who read the outreach email and graciously followed through on the promise to forward it. As a result, it is unknown how many community college transfer students who never received the recruitment email might have met the criterion and been interested in participating.

An additional limitation of this study is that it explores the community college transfer student experience for students attending a single public receiving institution in Massachusetts. Therefore, findings related to students attending UMass Amherst may not be generalized to students attending a different public or private receiving institution in Massachusetts, or any other receiving institution in the United States. Also, findings from this study were obtained from a relatively small number of interviewed participants (20), representing only a fraction of the community college transfer student population at UMass Amherst (UMass enrolled 1,085 new transfer students in the Fall of 2019 alone) (University of Massachusetts Amherst, 2020b). As a result, findings are not necessarily representative of the entire community college transfer student population currently attending UMass.

Summary of Research Methods

The qualitative phenomenological research approach used for this study allowed for a deep dive into the lived experience of community college transfer students attending UMass Amherst. Findings from the researcher's phenomenological data analysis provide educators, scholars, and even future community college transfer students, a better understanding of students' journey from community college to the most highly-ranked public institution in Massachusetts. As will be discussed in chapter five, findings also shed light on those points along the transfer journey suggesting community college transfer students are indeed a

stigmatized group susceptible to consequences of stereotype threat, which up to this point has gone virtually unexplored in the literature.

In the coming two chapters, this study's findings are presented and discussed. Chapter four is organized in accordance with the three periods found to span the lived experience of community college transfer students attending UMass: Pre-UMass, the Community College-to-UMass Transition, and Being a UMass Community College Transfer Student. Chapter five concludes this dissertation by discussing the study's major findings, employing the concept of stereotype threat to illustrate the community college stigma experience for students along this transfer journey, and by offering notable implications and recommendations for future research and practice.

Chapter Four: Students' Lived Experience

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experience of community college transfer students attending UMass Amherst. Of specific interest to the researcher was what, if at all, is the community college stigma experience for students along this journey, using a conceptual framework of stereotype threat to illustrate any potential stigma experience. Phenomenological analysis of participant interview data uncovered three distinct periods spanning the lived experience of community college transfer students attending UMass: Pre-UMass, the Community College-to-UMass Transition, and Being a UMass Community College Transfer Student. This chapter is organized in accordance with these three periods, each addressing the research question confronted by this study: What is the lived experience for community college transfer students attending UMass Amherst? This question is addressed by presenting the essence of that lived experience within each period, including its common themes, occurrences, and events, as reported by UMass students themselves.

Pre-UMass

UMass community college transfer students' Pre-UMass period begins with the decision to attend community college in the first place; A decision that, with striking exception, is met with generally positive support. This decision is followed by students' time enrolled in community college, which includes overcoming institutional and/or personal challenges.

Decision to Attend Community College: *A Place to "Keep my options open"*

Before participants ever thought about transferring to UMass, they made the decision to attend community college. Most commonly, they chose community college as an opportunity to figure themselves out and affordably get general education requirements out of the way while staying close to home. As Andrew, a 22-year-old majoring in communication and minoring in

English explained, “Why spend so much money on an education when you don't know what you want to do? ...It's just also very convenient. I lived, I think, ten minutes away.” This sentiment was echoed by Heather, a 20 year-old majoring in biology who shared, “...Number one, it was closer. Number two, it was cheaper. Also I feel that I could've gotten, like I got all my basics out of the way so now I'm just focusing on my bio classes...”

A smaller campus with intimate classroom setting commonly contributed to the decision to attend community college as well. Juliet, a 24-year-old majoring in communication shared, ...SCC also had two buildings total and I wasn't quite ready to go to the huge university. I just wanted smaller classes because I needed more attention on certain subjects, like math, and I just wanted to get all the general education out of the way before I attended a huge university like UMass.

As will be discussed, moving from this intimate community college setting to the sprawling UMass campus is a universal experience for students along their transfer journey.

Desire for career change is the rationale post-traditional students commonly cite for deciding to attend community college. Lauren, a 50-year-old majoring in biology, was employed in retail management for decades when she decided to attend community college as a path to earning her bachelor's degree and changing her career. She shared,

I just didn't feel like I was exercising my brain in any way, shape, or form. So I wanted to go back to school, and I knew from the beginning that Massachusetts has programs so that you can transfer without it being like a ridiculous admissions process.

Scott, a 26-year-old majoring in biology who took time off from academics after high school in Germany, used community college as a personal barometer for whether he was a good fit with higher education in the United States. Scott shared his decision to attend community college

stating, "...First of all to improve my grades, and then also to see if I actually am cut out for that...".

Community college is perceived to be the only option for those who never graduated from high school. Adam, a 23-year-old double majoring in astronomy and physics who was unable to complete high school for personal health reasons, explained,

So it was less of a choice directly and more of a, "Well I do want to attend college, but attending an actual university like that would be a lot more difficult and I think almost impossible without the diploma."

Adam's contention overlooks that earning a GED is a viable pathway to enrolling at a four-year institution without a high school diploma.

Keeping college options open and maintaining financial flexibility is rationale for students who attend community college after first withdrawing from a four-year institution.

Jerry, a 20-year-old double majoring in English and comparative literature explained,

I went to a four-year college, it was a communications arts college for my fall, in the fall semester my freshman year. And then I decided that I didn't want to continue there, and then I decided that I needed to take some time but continue my studies just to keep my options open.

For Cheryl, a 21-year-old majoring in biology, the thought of attending community college never even occurred to her until she dropped out of the four-year college she enrolled in directly out of high school:

So it wasn't ever really an idea that I had for myself. It was more, I started school somewhere else and I just wasn't prepared for it; So I dropped out after the first week, but

I knew that college was still in my future. So I just enrolled in my local community college.

The financial advantage of not having to start paying back student loans contributed to Christina's decision to enroll in community college. A 20-year-old animal science major, Christina described community college as a necessary financial decision after she withdrew from a private, Women's liberal arts college due to a family health emergency:

It was mainly a financial decision because I was previously at [Women's College] spring semester of 2018, and then I had to withdraw because my mother got breast cancer and it was just very overwhelming. And if I had stayed out of university, then I would've had to start paying back my loans.

Among these participants who previously attended a receiving institution prior to community college, Andre was unique in that he made the decision to specifically transfer to UMass while enrolled as a student at the four-year institution. No longer feeling like a fit with the private music college he attended directly out of high school, Andre, a 25-year-old animal science major, sought advice from a UMass admissions advisor who encouraged him to attend community college as part of a specific strategy for transferring to UMass. He explained,

So I originally came here to see what it would take to transfer here from [Music College] into the animal science major, and one of the advisors suggested that I do a year of community college to basically get all the classes that I would need to transfer into this program, as they weren't offered at [Music College].

It's unknown whether Andre was made aware of transfer avenues available through community college during high school, or whether that would have changed the trajectory of his initial college enrollment decision.

As the discussed participants demonstrate, there is no single rationale for students' decision to attend community college. Instead, students from a variety of backgrounds and academic interests discuss community college as an institution of opportunity; An opportunity to consider what they want from a college experience, an opportunity to chart a new career path, and of course, an opportunity to transfer to UMass. It is important for receiving institutions to be aware of these motivations to attend community college as they contribute to the diversity of perspectives students eventually bring with them to UMass.

Mostly Positive Reactions: “*Oh, they were all supper supportive.*”

The decision to attend community college is generally met with positive support from others, expressed in words of encouragement and/or validation of the decision. As Amelie, a 21-year-old majoring in animal science shared, “My mom...she was like, ‘This is just you trying to test the waters, get your prerequisites out of the way, do your thing. Kind of inch yourself into this whole new chapter.’ Which I was like, ‘Yeah, you're right!’” Lauren’s parents expressed financial relief for her cost-saving decision. She recalled them saying, “Oh good, because you can afford that. We don’t have to give you any money.” Having just completed high school in Dominican Republic, Luna, a 20-year-old majoring in biology, was the only student who recalled having to explain what community college was to her parents before they, “basically took it okay.”

Many students find that support for their decision stems from a family member or close acquaintance having previously attended community college. Natalie, a 22-year-old majoring in biology exclaimed, “Oh, they were all super supportive. Both of my sisters were already, were there or had been at the same community college, and you know, my parents thought it was a smart financial choice.” Similarly, Scott’s spouse, “...Was the first person who was saying,

‘Yeah, do that! Go for it!’ He is also a community college graduate.” In addition to supportive family members, Heather was surrounded by coworkers validating her decision, espousing the benefits they gained from attending community college:

...[I] had people around me that also said that community college is a great place to start, especially because it's cheaper, it's closer to you, and you can get your basics out of the way, and that way you also know how it is to go into a university.

Most students feel comforted, validated, and even motivated by positive support for their decision to attend community college. Heather felt that in the long run, it even helped her ability to transition between institutions:

...[It] made me feel more comfortable in that situation because I feel like if I didn't have that positivity around me it would have not been easy, you know, in the long run, because it is a big transition going from a high school to a community college and then to a university there.

Natalie also felt validated, sharing that it made her feel, “Like I was making a smart decision,” while Scott felt encouraged to the point he said it, “Was really like the first thing that actually [made] me feel like I want to do this.” While feeling supported is generally a positive experience for students, for some it can also induce internal pressure to succeed. Emily, a 33-year-old majoring in English shared, “I was always supported in what I wanted to do, so it was really good that they thought that. Little pressure, but it was still good.”

Despite this support, some students still feel internally torn about their decision to attend community college. For Amelie, there was some reluctance about not following the same path taken by so many of her high school friends:

My personal opinion on it was, I was happy that I decided with it, but at the same time like all my other friends were going to universities and they were going far away from home and stuff. So I was fifty percent super great with it and then fifty percent...I was like maybe I should kind of, you know, do what everybody else is doing.

This internal struggle was also reflected in Mark, a 24-year-old physics major who decided to attend community college after withdrawing from a private, four-year institution in New York.

Mark expressed the dichotomy of feelings he experienced:

On the one hand, there is a sense of failure of like having gone to a college and then you don't finish the program. Right, but on another hand, my main reason for being unhappy with [New York Institute] was that I didn't feel like I was getting very good value for my money.

In contrast to students who felt either positive or internally torn about the support they received, those who make the decision out of a desire for career change are mostly indifferent towards it. As Lauren put it, "I wasn't really looking for approval,...I didn't like the direction my life was in." Similarly, Max, a 33-year-old majoring in physics who long felt independent from his family shared, "I didn't really care cause I was already pretty much on my own, and you know, there was a lot of trouble with the family."

Some Negative Reactions: *"It's sort of looked down upon only slightly..."*

Regardless of how students feel about support for their decision to attend community college, they cannot take it for granted. Phrases like, "pretty badly," "really disappointed," and even "very sympathetic" describe a less common reaction from those who view community college and their students in a negative light.

For Jerry, the view that community college is meant for students with no better college option permeated the negative perception of these institutions in his hometown, where he described community college perceived as:

An acceptable interim avenue to take, it's kind of thought of in my town surrounding area, it's like a good place to start if you didn't have the option to go to four-year, but it's sort of looked down upon only slightly..."

Expressions of this negative perception are directed at students when they first make the decision to attend. Cheryl specifically credited a *stigma* towards community college as the basis for her mother's adverse reaction to this decision, who she explained, "...Was like really disappointed, and she had always had the stigma about community college, so she wasn't happy with my decision...". Similarly, Maria, a 21-year-old majoring in biology, reasoned that the lack of prestige and sense that community college is not a traditional college track are why her parents had difficulty supporting her. She explained, "Just the prestige, and the fact that everyone else I know would be in a completely different social environment would make me sort of the odd one out."

Students take displeasure with an icy reception to their community college decision. Yet, while Maria described feeling, "Not great" about it, both she and Cheryl expressed an understanding of their parents' dismay. Cheryl even acknowledged harboring her own stigma towards community college:

I didn't realize it, but in high school I did have a stigma of my own against community college, and so I wasn't necessarily upset. I was just kinda surviving and pushing forward

and still looking towards what was coming afterwards. But yeah, to answer your question, it wasn't the best feeling.

Once the decision to attend community college is made, regardless of how it is received, the next step Pre-UMass is the time spent as a community college student.

Community College Student Experience: “*Just a very interesting experience.*”

Intimate campus, small class size, and accessible faculty and staff are common attributes of the community college student experience. Teri, a 26-year-old majoring in biology, shared her experience in small community college classrooms and the positive impact it had on her ability to get instructor assistance: “I felt like the class sizes were smaller, so you've got more one on one attention with your professor on a daily basis, and not just if you went to their office hours.” Natalie echoed this sentiment sharing, “So I knew everybody in the financial aid and bursar's office and it was easy to find and talk to my professors. They often had time and it's one building.”

A diverse and welcoming student body is also a common characteristic of the community college experience. Adam described it as: “... Just a very interesting experience. I met a lot of people from different walks of life...”. This perspective is shared by Andre, who noted the general feeling of acceptance for students from a variety of backgrounds: “...No one even batted an eye that you were a little bit older, that you were in transitionary stage, that people in that environment were coming from all different directions. So it was really, really great to experience that.”

For several students, part of this feeling of acceptance during community college may be attributed to community college's resemblance to high school. For Heather, contributing to this was the large number of high school classmates who enrolled in community college with her.

She shared, "...Half of my... high school group went into college together. So It was like another part of high school." Andrew detailed this high school resemblance stating:

...It was a lot more like high school than I expected. Just with it being a community college, there's no on campus living, so everyone's a commuter. People, most people show up, take their classes they have to, do their work and then they either have a job, like part-time job, or they just go home and do their own thing.

Although not universal, the opportunity to be actively involved on campus and to easily make friends are aspects of community college enjoyed by many students as well. Heather explained,

...I was involved in community college more, a lot more... I was not involved in high school. So there was a lot of activities and stuff that I got to participate. I stepped out of my comfort zone very easily in college and I feel like that's what college is all about. For Juliet, the ability to make friends in community college put the sense of "community" in community college. She explained, "...The community was really great. Everyone knew everyone. It wasn't hard to make friends." Amelie shared a similar experience stating, "...Like my classmates, we were for some reason, like we all got along really well in like every class."

Interestingly, some students are pleasantly surprised by the behavior of their community college classmates, even describing it as exceeding expectations. Cheryl made this point by comparing her community college classmates to those at UMass:

...I guess even the way the students behaved and presented themselves, it was still maybe even better than people here, especially cause at UMass there's a little bit of a reputation

of a party school. So it kind of attracts that certain demographic of people who are maybe a little less mature. But it was, it was good. It was better than I was expecting it to be. This low bar for the behavior of her classmates appears to expose Cheryl's own negative perception of those who attend community college.

From an academic perspective, students generally experience high quality community college instruction, despite many of them later expressing they were underprepared for the academic rigor of UMass. Teri explained that the level of instruction she received in community college was comparable to that of a four-year institution: "I don't see a big difference in the quality of the education between community college and a four-year school. So I felt like the quality of education is the same." However, there are students who felt that despite the adequate level of instruction received in community college, at times they could better explain challenging concepts than the instructor:

It was good cause I was pretty qualified, and I felt like some of the people there, just like I said, the teachers and the professors were good, but there was sometimes where they couldn't like convey things and I'd have to look at the people around me and be like, "He means this." And so it was kind of a weird situation to be in.

And for others, community college is no more academically stimulating than high school. Emily asserted, "I felt like it was just like 13th grade, you know? I didn't have to study to get an A, and I didn't like that, cause I like to be challenged. So I didn't do well."

Many students credit community college with helping them develop their academic skills and habits, while providing them an opportunity for academic exploration. Scott credits the small classroom environment with allowing him to enhance both his math and writing skills: "...The small class experience and the personal interactions with the instructors helped me to

stabilize my skills and abilities in math and in college writing.” Another common benefit was the opportunity to experiment with different subjects at a relatively inexpensive cost prior to transferring. Emily explained,

I was able to take different electives at community college. Not have to worry about paying for it all, but to get to see what I wanted to do and where I wanted to be. So when I got here, I didn't have to guess at what my major was. I knew what it was.

Andrew shared a similar account:

...Obviously financially it helped me choose what I wanted to do, what major and what path I wanted to go. It just provided an opportunity to kind of explore the post, or the higher academic world in an environment that...wasn't very stressful.

Mark credits this opportunity to explore different classes and subjects in community college with making him a more analytic and faster learner:

Having enough time to take classes, and then like even take classes that you're not really sure about, but it gives you an opportunity to see things from different angles because each discipline, even if they're tangentially related, you only see it from the one side of things. And then that helps with being able to interconnect and truly think in kind of [an] interdisciplinary sort of way, which helps you learn faster.

This process of identifying one's major through academic exploration in community college leads to what some describe as the additional advantage of knowing they only need to spend two years at UMass, post-transfer. Juliet surmised,

I guess just having all those credits under my belt, knowing that I'm only going to be here for two years and those two years are gonna fly. Whereas if I came in as a freshman not

really knowing what I want to do with my life, not knowing what major I want to choose.

I know that that's really hard.

In addition to these social and academic attributes of community college, a number of challenges are encountered during this time Pre-UMass as well.

Challenges Confronted: “...*You go to school, you do your work, and you get off campus.*”

While students are generally pleased with the community college experience, they do encounter a variety of challenges during this stretch of the Pre-UMass period. Selecting and scheduling classes, juggling the demands of work and school, housing and relationship issues, getting re-acquainted with a “school schedule,” and struggling to live on a fixed income are all challenges students face during community college. Most common, however, are challenges associated with commuting to campus.

Juliet expressed the stress commuting puts on students’ time and money. She explained, “...Driving forty-five minutes was really hard. Gas was, is expensive and trying to split up a paycheck between groceries and gas was really hard.” In addition to being a strain on students’ time and finances, commuting often has a significant impact on the social aspect of students’ community college experience. For some it contributes to their inability to be involved on campus. Mark shared, “...Because of being twenty to thirty minutes away from campus, there's very much a like, you go to school, you do your work, and you get off campus.” For others, commuting during community college deters motivation to form relationships with classmates. Christina explained,

... Socially, it was okay, but a lot of the people there were sort of go to class, leave immediately. It's not like, "Oh, we're gonna make friendships," you know, form bonds and things. So it was sort of difficult to, we'll use the word, "connect."

Limited involvement and lack of social interaction with peers can have a significant impact on the personal and/or emotional wellbeing of students. For Jerry, it contributed to fostering a sense of loneliness during community college. He confided, "The lack of social circle was terrible. It's rather lonely, especially if you live a half an hour-plus away. That was easily the biggest thing."

An additional challenge is faced by some students with disabilities, and meeting the demands of college while managing that disability. This was the case for Natalie and Emily, as one of these students explained,

...I was dealing with disabilities, so physical. I have fibromyalgia and then I was diagnosed bipolar, so it was kind of hard to keep up and I was still trying to do full-time schedule. I didn't have any help so, besides my wife, but I didn't have any help, you know, medically-wise. So I was just dealing with it all myself. So I failed out, like twice, and then I got, as I got help, I was able to go back in 2015 very seriously, [and] continue to stay there.

Navigating the UMass transfer admission process can also be a significant challenge faced by students in the Pre-UMass period. Students unable to secure assistance from either a community college faculty or staff member or a UMass representative find managing this transfer admission process on their own particularly difficult. Amelie explained,

...I felt like I did a lot of it myself, getting all the papers together, emailing the admissions office here, sending over my transcripts...For UMass, the person would come

like once a month, so I would always miss them cause I was never on campus at the time that they were there.

While Amelie did not indicate whether lack of assistance with her transfer application had any impact on her ability to transfer within her desired timeframe, it seems this situation could have such a negative impact for some students.

Perceptions Confronted: “...*People are judged when they attend community college*”

Coinciding with these Pre-UMass challenges is the perception some students have of an existing community college stigma and their own self-perceived attachment with it. Luna appreciated the support she received during community college despite the stigma she found to be attached to those who attend:

I heard that people are judged when they attend community college, and I was the kind of student, like it was hard for me to go to community college and not feel different, because when I went to high school, I was the perfect student...I had all A's and all of that. And *it was difficult for me to overcome the stigma*, but I didn't receive that stigma from the people I knew. So it was comforting and I felt good.

Grappling with the self-perceived attachment of a stigma is particularly challenging for students who first attended a four-year institution out of high school prior to enrolling in community college. Cheryl, who was briefly enrolled in a private four-year university, explained this internal struggle:

So personally I was in a really bad place because I had just dropped out of this school that I really thought I wanted to be at and people were just so proud of me for going to. So going from that to a community college was upsetting.

Similarly, Christina, who also withdrew from a private four-year institution, struggled with talking to friends about being a community college student:

It felt sort of discouraging at times when I would talk to my friends and they'd be like, "Oh, I'm going to Johns Hopkins and Princeton," and all these places and then I was like... "Southie City College," and oh, it's kind of like this little nagging feeling in the back of my head.

After students successfully navigate community college and its associated challenges to receiving admission to UMass, the Pre-UMass period comes to a close and the Community College-to-UMass transition commences. As discussed, students bring with them a number of self-identified advantages from having attended community college in a relatively small and intimate campus and classroom setting; Characteristics which few, if any, participants applied to UMass as they immersed themselves into the massive campus community.

Community College-to-UMass Transition

The Community College-to-UMass Transition begins with students' decision to transfer to UMass. Following admission acceptance, most students attend transfer orientation where they register for classes, or they participate in an online alternative. For students choosing not to commute from home, most find themselves living on-campus in Sylvan transfer housing while adjusting to a significantly larger environment than accustomed to in community college.

Why Transfer to UMass?: "...It kinda just made sense."

There are multiple motivations for why students choose to transfer to UMass. Most commonly is a desire to pursue a specific academic program, such as animal science or physics. Affordability of in-state tuition, its location or proximity to home, and the general reputation of

the university and its transfer-friendly admissions process are also frequent rationale. Insight offered by Max touches on these common motivations: "...The physics program here is really good. Plus, it's cheaper too, which is another thing. So cost-effective because I'm a Massachusetts resident, so it really helps." Expressing her desire to stay close to home, Amelie shared, "Cause I love my mom so much and my animals and stuff, I didn't want to go too far."

Reputation of the university, its transfer-friendly admission process, and perceived opportunities for its students are also common motivations for transferring to UMass. Jerry's explanation for choosing UMass illustrated these motivations: "...Mostly just the variety of departments, academic routes, it's very appealing and kind of, can do anything... it's a very good state school, but it's also very friendly to transfers applying. So it kinda just made sense..."

For a minority of students, however, UMass is not their first choice for transfer. Juliet explained this averseness, despite feeling pressure to transfer to UMass by a community college transfer counselor:

When I was first actually picking schools to transfer to, UMass was not my first choice. I didn't want to go to UMass, and the transfer counselor there actually pushed UMass on to all the students who wanted to transfer... and then I found that it was harder to transfer to other colleges by myself than it would've been if I went with a counselor. So I just essentially ended up at UMass because it was the easiest way to transfer in with a Mass block and everything.

Whether or not it was a first choice, once students make the decision to transfer and enroll at UMass, the community college-to-UMass transition period continues with new transfer student orientation.

Transfer Student Orientation: “*It was a glorified campus tour...*”

For most students, the community college-to-UMass transition period continues with attendance at a one-day, new transfer student orientation prior to the start of classes. Amelie shared, “We went to like a transfer orientation, which I guess was something really new that they hadn't even done in the past.” For those who start in the spring, transfer student orientation takes place in December. Christina described the December transfer orientation: “...The transfer student orientation back in December was very small and there was only one other person transferring into my major.”

Not everyone wishing to attend can be accommodated at transfer student orientation. Juliet shared, “...It filled up very fast so I did not get to go to it.” Those unable to attend in-person are offered an online alternative that is not transfer student-specific. Natalie explained,

I was away the summer before I started at UMass, which means I didn't go to a specific transfer student orientation, which they do have, but they don't have an online transfer orientation. So I had to do the online normal orientation, which of course didn't really apply to me a lot of times.

Students permitted to attend transfer student orientation in-person are broken into groups organized by major. They then meet with an advisor or current student who assists with registering for first semester classes. Teri outlined this process:

...When we did our transfer orientation day, that was the day that they kind of looked at everybody and then broke us up into groups based off of what our major was and then... kind of broke us off into even smaller groups at that point to go and register for classes. And they had other students there to help you do it, but what happened to me was they

already had the classes that they said that I needed picked for me. So I didn't really have to do any of the registering process. So they were like, you just need to take these classes and we registered for those...

The orientation and class registration experience is beneficial to some students. Andrew was highly complementary of academic advising received at transfer student orientation:

We were assigned our academic advisor and they, per major obviously, and he was very helpful. He worked with other transfer students before and he was really helpful. And just the process of a transfer student coming to UMass, he was very familiar.

Others appreciate the opportunity to meet students they can relate to. Teri explained,

I think that the orientation specifically for transfers was helpful because you're, you do meet a couple people that are in the same situation that you're in. Unfortunately, the people that I met, like I still actually talk to some of them, but I'm not in any of the same classes of them.

More often, students find UMass transfer student orientation ineffective, commonly experiencing it as too short, disorganized, lacking in useful information, and failing to foster lasting student relationships beyond the one-day event. Describing his experience in decisively harsh terms, Mark vented, "It was a glorified campus tour, and then sitting down and signing up for classes, and even that wasn't particularly useful." Max described the loss of organization that develops over the course of the event:

The problem with orientation is that, you know, it was organized in the beginning, but then once groups started branching out, there was no organization. I didn't know where the hell to go. I mean, I thought there'd be somebody to tell you where to go, but it just

literally, oh, it doesn't, it dissipated. And then after I signed up for classes, everything was gone and I was like, "Okay, well I didn't learn as much as I thought I would."

Christina highlighted the perceived lack of useful information provided at transfer student orientation, particularly as it relates to joining student groups. She divulged, "...It's been kind of confusing trying to join groups and student organizations, because they never really went over that in my orientation."

Students also complain about the brevity of transfer student orientation, particularly compared to what UMass provides new freshmen students. Jerry succinctly pointed out, "Like transfer orientation was very brief compared to freshman orientation." Similarly, Cheryl lamented the duration of transfer student orientation compared to the week-long trip provided new transfer students at other universities:

There wasn't a lot of support in orientation. When I listened to other people who are from other colleges and they were transfers, they had this week long trip with other transfer students and we just had this day. It wasn't a lot.

Cheryl suggests UMass improve students' transfer orientation experience by developing a lengthier event: "I think probably the administration, just putting, having a longer orientation for transfer students, cause I've heard other people complain that it's really not enough."

In addition to these shortcomings, transfer student orientation is not perceived to be fostering relationships between new students. Cheryl explained, "...We had this speech given to us and this book given to us and they were kind of just like, 'Have at it.' Like you have to be the one to put yourself out there and make friends...". The majority of those who do connect with others at orientation never see those students around campus again. Max shared, "I mean, orientation was like, there was one kid that I met... we bonded at orientation, but I never saw

him again.” Similarly, Christina explained, “...It was sort of like, ‘Well hi, nice to meet you,’ and I haven't seen her again.”

By failing to facilitate relationships between new community college transfer students, UMass transfer student orientation contributes to a sense of isolation students experience transitioning into the university. As Juliet explained, “...For transfer students, it's like you're thrown into whatever crowd for orientation. You're probably not going to connect with those kids, so you're also gonna come to school on the first day and just be by yourself.” Others who perceive a similar consequential impact on their sense of belonging at UMass offered suggestions for how the university could help its students. To foster community college transfer student comradery, Max proposed UMass organize time during orientation for students to talk with each other about their transfer journey. He suggests this would allow students to bond with others from a similar background, and could be a source of support while navigating the transition:

... Maybe the people that were the transfer students could be in their own little community, because then maybe they could actually start talking to each other, and maybe they could form bonds that could help them navigate through this, because it's not there. I know it's by major, but I feel like if they did that little part and you'd just be able to bond a little bit and speak about your own experiences with community college and such. I think it would help other community college students be able to do better. Okay, because your orientation, the way it is, is really unorganized and I was not impressed with what I learned there.

To some, UMass, through its transfer student orientation, is not demonstrating respect for the various backgrounds of its community college transfer students. Mark explained,

I think that, you know, it's part of a, maybe part of the bigger problem, but yeah, the NSO [new student orientation] was thoroughly unimpressive and...I think the biggest thing was they didn't do enough to respect the diversity of the people transferring in.

Mark had no interest in developing a lasting relationship with the students he met at orientation, disenchanted to the point of questioning his decision to attend UMass:

I remember being really unimpressed at lunch. I, it was basically, sat with a couple other, some other transfer students, but they were all frat boys. And the lunchtime conversation was really unimpressive and had me doubting why I was coming here.

Based on Mark's previous comment, it would seem he and other new community college transfer students might have benefited by some additional forethought into how they are grouped at orientation, with greater consideration for the diverse backgrounds of these students.

Mullins Center New Student Event: *"I haven't heard anything that suggests I'm supposed to be here."*

Students unable to attend orientation in-person due to space restrictions or otherwise may be invited to an alternative new student event held in the Mullins Center on campus. Recounting her experience learning about and attending this event in lieu of transfer orientation, "...with thousands of other students," Natalie explained,

They told me I should go to this in email correspondence...and then we met up in an area, like they would take us to the event, and I asked the person there, I was like, "I'm a transfer student, should I be here?" And she was like, "Yeah."

Despite this affirmation, event speakers never acknowledge the presence of the new community college transfer students in attendance, instead addressing the audience as a homogenous group that is making its first foray into higher education. Natalie explained,

...So, before that it seemed like it was an event for new and transfer students, but then just getting there and being like, “I haven't heard anything that suggests I'm supposed to be here.”

This causes new community college transfer students to question whether the event is really intended for them. Natalie vented,

...There were speeches and it lasted like an hour and a half and probably an hour into the speeches I was like, “Am I like supposed to be here? Because nobody has said the word ‘transfer’ in the last hour.”

As if to confirm suspicions, the Mullins Center event caps off by asking students to participate in a group photo of a future graduating class they will never be part of. Natalie shared, “Then they took the class of 2019 photo, which of course I didn't make it into anyway...”.

In retrospect, it can feel like UMass invites new transfer students to the Mullins Center event without any forethought as to why. Natalie declared, “...It just felt like they were inviting transfer students to it, but not really for a reason. They were just like, ‘I guess you haven't been here before so you can come to this thing.’” To help future transfer students feel they belong, she offered, “Even just adding the word, ‘Transfer students’ into the first speech would have made me feel like I'm not completely wasting my time by sitting here for an hour, because it was also really boring.” This recommendation of Natalie sets a pretty low bar for acknowledging the presence of community college transfer students in attendance, and one that should be easily achievable going forward.

Community College Transcripts: *“We haven't even looked at your transcript yet, so we're just gonna wing it here.”*

A staple of the community college-to-UMass transition period is review of students' community college transcripts prior to registering for classes. Upon enrolling at UMass, students are dismayed by the university's handling and apparent non-review of their community college transcripts. Many provide transcripts to UMass only to have them misplaced or not reviewed for transferability of units prior to their registering for classes. Amelie detailed this experience:

I was super overwhelmed at first when I got there for the orientation, cause they whipped through it really fast and then they sat you down and they were like, “Here, pick your classes. We haven't even looked at your transcript yet, so we're just gonna wing it here.”

Juliet had a similar experience despite twice providing UMass with transcripts: “... You had to bring your own transcripts, but also mail your transcripts out. And then when we got there they said they didn't have our transcripts, so it was hard to sign up for classes.” Handling and review of students' community college transcripts does not necessarily improve for subsequent terms either. Amelie vented, “The middle of October, you're supposed to be picking classes for spring semester and it was the same situation.”

Failure to review community college transcripts upon transfer student enrollment is perceived to be a UMass oversight distinct from non-transfer students who commonly enter the university directly from high school with advanced placement (AP) credit. Mark shared, “... Just the fact that it wasn't analyzed when I transferred in. So that one specific area is really, I think, unique to transfer students because AP credit is pretty easy.” Expressing students' frustration with this administrative oversight, Mark exclaimed,

...I was really unhappy with when I transferred here, that they did a really bad job handling my transcripts. So I would say that that is the one area that they need more, to offer more assistance with and do a better job.

This transcript review shortcoming seemingly requires urgent attention as failure to do so could potentially cost students additional, otherwise unnecessary, semesters to complete their degree, which many may be unable to afford without additional employment and/or student loans.

Registering for Classes: “...It’s even after freshmen, which is really slim pickings.”

Registering for classes is a universal experience for students during the community college-to-UMass transition period. Placed at the back of the registration priority line, community college transfer students get extremely limited class options, making for an incredibly stressful and frustrating experience. Andrew detailed this experience:

...Transfer students regardless of age or what year you're in, you have the last pick of classes. So you might not be able to get ones you need for your major. You might have to rearrange your schedule. And it's even after freshmen, which is really slim pickings.

Completing the registration process can be, “quite stressful” for students, with Natalie describing it as an academic barrier: “...Mostly figuring out what classes I'm supposed to take, that's been the biggest barrier.” As a result, frustration sets in for those who realize they are a poor fit with a selected class. Teri divulged, “I ended up taking a class that I did really bad in because I really didn't like it. It wasn't for me at all, and I didn't really need to take it anyways. So that was kind of frustrating.” Fortunately, some have confidence in their advisor’s ability to fix any mistakes they make registering for classes on their own. Hal, a 27-year-old animal science major who shared this frustration, explained,

At least when it comes to credits, I know that they use, they have issues. Like when I first tried transferring here, they would, they don't do a great job picking the classes we have literally transfer or not, but it's fixed by your, by the advisors.

As will be discussed, most do not share Hal's confidence in their advisor's ability to remedy such a mistake.

Living On-Campus: *“Sylvan...It looked like prison and it was just so isolated from everything else.”*

For most students, moving into university housing is a significant part of the community college-to-UMass transition period. The majority of students who live on-campus initially live in the transfer residence known as “Sylvan.” Andre detailed the Sylvan residential configuration:

“I was put into a residence hall where the entire residence hall actually was transfers. The majority of them were community college transfers where we all, we had a suite style, so there were, you know, four, three or four rooms in a single suite that every single one of us was actually a community college transfer.”

Described by students as looking “like prison” and located “...in the corner of the campus...,” Sylvan is perceived to be small compared to UMass non-transfer student dorms. Michael, a 25-year-old majoring in informatics, shared, “...They're like little pods, basically... It's like a smaller community basically compared to the traditional dorms where you just open your door and there's like a bunch of people on the floor...”

There are both positive and negative aspects to living in Sylvan. The opportunity to live with a cohort in the same transitional situation is a highlight for many. Andre shared, “...Being in the housing environment with this, the similar minded people who came from the same, you know, they're transferring from community college as well, was very beneficial because we

could actually share our experiences with each other.” Living in Sylvan also provides many with a potential network of friends. Michael, “Met a lot of good people” in Sylvan, while Amelie established a strong and enduring bond with the roommates she was assigned to in Sylvan:

Last year when we were living in Sylvan, which was where all the transfers would go, that was like what it was known for, we stuck together, me and my roommates, and we did everything together... I have more friends on campus, but a lot of them are transfer students. It was like we just kind of gravitated and stuck towards each other, and we, we still go to clubs and other things on campus, but it was like we were put together so now we stick together kind of a thing.

While many enjoy living with a cohort of new transfer students, others find it detrimental. Jerry expressed the feeling of isolation fostered by living in transfer-only housing accommodations:

So the idea was, I think, that we would all kind of grow as transfers like freshmen would do, but not, not the case. Because of the things I kind of mentioned earlier about, there's a lot of people that kind of knew what to do with themselves and knew how to be by themselves, didn't need to make connections. And then also there's just so many people in one building that don't know what they're doing. So no one knows, no one can really help one another. I think, but you're like old enough that you're kind of expected to know what you're doing. So it was pretty, just felt like a very aimless semester. Like I don't know what to do cause there's no one I know that knows what to do, so that was a big, defining context, especially the first semester.

This insight into the experience of being segregated from living with non-transfer students is strongly supported by Michael, despite Sylvan working out well for him personally:

Sylvan was a great experience for me, but I feel like it's very easy for it to be a bad experience, because if you are, I'm gonna say like “segregated,” but you're in a different spot and you're with people who have a similar experience cause they transferred in. But at the same time I feel like it'd be pretty, a lot easier if you were just put with other people...Sylvan worked out for me, but I could see it not being great for everyone.

Students' perception of Sylvan transfer housing as aesthetically unappealing, segregated from non-transfer students, and as isolated from the rest of campus contributes to what is described as a “*stigma behind it.*” As Amelie, who appreciated her time in Sylvan, explained, “... Everybody was like, ‘Oh God, I don't want to live in Sylvan, cause it looked like prison and it was just so isolated from everything else...’”. This stigma is reflected both in Cheryl's description of Sylvan as the “worst residential area” on campus, and in her explanation for why she chose not to live there despite its association with new transfer students. Cheryl rationalized,

I know there's this like one residential area where people are like, “Oh yeah, that's where all the transfers go,” and I didn't live there at all because it's not the nicest. It, I walked through it before and it kind of looks like a jail cell, and it's like the, it's not the nicest. It's like the worst residential area.

While most new community college transfer students live in Sylvan, a less common on-campus alternative is the Commonwealth Honors College Residential Community. Maria, who briefly lived in Sylvan upon transferring to UMass, explained, “One of my classmates from the

same community college that I went to had an apartment, and she didn't have a roommate so she just pulled me into the Commonwealth honors college apartment." Outside these on-campus housing options, many community college transfer students elect to live in unaffiliated housing off-campus.

Living Off-Campus: "...Not only did I transfer, but I also commute, so that's really hard."

Those who choose to not live in UMass housing commonly identify as a commuter student, with most living between five and twenty minutes from campus. Mark explained his rationale for choosing to live off campus:

...When I came here I knew that immediately I wanted to live off campus. I wanted to have a kitchen, be able to do my own laundry and whatnot. I ended up living in an apartment complex with my friend and taking the bus a lot.

Commuting significantly limits community college transfer students' campus involvement, especially for those with a lengthier commute. Teri divulged,

I don't really attend events. I don't really, I don't do groups or events really. And again, I think that kind of also stems back to its challenging being, you know, I'm a commuter, which is challenging. I commute from an hour away so I'm not really, you know, I'm not here every day. I'm a non-traditional student and I'm a transfer student, so I feel like I have all of those things kind of working against me in the sense of like community here.

Emily shared a similar impression: "I'm part of the Jabberwocky magazine where I help fiction edit, but other than that I can't get involved cause I commute two hours to school and then two hours home." And despite not having nearly as long of commute as some, Juliet explained how living off-campus substantially limits her involvement just the same. She vented, "...A lot of the kids live on campus and I don't, not only did I transfer, but I also commute, so that's really hard. I

kind of feel left out of the loop on what's going on, on-campus.” Those commuter students who wish to attend an on-campus event must take extra steps to do so, such as finding and paying for parking. Juliet described these steps and the impact they have on her motivation to attend events on campus:

There are things that happen on campus, concerts and stuff, but I don't want to go to them because I have to drive and then park, pay for parking or just generally... I live ten minutes and it doesn't seem far, but it seems far for me. It's just not something that I want to do.

The negative impact living off campus has on some students' transition to UMass is too much for some students to maintain for very long. Lauren, the only student to report having moved from living off-campus first year to living on-campus second year, detailed the stress she experienced commuting to UMass and the impact it had on her academically:

I do live here now... so I spent three hours a day in a car and I wanted like, I wanted to pull my hair out all the time and I, my GPA fell to a 3.1 or something like that. I felt so deflated. It's hard. It's hard to balance having a full life outside of school, having a full life in school, and stuff that happened.

Regardless of whether students live on campus or commute from miles away, situations characterized by both the unique and overlapping challenges discussed, they also must contend with adjusting to a significantly larger campus environment than accustomed to in community college.

Adjusting to the Size: *“The size of the whole community, the size of everything. It's just overwhelming.”*

The community college-to-UMass transition period involves moving from the quaint confines of community college to a UMass campus described as, “massive,” “humongous,” and, “like a whole mini city.” Emily described transitioning to such a large environment, “I think that's definitely a big thing, transitioning from Castille College, which is about three, four buildings that you go to versus here, it's like a whole mini city, so you have to get used to that.” Similarly, Amelie shared, “...Just getting adjusted to the size of the campus was kind of a lot, cause you know, community college is significantly smaller. UMass is like a whole little city.”

Challenges students face adjusting to the size of UMass include getting lost trying to find classes and figuring out how long it takes to get from one campus location to another. Heather discussed these challenges sharing, “So at UMass I did struggle a little bit my first week finding classes. Obviously it's a big humongous campus. Also like going from one place to another, it takes up most of my between class time...” Having to navigate a much larger campus can put a strain on students’ time management. Jerry highlighted these challenges:

Just kind of knowing where things are on such a massive campus. Knowing where you should not go during the day because it's too far away from your dorm, and busses, and all that stuff. And also having, finding time to do errands that you have to go off campus for.

For those fortunate enough to receive it, assistance from someone who knows their way around campus can be very beneficial to new community college transfer students. Luna

described the helpfulness and gratitude she has for a roommate who happened to be a continuing UMass student:

The first day they were here, one of them took me to the whole campus and showed me where all my classes were and she didn't even have classes there. She has a different major, completely different place, and she took like one hour of her time to walk me around and tell me, "This is this class, this is this class." And I felt so welcomed that day.

Beyond being on a much larger campus, community college transfer students transition to a university with a significantly larger student body. Lauren explained, "People told me from the beginning that UMass was a big place, and I just thought they meant the campus is big. Yeah, no it's, there's a lot of people here...Like it's a really big place." Adjusting to the large student population on a massive campus contributes to a challenging social transition for new community college transfer students at UMass. Max expressed the frustration of trying to bond with others in such a large environment exclaiming, "The size of the whole community, the size of everything. It's just overwhelming." This transition can even be difficult for those entering UMass with other students from the same community college. Juliet confided,

...When I graduated SCC there were a lot of kids that were going to be going to UMass, but I have yet to run into any of them just cause the campus is so huge and we've all gone to different majors.

The inability to form bonds with other students within such a massive environment can also have serious repercussions for those contending with issues of mental health. Juliet squarely ties coping with this challenge to an exacerbation of her social anxiety. Asked what barriers or challenges she has overcome related to being a community college transfer student at UMass,

Juliet admitted, "...My social anxiety, because it's such a big college, like I have to personally reach out to people. People aren't gonna just like reach out to me."

While more on this will be discussed in sections ahead, academic consequences for students unable to adjust to the much larger environment of UMass can be dire as well. Serving an academic leave of absence at the time of his interview, Max described his current academic predicament as directly related to his difficulty adjusting to the size of UMass:

I come into UMass, this place is huge. Like I, it took me like half the semester to get used to the size, and at that point I fell behind in school. So like, I was screwed on that semester.

Following students' transition to the massive UMass campus, their time being a UMass community college transfer student begins.

Being a UMass Community College Transfer Student

During students' time being a community college transfer student at UMass, students confront a unique set of academic and social dynamics. Students must adjust to a rigorous academic curriculum in their major's most challenging courses, taught within a massive classroom environment, and commonly left to navigate coursework and decipher professors' expectations independently. In the classroom, students are surrounded by hundreds of students with minimal opportunities to get to know classmates and professors. Outside the classroom, students must rely on academic advising provided within their particular college or academic department, and no transfer-specific student services or resources are available to them beyond what is provided the general population of students. Some community college transfer students supplement their UMass experience with academic or career development opportunities, such as university research, paid internships, or campus employment. While UMass hosts some transfer

student outreach events on campus, community college transfer students rarely attend. Likewise, most do not participate in campus student groups or campus events for various reasons, including lack of awareness. Findings related to students' time being a community college transfer student at UMass are presented.

Academic Adjustment: “*Definitely more rigorous. Things are getting harder.*”

At UMass, community college transfer students confront a rigorous and challenging academic curriculum. Heather described it as, “Challenged, academically challenged, that's what I'm gonna say. Definitely more rigorous. Things are getting harder. It's definitely harder and harder. It's not that leeway that my professors used to give at a community college. Here they don't have that.” Part of this academic challenge is attributed to feeling compelled by the limited time they have at UMass to immediately enroll in challenging, required courses for their major, lacking the freedom to dabble in elective courses like their non-transfer peers. Luna explained,

When you're a transfer student...you don't have gen eds left, you don't have easy classes left. All you have is all [these] hard classes, the 300, 400 level classes. The scary classes that people take two at a time, you have to take four at a time. So you don't really have time to be free if you want to do really well.

Unlike what they perceive to be the academic experience of non-transfer students, feeling the need to take required courses every semester in order to timely graduate continues throughout community college transfer students' stint at UMass. Lauren explained, “...So my senior year is going to be all the requirements, but requirements for my particular degree as opposed to the electives for my degree, which is what all of my peers will be doing.” Focusing on the challenging course requirements of one's major in such a condensed timeframe also strains

students' ability to form relationships with professors. Emily vented, "...I have to get right into all my requirements and I don't have time to see other professors and gain relationships with them like other students." Yet, despite the heightened academic rigor and inherent challenges to having less time at UMass, having a community college background does provide some notable advantages to students.

Transfer Advantages: "...If I started out here, it probably would have been disastrous!"

While grappling with academic challenges presented at UMass, students benefit from several advantages gained in community college. Describing the study habits and time management skills developed in community college, Hal shared:

The biggest thing that transferred over is just my study habits and how to get assignments done properly, because I never really had that much of an issue being able to get my assignments done, and community college probably helped me get there.

Others also honed academic writing skills in community college, as Emily explained, "I think also community college helped me because I'm an English major, so the writing, it helped me get that little leg up with more academic, rigorous academic writing than a lot that have come here since freshmen."

The ability to talk to professors is another valuable trait students developed prior to UMass. Two UMass biology students highlight this advantage. Maria shared, "I actually talk to professors more here, but I think talking to professors at the community college sort of prepared me to know that it's not as scary as it seems." Learning to connect with professors is a crucial skill Lauren developed before transferring to an environment as big as UMass. She explained, "I

learned how to make connections with professors, which is really important in a place that's this big.”

Knowing how to deal with the stresses and failures of being a college student is another critical advantage gained in community college. Asked how being a community college transfer student has impacted his experience at UMass, Adam explained, “I guess it's like, there's certainly almost a philosophical difference about some things that I see in terms of, I've learned to deal with stress differently than a lot of my peers have at this point.” Similarly, Emily learned what it feels like to fail a class she paid for and has no interest in doing that again: “...I know what it's like to fail. I know what it's like not to like that. And I know what it's like to lose money for doing it. So I come here and I take it very, very seriously.”

Many also gained self-confidence in their academic ability during community college. Cheryl shared, “...At community college I felt like I was more capable, so I was just more confident in my ability, and so that, having that mindset made it a lot easier to transfer into a larger university.” Some view this self-confidence as something distinct from non-transfer students. Emily explained,

I do think community college is a great step to come straight here because I believe it could be overwhelming to have that much in your face as an 18, 19-year-old versus going to the two-years of community college, getting your feet wet with academic work, and then coming here and being like, “Okay, I'm not going to drown because of this. I've done this before...it's just going to be at a higher level.”

Without community college, many students feel they would have been overwhelmed had they gone directly to UMass instead of first attending community college. The thought of having

to take general education courses at UMass is one reason for this. Amelie admitted, “I feel like if I took them here, just like the massive amounts of people in a classroom and just how fast I guess everything goes here, I would be probably overwhelmed.” Some even think attending UMass directly without first testing themselves in community college would have been disastrous. Max explained,

But like being able to go to community college, it let you try it out and see if it was for you or not. And obviously I liked it, so I continued to go and now I'm here. But I mean, if I started out here it probably would have been disastrous! And I know people that, like my cousin, he started out here, it was disastrous.

Similarly, Michael suggested, “At UMass, I would have probably been on academic probation or something. Would not [have] been good.” And while some students lament that the time they spent in community college could have otherwise been spent at UMass, they know it would not have worked out otherwise. Adam confided,

I feel like the time is the biggest thing...but sometimes I just need to be reminded that at the end of the day, I did it. It wouldn't have worked if I tried to rush it. So it's better to have taken the time than to just rush and fail, you know?

Yet, despite all these advantages attributed to attending community college, students are not prevented from feeling overwhelmed or unprepared for the academic rigor of UMass.

Unprepared and Overwhelmed: “*I was expected to know a lot more about that than I was prepared to...*”

Despite the notable advantages to attending community college, students commonly call into question preparation they received from these institutions. Adam felt unprepared for UMass physics lab despite having completed requisite foundational coursework in community college:

“...When it comes to laboratory work with physics, I was expected to know a lot more about that than I was prepared to, even though I took something that was supposedly equivalent.” Students commonly feel they also should have been better prepared for the disparity in workload between the two institutions. Lauren divulged, “The workload is so different. I feel like there should've been a class at community college about the difference in workload when you get to a high caliber research institution.” This increased workload at UMass put Amelie in a state of shock: “The general chems that you have to take at UMass are not like, just incomparable to anything CC has to offer. It was a literal shock.”

Students cite a self-perceived disparity between caliber of instruction at the two institutions for why they now feel unprepared at UMass. Emily shared, “...I think because of the level of professionalism that my professors have, I'm learning a lot; Especially a lot more than I did as a community college student.” Jerry offered a particularly harsh, assumption-filled diatribe criticizing instructors encountered in community college:

...Certainly I think that academically just, I hate to harp on the professors, but just, unfortunately a lot of them had been there awhile. Had clearly, just they're there waiting. They're retired or they're just waiting to retire. A lot of classes where you're just listening to the lecturer ramble about what they read in the news and how it almost connects to what they're trying to talk about, and again I hate to harp on them because I understand that financially it's not the best position to be in. It's not a very well-funded system, but that was like, the lack of very challenging academics.

Reflecting Jerry's sentiment, some even perceive community college instructors to have been an academic barrier to be maneuvered around. Max shared, “...There were people at CC that were maybe not supposed to be teaching. My first English professor, she was awful.”

Playing Catch Up: “*In terms of academics, I felt a little bit behind...*”

As a result of feeling unprepared and overwhelmed by the academic rigor of UMass, community college transfer students commonly feel behind their non-transfer classmates in terms of both comprehending the material and understanding professors’ expectations. Jerry explained,

In terms of academics, I felt a little bit behind still... Community college doesn't fully catch you up, I think, to a lot of the standards of that at a school like UMass...that took some overcoming, some extra work on my part.

For many students, struggling with the course material while classmates seemingly do not is something never experienced in community college. Max shared,

I don't know. It just seemed like people understood what I was supposed to understand and I was just like, “Why am I having such a hard time understanding it?” I didn't feel that way at CC. I felt like I understood it and excelled, and I didn't excel here. So I'm not sure why. I would work a long time on Physics and get nowhere.”

Some describe these feelings as being related to the fact community college transfer students in STEM-related majors often work their way through more pre-requisites than non-transfer students do just to be taking the same upper-division course. Scott explained,

...People who transfer in with specific goals as in premed, biology, any other science, I would say probably, they're probably feeling less prepared because they again, needed to work up their way for a lot of the prerequisites for a lot of the higher classes you need to get there before you can actually start being what you want to be.

However, this feeling of having to play “catch-up” with non-transfer students is not, as Scott suggested, isolated to those in STEM-related disciplines. Jerry, a student majoring in both English and comparative literature shared:

...Most of the first semester here, and part of the second semester here, I very much...feel like I was playing catch-up. Felt like, constantly behind people that had been here and knew the UMass, had gone through the UMass curriculum, and were on par for what the professors expected.

Shaken Self-Confidence: “*There’s no way I’m making it out alive.*”

Feeling overwhelmed and unprepared for the academic rigor of UMass takes its toll on the self-confidence of many community college transfer students. Amelie detailed how feeling unprepared by community college stripped her confidence in grasping chemistry material at UMass:

Oh, definitely my chemistry classes...I was like, “I am going to fail.” Cause it was just stuff I was not prepared for at all. Even taking micro-bio at CC and having a good strong science background, once I got to chem I was like, “There's no way I'm making it out alive.”

Lauren, a biology student, also detailed wavering self-confidence at UMass: “...If I don't get something instantly I feel like, ‘Did I, did I not, did I not pay attention well enough? Why don't I know this? I feel like I should know this.’ This feeling continues even after reassurances from a UMass tutor. Lauren divulged: “I don't have a lot of confidence with any of the science stuff and they, my tutors are all like, ‘I don't understand why you freak out so much when you take tests, cause you know this...’.”

Students' self-confidence in their community college academic preparation can really come into question after performing poorly on a test. Amelie shared, "Then, oh my God, we had the first exam and I got the worst grade ever...it made me question everything. I was like, "...Am I really prepared for this?" Shaken self-confidence can even cause students to give up studying for future exams. Amelie confessed, "...So the second exam I did awful again, because I didn't even study for it, and I was like, *'What's the point?'*"

Intellectual Inferiority and Diminished Sense of Belonging: *"I felt like I was out of my league last semester, which I didn't like."*

In addition to some students giving up on studying, a result of diminished self-confidence is that students commonly develop a sense of intellectual inferiority to their non-transfer peers. Jerry bluntly stated when describing barriers faced related to being a community college transfer student, "So I mean, of course the inferiority and that stuff." Inferiority stemming from students' academic struggles is commonly manifested in students' self-perception of being less intelligent than their non-transfer classmates who entered UMass directly as freshmen. Reflecting on how taking more years to be at the same point as his non-transfer classmates impacts his self-perceived intelligence, Scott explained,

A lot of people now with whom I'm sharing classes, they are actually coming in as a biology major. So that kind of makes me a little bit like, "Okay, I need to fight harder than them," and it makes me a little bit less, feeling ... less smart I would say because it took me so long.

Despite having earned his way into UMass, Scott's diminished self-confidence at times causes him to question his ability. He confided: "It does make you feel a little bit uncomfortable, and also makes you question yourself. Cause again, I feel like sometimes they out smart me..."

Further, struggling with the rigorous curriculum at UMass not only impacts students' self-perception of their academic ability, but it can diminish the sense of belonging students have in classes as well. Max confessed, "I felt like I was out of my league last semester, which I didn't like."

Connecting Struggles to Community College Preparation: "...I feel like for me, it's definitely because I'm the community college student, but maybe not."

Students commonly question whether their feelings of being overwhelmed, impaired self-confidence and intellectual inferiority, and diminished sense of belonging tie back to self-perceived shortcomings in their community college preparation. Lauren explained, "...I feel like for me it's definitely because I'm the community college student, but maybe not. Maybe it's just because it's a research university, that it's so intense." Others relate it more to just the pressure of not wanting to represent UMass community college transfer students in a negative light. Mark, a physics major who spent high school in New York home-schooled, shared, "I think it's just, there's a little bit of concern in being I don't want to represent either transfer students or homeschooling or whatever it is, you know, in a negative light."

Yet, despite students' personal confrontations with the rigorous UMass curriculum, the academic "shock" some community college transfer students experience is only temporary.

Andre shared,

So the first semester was more of a challenge, but after that I felt like I had been here the whole time. So definitely felt more accepted in all ways, that once you've completed that first semester it's like, "Okay, yeah...you should be here."

Many even appreciate being taken to their limit, knowing it will help them achieve long-term, post-bachelor's degree aspirations. Heather disclosed, "This is definitely a really good

experience on how I'm getting challenged, because I need this challenge in order to proceed in med school.”

Regardless of whether they grow to appreciate this turbulent academic adjustment, UMass community college transfer students encounter a significant change from what they were used to inside a community college classroom.

Classroom Dynamics: “...*My classes at [Community College] had 20, max 30 people in them, and here I'm in a lecture with 189 other students.*”

Upon transferring to UMass, students attend courses with hundreds more classmates and in significantly larger lecture halls than accustomed to in community college. Hal described the comfort of a small community college setting: “Because the community college is small. It's a small group. It's a small amount of people. Most classrooms are small. You don't really feel anxious because of that...”. The small class size students encountered in community college allowed students to receive more individual attention from instructors and fostered greater personal interaction with their classmates. Being able to communicate with community college instructors was particularly beneficial when undertaking difficult course material. Christina explained,

Because it was a much smaller class, like I don't know, 20 people, I could actually ask the questions that I needed to ask, and if I was struggling my professor would notice me like, “Hey, do you need a little extra help with this?”

The quaint classroom setting described changes dramatically for students after they transfer to UMass. As Hal explained, “I was used to the small classrooms and then I immediately went into like 200, 300 student classrooms, so I was like, ‘Oh God, how am I going

to handle this?” This increase in scale can even alter students’ perception of how much time they spend in lecture. Lauren supposed,

I just feel like there's not enough actual class time, and I don't know, was it longer when I was in community college? Cause I don't think it was, but it sure felt like it was. I don't know if that's cause my classes at Longfellow Deeds had 20, max 30 people in them and here I'm in a lecture with 189 other students.

The most common challenge for students adjusting to so many classmates is the inability to ask questions during lecture. Luna explained,

...There were six of us in the class and then I come here and general genetics and cellular molecular bio, it was two-hundred-sixty people per class. So I was so used to raising my hand and asking questions and asking them as many questions as I wanted. And then I come here, I come to this class and everybody's just listening and I'm like, “When is the time to ask questions?”

Attempting to ask questions during lecture is not without consequence either. Unlike most classmates who are not new to UMass, community college transfer students are often unaware of unspoken student norms. Luna learned this the hard way, asking a question in the middle of a crowded lecture hall in apparent violation of an unspoken classroom rule. Describing the classmate scorn she experienced for failing to adhere to the accepted norm of withholding questions during lecture, Luna shared,

And I would raise my hand and talk to a professor in the middle of the class and everybody would just look around and be like, “What is this kid doing? You don't do that with that many people.”

Older and Out-of-Place: “Oh, you’re a sophomore and you’re in this freshman class?”

Community college transfer students at UMass are generally older than their classmates. This is largely attributed to community college transfer students often spending several years in community college prior to transfer, and because they routinely take their major’s course requirements alongside freshmen and sophomore students who entered UMass directly from high school. In this setting, students occasionally experience interactions with other students in which they feel judged on the basis of this common community college transfer student trait. Christina explained:

When I was in the freshmen classes, it was kind of odd being much older than a lot of the people there. I'm not that old, I'm only twenty. But the difference between, you know, recently eighteen and twenty is quite large, and it's kind of like, “Oh, you're a sophomore and you're in this freshman class?”

Being reminded that they are older than their classmates can diminish students’ sense of belonging in class. Christina explained feeling, “A little bit out of place, somewhat, cause I would see all my peers who are my age going, you know, strides ahead.”

This dynamic of being older also contributes to community college transfer students feeling they have fallen behind in their academic pursuit. Christina shared,

I guess just being behind a semester and being in classes with people who are maybe slightly younger than you. That's kind of like a reminder. It's like, “Oh yeah, I missed out on a semester of learning here. And I'm a little bit behind...”

Community college transfer students in STEM majors feel particularly behind their younger classmates. Adam explained, “I feel I'm older and a lot of times people see math, mathematics and the sciences as a younger person's game in terms of like publishing and doing research.”

Classmate Interactions: “...*The classes are way too big really to talk to people.*”

One of the most common consequences of being in class with substantially more students is inability to interact with classmates. Several students experience difficulty bonding with others in such a large and crowded setting. As Natalie succinctly put it, “...The classes are way too big really to talk to people.” Hal expressed the limits to bonding with others in such a large space as compared to his community college experience: “I guess the biggest one really is just getting used to the large amount of people...but just being in a big group like that just makes...it a little hard to actually open up, you know?” Trying to develop social connections in such a large and crowded environment can also feel highly unnatural, and contributes to a sense of lonesomeness for some students. Jerry divulged,

I'm still a lone person going here and it was, it was hard at first to kind of make those social connections, especially in a school so big where it's very inorganic to do within a classroom setting, especially with all the people.

There are also interactions in the classroom that remind community college transfer students they are distinct from their non-transfer peers; A situation leading some to alter how they would otherwise respond if not for being a community college transfer student. Few can pay attention to a lecture surrounded by classmates carrying on a discussion having nothing to do with the presented material. Lauren described herself in this very situation at UMass: “I have disability accommodations and I need to pay attention, and they sit right behind me in the second

row of a really big lecture hall, and talk almost nonstop.” However, because she is a community college transfer student, Lauren did not feel she had the stature to ask her talkative peers to stop their disruptive conversation:

And at one point I really wanted to turn around and be like, “For the love of God, I just need you to stop talking!” ...Did I say that? No. Would I have said that if I was in community college? Yes, I would.

Classmate Acceptance: People generally have not really batted an eyelid...

By and large, when community college transfer students do interact with UMass classmates, they are generally welcoming and accepting of a community college background. Teri explained, “I think everybody's pretty accepting here. I mean there's really not a lot of...biased against anybody really.” Cheryl described the welcoming interactions she has had with peers stating,

“...The students are welcoming too. I haven't had a bad experience really with saying that I'm from, a transfer from a community college; Although I wasn't there for the full two years, so my experience is probably a lot different than others.”

Some chalk up acceptance of their community college background to the fact students, regardless of their transfer status, are all struggling to get by together. As Christina shared, “People generally have not really batted an eyelid at transferring in from a community college, cause we're all struggling together in our classes.”

While classmates may not “bat an eyelid” at students’ community college background at UMass, this is not the universal experience for students taking a class within the five college consortium. UMass Amherst, a public university, is part of a five college consortium with its

four neighboring private institutions: Amherst College, Smith College, Mount Holyoke, and Hampshire College. While the classroom experience at these private colleges is “a bit elitist” to begin with, there are instances where students perceive themselves to be judged by students of the private colleges based on their community college background. Adam explained,

I come from a state community college. It does, when that comes up, sometimes in that context with anyone from the private schools, there does seem to be a strong like, “Oh, you're not qualified to work on anything.” But, that's not nearly everyone in that, it's more so a handful of people...

The consequence of students' inability to connect with UMass classmates is they are often left struggling to learn challenging new course material on their own. Juliet explained, “...The disadvantages have been teaching myself the curriculum and adjusting to the way things are taught here.” This applies to students who otherwise wish to be part of a study group. Lauren shared, “...I'm not in study groups or anything, and am I sort of bummed about that? Yes, yes I am.” Those without a supportive group of peers resort to finding an individual routine that works for them. For Max, that involved hunkering down in the library:

...I came to the library and I went up to like the fifth or sixth floor or whatever and just found a spot...and put my headset on, listened to music while I did schoolwork. That's what I did, and I did that until this class started. Then when class was done I went back up there, did that again, and then went to the next class.

Faculty Dynamics: “...*Communications with them, it’s really hard.*”

While inhibiting students’ ability to connect with classmates, crowded classroom spaces at UMass also make it extremely difficult for community college transfer students to communicate with professors. Heather shared,

...And talking, approaching professors, cause there's going from 15, 1 to 15 ratio from a community college, to like, 1 to 260. So there's more students here. One of my classes has almost 270 students. So talking with your professor, engaging that, you know, communication with them, it's really hard.

In addition to the previously discussed unspoken rules of the classroom, this crowded space acts as a barrier to students getting questions answered by professors. Lauren succinctly explained, “It's harder to get an answer out of a professor in a classroom setting here than it was at community college.” This often leaves professors’ office hours as an only option for needed assistance, which many are not available to attend. Juliet shared,

...Just adjusting to huge classrooms and adjusting to...kind of like go home and teach myself everything that I learned in class, because it's such a big class. You don't have chances to ask questions or have a one-on-one unless you go to office hours, which are, can be hard. Especially cause I work.

With 15 of 20 participants employed at the time of interview, the challenge of being available to attend professor office hours, as described by Juliet, likely reoccurs for many throughout their time at UMass; A challenge faculty must be made aware of to ensure their students can access alternative methods of needed academic support.

Confronting Assumptions: “No, I don’t remember. Cause I wasn’t here.”

With hundreds in a class, students routinely experience faculty addressing students in a manner that reflects the assumption students at UMass are a homogenous group who spent the entirety of their college education at UMass. Teri explained:

I think that sometimes the professors don't always take into account that not everybody has been here the whole time. So sometimes in class I notice that they'll be like, “Oh you guys remember in Bio 141 when we did this lab and we did this?” And I'm like, “No, I don't remember. Cause I wasn't here.”

Professors communicating expectations with an assumption that everyone has the same UMass lower division background causes some community college transfer students concern that their prior educational experience is being overlooked. Juliet shared,

There were a lot of classes where teachers or professors would be like, “Okay, well you should all know the answer cause you learned it in 1, 1-0-1 or whatever.” And it's like, “You have transfer students in your class, but you're assuming that everyone went to UMass and went through this class and knows the curriculum.”

The underlying assumption that students did not transfer to UMass is reflected in comments of teaching assistants as well. Max, who had an admittedly challenging academic adjustment to UMass, described such an encounter with a TA who disregarded that not every student in advanced physics has taken the same calculus sequence at UMass:

The TAs are like, “Well, everybody's confused the same way.” And it's like, “No, they're really not, because they took the Calc 3, and then they took Physics 2, but I didn't know

that. So I wouldn't have ever took that class if I knew that I wouldn't be able to understand it.

Validation and Dejection: *“Talking to professors is helpful. It's daunting and not always so gratifying...”*

Despite their assumptions, UMass faculty can often be a significant source of validation for students. Amelie shared, “It feels good. Cause finally, I'm in it now, you know? And all the professors... are super accepting and it's just nice to officially feel like a UMass student now.” When they do get the chance, student encounters with faculty are generally friendly, as Maria shared, “...I do talk to the professors a lot and it just feels nice to be so friendly with the professors.” UMass faculty are also largely welcoming of community college transfer students. Cheryl stated, “The faculty are more than welcoming and accepting of that sort of thing. Like I said, a lot of them can relate to that...” However, not every community college transfer student's experiences with faculty are as positive as Cheryl described.

Interactions with faculty can also be a major source of community college transfer student dejection. Luna highlighted an interaction she and another community college transfer student had with a biology professor who, upon learning of their community college background, exclaimed that the course was not meant for transfer students. Luna explained:

...And one time I was taking this cellular molecular biology class and the class is really, really hard. And we went to office hours and we were trying to get to know the professor, and she was explaining something to us and she was, and we were trying to understand everything, and I understood everything. But one of my friends who was at a community college, and she said that she was from my community college, that this was her first

semester here, and the professor said, “This class is not for community college student transfers.”

For some, the sentiment behind the professor’s statement represents what it is to be a community college transfer student at UMass. As Luna confided, “...That's what defines you being a community college student. People think that you're, you know, less. People think that you can't to do it...”

Despite instances such as this, most students find meeting with professors outside the classroom to be helpful, so long as they know who to approach and how to talk to them. Luna explained, “So the professors are really a big help if, if you know who to talk to and if you know how to talk to them.” However, interacting with faculty is not necessarily pleasant, especially when giving students hard truths about their comprehension of the course material. Jerry confessed, “Talking to professors is helpful. It's daunting and not always so gratifying...”. And although interacting with faculty is not always a pleasant, they can be quite accommodating and supportive of students’ individual needs. Heather explained, “Faculty is really understanding. Even after I approached them with some exam confrontations, they were like, ‘We can work it through, you know, we'll do it together, but we'll get you, we'll get the pass out of this class.’” For those students requiring assistance beyond what professors can provide, UMass offers them additional support via academic advising, services, and resources.

Academic Advising: “...*It felt like that was really an oversight for transfer students.*”

Community college transfer students who desire assistance with mapping out their courses at UMass must largely rely on academic advising offered to all students within their department. Hal explained, “...If they need help academically, they would go to their advisor just, and the advisor is probably the same advisor as someone who's not a transfer.” The

advising community college transfer students receive at UMass is hit or miss. Some credit academic advising received for keeping them on track for timely graduation. Christina explained,

...Especially my advisor, she's been extremely helpful with figuring out a plan for me to graduate on time. Especially cause even though I'm a junior I still have to take a lot of freshman and sophomore courses for my major.

Advisors can also be instrumental in raising students' institutional awareness to resources they otherwise would have no knowledge of. Max shared, "...When I met with my advisor, he's the Dean of advisors, Tom Mertes, and you know, he told me some things that they have here, and I was like, 'I didn't even know they had that!'"

Just as often, however, UMass community college transfer students receive less than satisfactory academic advising. Students commonly describe advising at UMass as hands-off, difficult to obtain, and even to blame for having to take an additional academic term in order to graduate. Juliet, a student majoring in communication, described the "hands off" approach taken by her departmental advisors:

...At UMass, you're kind of just doing everything on your own. When I meet with my advisor, I always have to ask, "Okay, so what do I need next?" Because I have no idea what's being fulfilled in terms of graduation.

Juliet highlighted the challenge this approach presents compared to the more personal advising experienced in community college: "I just found it harder because I was so used to an advisor working with you instead of an advisor kind of checking in on you."

For some new community college transfer students, this “hands off” approach makes it challenging to procure advising in the first place. This is particularly disadvantageous for students in the biology department. Natalie expressed this frustration:

I think the thing I've noticed about it most is that, I'm a biology student and there's some thousand-thousand biology students. So you don't get an individual advisor, you get to go to an advising office, and you have to go, and they didn't solicit me coming to the advising office at all when I transferred. So I had no idea what classes I was supposed to take. And then, you know, I...couldn't really get myself to the advising office. Of course had never met anybody there. And so I spent at least the first year not really knowing what I was doing, and it felt like that was really an oversight for transfer students; Especially in biology, because transfer students in other areas do get an advisor and they do meet with them.”

A common result of ineffective advising is students being left without a clear path to degree completion. Natalie detailed the lack of clarity received when she eventually spoke to an advisor:

I was on the phone with an advisor at one point, and they told me that they'd automatically put me in this chemistry class, and I was like, “Okay.” And that's kind of all that they said. So yeah, so I didn't really know what I was supposed to be doing.

Ineffective advising is not confined to the communication and biology departments. Michael, a student majoring in informatics, was never made aware of how his community college credits impacted his standing at UMass, or what he needed to do to finish his bachelor’s degree:

...Just knowing where I was as far as getting a degree and stuff, since I was, I already had a mix of credits coming in from college and stuff, so I didn't know exactly what I'd have to do to graduate...

Being in the dark about how community college credits transfer over can have a detrimental impact on students' ability to timely graduate. For Michael, it resulted in having to take an additional, and otherwise unnecessary, academic term of study at UMass:

...The reason I had to take a summer course was because that class was not accepted apparently, but they never told me, I guess. So I had to take another semester longer than I wanted to just to do that. So that was a kind of barrier there. That was annoying.

A fortunate few community college transfer students can compensate for inadequate advising by bonding with a non-transfer or experienced undergraduate student at UMass. For those with such a valuable informal learning resource, the pathway towards graduation is much more clear. Heather reflected on the benefits this relationship bestowed on her as a new community college transfer student at UMass:

So things are really easy for me, cause she tells me all these things that I need to know in order to graduate. Hearing it from the same type of student that is going on the same track as you are; She's going to UMass med school, so hearing all of this is actually really comforting I feel, because now I know what I need to do.

While Heather was able to obtain this critical information from a more experienced UMass student, she wished UMass had provided her with it sooner to have avoided taking a gap year upon graduation: "... I feel like if I did get this information, I would've not taken that gap year and went and jumped in directly. But it's okay. As I've said, things happen for a reason."

Transfer-Specific Services and Resources: *“I would say that there’s none.”*

Transfer-specific services and resources either do not exist or students are simply not aware of any available at UMass. Juliet declared, “No. I would say that there’s none,” while Maria bluntly stated, “If there is, I haven’t used it.” Emily related this to being something that was probably provided in community college:

Once you get here, I guess the transferring happens while you're at the community college, and that's where you get the information and stuff from. But once you're here, no, you just kind of get in with the rest of everyone else.

Fortunately for Emily, she does not recall having needed anything transfer-specific at UMass:

“...Once I've gotten here, I don't think I've needed anything transfer specific, so that was fine.”

Despite there not being any designated, transfer-specific services or resources on campus, some find there are still ample resources available to meet their needs; It is just the student’s responsibility to be assertive enough to find them. Lauren contended, “...There are extensive resources to use during the day. Other than that, if you can advocate for yourself, there's more than adequate.” However, even those who agree it’s the student’s responsibility to seek out transfer-specific assistance admit they would not know where to begin looking for it. Maria explained,

... As for the services, I, well I didn't really seek them out, so I don't know about them, which it would be to, nice to know about, but I'm also not sure how that would work...I think it's part of my responsibility to seek it out because I've not made any effort at all. That being said, it's also, I wouldn't know where to get started either.

Not an Institutional Priority: *“There's definitely a sense of, they probably know that there are problems and they just don't spend the energy to fix it...”*

That UMass does not provide transfer-specific services or resources is perceived by many to reflect the university's indifference towards community college transfer students. Natalie stated, “...Academically, I think there really isn't anything transfer specific. It's just like, ‘Now you're a student here, so do the ‘student here’ things.’” Others think this non-investment is also an indication that community college transfer students, as a group, are just not a university priority. As Mark cynically opined, “I think it's a bit of like...transfer students aren't their bread and butter. I get it from an administrative standpoint...like you're not going to make as much money.”

The perception that providing community college transfer students sufficient transfer-specific services and resources is not a university priority has a significant impact on students' self-perception and sense of belonging at UMass. Some community college transfer students perceive themselves as not having the same access to critical information and opportunities as non-transfer students. Cheryl explained,

So I feel like a lot of things, like getting involved with research, getting involved with labs on campus, just talking to graduate students and professors, I didn't realize how important it was until probably last year. So I felt like I wasn't given that information at, which might've been accessible to people who were fall semester freshmen.

Limited institutional awareness contributes to some students' diminished sense of belonging at UMass. Max described the feeling as: “Like you're outside and not inside...”.

Natalie detailed the impact feeling like a less-prioritized member of the UMass community has on students' sense of belonging at the university:

So it seems like kind of an easy fix for some of these things, but that we're just not important enough, you know, we're only a fraction of the student body. They have a lot of other stuff to do. They have buildings to tear down and redo. So it's, there's definitely a sense of, they probably know that there are problems and they just don't spend the energy to fix it, which also *puts a damper on your feeling like this is a nice school you want to be at.*

Students with this sentiment feel alienated and want UMass to know it. Explaining her interest in being interviewed about the community college transfer student experience at UMass, Juliet pleaded:

...Having UMass kind of, hopefully listen to transfer students and understanding you're kind of, you know, alienating a whole part of your college, and that they're not just made out of freshmen. Like, there's a lot of incoming students from transfer.

In a tongue in cheek defense of UMass, some see this as just the universal approach taken by all four-year colleges and universities towards community college transfer students, because they simply do not know what to do differently for these students. Natalie flippantly contended, "I think really it's just that four-year schools are designed for four-year students, and if you're non-traditional in some way, they just don't really know what to do with you."

Use of Campus Services and Resources: “*You got to fend for yourself.*”

Upon entering UMass, community college transfer students assume numerous support services and resources would be available to them. Heather, in only her second academic term at UMass, captured this optimism:

I haven't gotten to explore all the resources that they have, but I have to say my community college has so many resources. This college is definitely going to have twice, or even ten times more than what they had.

Without anything transfer-specific, UMass community college transfer students must largely rely on the same general services and resources available to all students of the university. However, students must exert a lot of effort trying to locate them on campus. As Natalie shared, “I think there are some, I think you have to do a bit too much active seeking.” Some students never locate available support. Max stated, “...There’s a bunch of stuff here that they have, you know? It's not on paper or anything and you know, how do you find out?”

Failure to locate available services leaves many without needed support and feeling disadvantaged in their access to opportunities at UMass. Unaware of where to obtain tutoring on campus, Juliet has not received the same level of academic support she relied upon in community college: “...Unlike SCC, I didn't reach out for help. I don't know where the tutoring center is.” For others, the inability to locate needed resources is perceived to have cost them scholarship opportunities. Max shared,

Well, I still don't know where to go for scholarships, but my grades aren't good enough right now anyways. I dunno, I mean I think it's because I started in the spring, not fall. So I'm at a disadvantage for things that I could have or whatever, like opportunities. I don't know about any of the opportunities.

This frustration with obtaining needed support at UMass is described as having contributed to a culture of confusion among new community college transfer students. Luna detailed,

...There's not a lot of support, the kind of support that we need. So after you enroll in your classes, after you pick your housing and after you go to one day of orientation, there's basically nothing else. You got to fend for yourself. So that's one of the things community college students here at UMass, confusion the first semester. That's basically [the] culture.

The support services and resources that students do locate and utilize on campus are those generally available to every student, regardless of transfer status, or available only to students within a specific UMass college or academic department. The Off-Campus Student Center, the writing center, departmental career advising, financial advising, the Center for Counseling and Psychological Health, and the university tutoring center are all resources frequented by community college transfer students at UMass. Rather than seek transfer-specific resources, Mark explained that he relies on the UMass Off-Campus Student Center:

...In terms of day to day life, when I got here, most of my stuff was addressed by visiting the Off-Campus Student Center, which was really because it was related to living off campus, not anything to do with me being a transfer student.

Students are generally satisfied with their experiences utilizing UMass services and resources available to all on campus. Andrew shared, "I've only used a few, mainly the writing one, but I've never had a problem with it and it's always helpful." Despite having vented frustration with the lack of transfer-specific services and resources available on campus, Luna

spoke highly of career advising in the College of Natural Sciences: "...There's a career center in the College of Natural Sciences and the Director of the career center, her name is Audrey, she's [a] really, really good person and amazing advisor and everything." Others also recommended community college transfer students utilize this career advising right away. Heather exclaimed, "Oh, and definitely advisors, career advisors, they're here. They're definitely worth going to. I honestly suggest if you're coming from a community college, right away, go right away."

As students must know what services and resources are available before they can utilize them, they advise UMass make additional effort to push community college transfer students in the right direction. As Amelie indicated, "I feel like there needs to be a little bit more of a push...just like to get us jump-started." Having felt lost and on her own looking for needed services after transferring to UMass, Emily actually recommended transfer-specific information be provided at community colleges prior to students' transfer:

I think they should have that at community colleges, to be honest...cause when we come here, we're two years behind everyone else who's been here, who knows the ropes. So it would be nice for someone to be there to say, "Okay, for you transfer students, this is what's available to you and this is where you go," you know? But it's kind of like you get here, and you get lost, and you have to find it yourself.

Students offer unsolicited advice for how UMass itself might address unmet transfer student-specific needs, beginning with something as simple as a frequently asked questions resource. Amelie suggested, "...I feel like there could be maybe, I don't know, some type of transfer informational section, just with like general frequently asked questions, that they could maybe get together and put answers for." To help new community college transfer students

avoid getting lost on the massive UMass campus, Natalie proposed, "...I think that could be very, very useful on a campus like this where it's so big. Just have somebody out there for the first couple of weeks to say, 'Oh, that's the library. This is Morrill.'" Natalie also suggested UMass make initial advising mandatory for all new community college transfer students, particularly for those who attended the non-transfer-specific online orientation. Natalie contended,

...It would have been much more helpful if I sort of been forced to go and see somebody when I got to campus. Cause I think they do that when you're on campus for orientation, you have to go see an advisor as part of that, but they didn't have you do that as an online orientation person.

UMass could also be more accommodating to students who do not operate on a "morning schedule." Lauren pleaded, "So I'm a night person. I'm not a morning person, so I just want there to be stuff at night and I want them to realize that not everybody in the world operates in a morning schedule."

Academic and Career Development Opportunities: *"I feel like it gave me a little bit of an edge..."*

During community college, there is an institutional focus on students earning their associate's degree. Amelie explained, "CC was kind of like, you're here to get that associates degree. That was like their main focus." At UMass, students notice an increased push towards "hands on" academic and career development opportunities. These university research, internship, and employment opportunities make students more ambitious in how they spend their relatively limited time at UMass. Amelie shared, "There is a lot more internship opportunities here, and a lot more, kind of like 'hands on' opportunities...So personally, it kinda made me

more ambitious with my future and my goals.” Impressed with his access to quality research, Scott exclaimed, “UMass has so much to offer...Now I have access to a lot of great researchers. I have access to a lot of great professors who can help me further my future with my, any of my interests I have.”

Some students actually find their community college transfer status to be advantageous when seeking an academic or career development opportunity on campus. Discussing the lab work he has been entrusted with at UMass, Hal shared,

I think if anything it's been impacted in a positive way. Just cause, for example, I'm in a, I work in one of the research labs on campus and the fact that I've done things, like learned how to do lab work in one of my community college classes, unlike people who are, who don't do that kind of stuff until their late junior or senior year, they're already like, “Okay, you know how to do this stuff. You're free to join our lab.”

Similarly, Adam detailed being able to apply his large number of community college credits to obtaining an undergraduate research position at UMass:

“It helps to have a stupid amount of credits coming in, and actually a lot of the REU's, Research experience for Undergraduates, they look for people who are either from or currently in community college to kind of encourage the diversity of those fields. And so applying those [credits], I feel like it gave me a little bit of an edge for those and they made me really want to go back to my community college and kind of advertise those a little bit more.

Not everyone finds being a community college transfer student advantageous. Cheryl explained the preference for underclassmen she has experienced trying to secure a UMass undergraduate lab position:

...I was really stressed out cause I didn't think I was going to be able to get into a lab, especially as a senior cause most of the time they want you to be a freshman or sophomore. And I was turned down from a lot of labs because of my year.

Being a transfer student presents a challenge to securing the number of recommended internships as well. Emily noted, "So when we first get here, they tell us you should have three internships by the time I graduate." Community college transfer students face an inherent challenge to achieving this recommendation within the limited time they spend at UMass. Emily explained:

So it's kind of scary to graduate and be like, "Alright, I don't have that same time to get those internships and I may not get as many as a student who has been here all four years." I think that's the biggest issue for me...

Community college transfer students also find themselves ineligible for UMass teaching assistantships. While some are fortunate enough to become a TA during their short time at UMass, others are ineligible as a direct result of having completed prior college education elsewhere. Christina explained, "I've seen some TA positions or job opportunities where you need X amount of experience at UMass, or you need consecutive semesters of this specific course, and because I've transferred, a lot of that doesn't come with me." Students lament losing TA opportunities knowing they acquired the same requisite subject matter knowledge, albeit in a community college, as non-transfer students at UMass who are eligible to be a TA. Christina

vented, “It's just frustrating, because I'd love to be part of that and I'd love to work the scenes, and also learn more about the class that I didn't necessarily get to take.”

Community college transfer students unable to secure a university research position or internship may find university employment as an option. Juliet, who worked in an administrative capacity at UMass, shared the positive feeling derived from being treated like a co-worker rather than just a campus student worker: “...They don't treat me like a college kid, cause technically I'm older, so I'm not seen as the student worker. I'm just seen as a coworker, and that's pretty nice.” However, Juliet bemoaned the fact her job does not involve student interaction: “Even though I'm working for the college, it's not on campus, so it's not like at the library where I can interact with people...I interact with zero students.” Those who do get to work with students cherish the opportunity. Andre shared, “...And it is also really cool too, because now I'm in the position where I can help newer transfers...” While securing an academic or career development opportunity can have a positive impact on the experience for community college transfer students, the importance of having a social outlet at UMass cannot be understated.

Transfer Student Outreach Events: *“I think that they would try to reach out, but it was always in a pretty uninteresting way.”*

Having a social outlet can be incredibly valuable to community college transfer students undertaking a challenging academic adjustment to UMass. Scott confided, “It is very important, I feel, to socialize, to get away from that, or at least find people who can support you. And if you don't have really that, it makes it a little bit harder...” UMass attempts to nurture these social outlets for students through organized transfer student outreach events. Andrew explained, “...They set up events just to kind of, for the transfer students just to kind of meet one another and just to get to know each other...”. To some, UMass organizes more than enough transfer

student outreach events. Describing what she considers to be an over-abundance of these events, Lauren exclaimed, “Oh yeah, yeah. More than I want there to be.” Conversely, many others find the number of UMass transfer student outreach events to be inadequate, as Juliet bluntly stated, “...Implementing more events that focus on transfer students would be nice.”

Examples of UMass transfer student outreach events include monthly meetings, transfer student dinners, and former community college transfer student speakers. Andrew described a transfer student meeting he attended: “It was fun. Just casual, just meeting other kids. Most of it was, ‘Oh, where do you transfer from? What's your major? Why do you transfer?’” Hal described the only transfer student dinner he attended:

...I know that they occasionally have activities that focus on transfer students, but I can't really say much about it. I, the only one that I've been to was when I, during my first semester and they kind of had a little dinner... It wasn't anything that special though. They were just saying, “Welcome to UMass” and things like that. “Here's some cookies...”

As Hal indicated, few community college transfer students attend UMass transfer student outreach events more than once, if at all. Excuses for not attending include students' age, the late evening start time, having outside commitments, and ineffective marketing of the events. Lauren cited her age and being overwhelmed by coursework for why she does not attend: “Am I going to do that? No. Would I, if I was young? Yes... I'm too overwhelmed with the workload to have time for that.” Natalie described transfer dinners as being too late in the evening and inconvenient for her to attend:

I now get emails about a transfer student dinner every month or so, which didn't happen when I transferred, but I still get invited to it because I am a transfer student. I haven't gone because they're usually really late and I live off campus.

Similarly, outside evening commitments have prevented Christina's attendance. She explained, "...The schedule I keep with sports and homework and work is, they have transfer student meetings and gatherings but they're always at night and I can never attend."

While students are generally aware of these events, the only method of communication commonly used by UMass to advertise them is email. Lauren shared, "They send me so many emails to try and get me to go to these dinners and socials...". Students lack of attendance is partially attributed to these emails being both confusing and not particularly compelling. Jerry explained, "I mean, I think that they would try to reach out, but it was always in a pretty uninteresting way or, you know, not very tantalizing way." Likewise, Maria cited confusion over which events are intended for transfer students as a barrier to attendance: "...Things can be a bit confusing. I remember the first time that I came to the college, there were events that are happening, but it was very unclear whether it was for first-years or for transfers."

The impact of not attending transfer student outreach events is that it contributes to students feeling there is not much sense of community for transfer students at UMass. Scott explained,

I would say there's a support net. People are asked to participate in, what do you call them? Dining out or evening meetings, monthly... I personally haven't taken any of them yet, but I [am] planning on taking a little bit more adventure this year because so far I feel maybe that was the reason why I feel like there isn't a lot of our community, community college students here...

Many students feel these organized transfer student outreach events demonstrate the university's effort to make them feel they belong at UMass. Amelie shared, "...Definitely they try their hardest to get us integrated well and there's a lot of effort put behind it...you can tell that we're appreciated and we, we belong here for sure." Even those who do not attend appreciate UMass showing effort. Adam explained, "They have a lot of transfer meetings where they try to reach out to transfer students and I do appreciate that. I've not exactly had the time to attend any of them."

For many others, the perception is that UMass could be doing a lot more to help community college transfer students develop needed social outlets on campus. As Jerry expressed, "...They make an effort. I don't know if it's enough." These students feel strongly that the university's inadequate effort is not setting them up for success. Cheryl explained,

...The social aspect was literally the worst and the hardest part. That is what I feel really needs to be changed, because no one, I know you're an adult technically, but you still need to...have that social support around you and when you're not even trying to help students in that way, it's just you're not really setting them up for success.

Students suggest inadequate transfer student outreach and its negative impact on students' sense of community could be improved if UMass organized more frequent opportunities for transfer students to meet up throughout the year. Otherwise, community college transfer students are left feeling a sense of isolation on campus. Juliet divulged:

...I know they want UMass to feel as a community in itself, but I know I've talked to a lot of transfer students and we all don't feel that sense of community. So if they had something for transfer students, like a meetup or a meet and greet with each other after

the school year started, or even frequently throughout the school year just to connect with each other; Because having that one transfer orientation day and having it fill up so fast and not being able to see who the other kids are and are transfer students is, *I'm just kind of blindly walking through campus here and not really finding anyone within my crowd.*

Student Groups and Campus Events: “I don’t do groups or events, really.”

Most community college transfer students do not actively participate in UMass student groups or campus events. Lack of participation can generally be attributed to students trying to keep up with the heightened academic workload previously discussed. Lauren shared that her involvement on campus is, “Non-existent...there are a couple things that are interesting to me, but I like to, I just have too much homework.” Being a working student makes student participation on campus particularly challenging. Juliet explained, “Essentially I put my head down and go to class, leave, go to work and then go home and do homework. And that's what I pretty much do.” Similarly, Andre related his lack of campus participation to having to work twenty-five to thirty hours a week:

...Personally, I definitely have challenges where I have to work a lot outside of class to sustain myself....it was about 25 to 30 hours a week that I'm working outside of class and that's very challenging. So actually, where a lot of that happens on the weekends and that removes my ability to be involved in a lot of the social events.”

Factors such as age and the challenge of commuting inhibit other students’ ability to participate in student groups and events on campus. For Teri, this contributed to what she described as a lessened “sense of community” at UMass:

I don't really attend events. I don't really, I don't do groups or events really; And again, I think that kind of also stems back to, it's challenging being, you know, I'm a commuter, which is challenging. I commute from an hour away, so I'm not really, you know, I'm not here every day. I'm a non-traditional student and I'm a transfer student, so I feel like I have all of those things kind of working against me in the sense of like community here.

Less commonly, despite a desire to participate in student groups at UMass, students are unaware of where to locate them or how to join. Christina disclosed, "It's confusing a lot of the times, just cause, there's no guidance as to how to become involved. Andre described his initial lack of awareness at UMass: "...So awareness of the opportunities was the challenge from the start. And then once I became aware it was easier to get there." Andre credited his on-campus job for how he eventually learned of available student groups and events on campus. Andre explained,

Within the first semester it was a little challenging to get there, but the second semester I definitely got more involved and I figured out groups and organizations that could be a part of that. I wouldn't have necessarily known my first semester cause it wasn't clear, but so now I'm working at the Barn here on school, at school and that was really helpful. I think I've been able to make a lot of connections that way and a lot of, gain a lot of valuable experience, and I wouldn't have known, I definitely didn't even know that was an option before starting.

This lack of guidance UMass provides community college transfer students is distinct from what they provide new freshman at their orientation. Christina explained,

I'm not part of any...It's, it's been kind of confusing trying to join groups and student organizations because they never really went over that in my orientation. But I know freshman year they have like the big fairs and everything and, "Oh, come join our group, come join our club. This is how you do it, this is what you need to do to be part of it,"

Similar to how insufficient student outreach events contribute to students' inability to develop a social outlet on campus, community college transfer students without support of a student group commonly feel lost at UMass. As Christina shared, "...without that, it's sort of, it's like being just shoved into a giant sea of people not knowing what to do or where to go.

Community college transfer students who participate in groups and events on campus often limit involvement to groups and activities sponsored by their respective academic departments. Maria explained, "I mean, I like going to some of the seminars that are happening on campus, but I'm not really involved with student groups as much." Similarly, Adam participated in events organized specifically for UMass physical science students: "...The SPS society for physical science students...they do talks about like graduate programs, and they have liquid nitrogen ice cream nights, and I've attended a couple of those."

Actively participating in student groups and campus events is proven to be a valuable social outlet for the few community college transfer students able to carve out time to do so, providing them with a sense of support and community at UMass. Describing his positive whitewater kayaking experience as a member of the UMass Outing Club, Hal shared, "I'm personally part of whitewater kayaking, and you can tell how close everybody gets. Like after going through one cabin trip...it's like everybody knew each other a whole year..." For Jerry, who previously described himself as being in a dire social circumstance living in Sylvan transfer

housing, friendships and a deep sense of social support were developed after he joined a student political group on campus. Currently in his third year at UMass, Jerry shared,

Last year I was like pretty involved with a political group on campus with a kind of unofficial amateur "Fictionzine," and then with the radio station. Actually, I kind of joined all those things in order to garner some relationships, friends, acquaintances, whatever; And this, actually, this semester I'm only doing one of those things, but they were very instrumental in making social connections and stuff. Even if participating in them for the sake of itself wasn't always so rewarding and fun, it was certainly worth meeting people I met. Like I, all my friends are from that; I met either directly or indirectly through that political group.

By and large, community college transfer students whose social dynamics at UMass involve some level of participation with transfer student outreach, student groups, or campus events demonstrate a palpable degree of increased satisfaction with their experience at the university.

Resume Disclosure: “...*When you have something to be proud of, of course you want to include it.*”

Findings related to students’ lived experience being a community college transfer student at UMass conclude with an exploration of students’ disclosure of community college as part of their higher education journey. Although not necessarily a reflection of how students mentally and/or emotionally identify in other contexts, community college transfer student resumes demonstrate that the vast majority (75 percent of participants) acknowledge community college as part of their college experience.

Many students acknowledge community college on their resume out of a sense of pride in what they have accomplished. Lauren boasted,

Cause I was on the Dean's list for every semester, and I got an award for excellence in medical coding. So I mean, when you have something to be proud of, of course you want to include it. It doesn't matter where it came from.

In addition, students do so as a way to give credit to those who helped them achieve their goals.

Emily warmly shared,

...Castille College, that's a home for me. I loved it. I loved, my professors were very supportive. I had a great supportive team with me. Teresa Carrasco from the pathways program at CC helped me keep on track and look towards after community college.

Others acknowledge community college as simply a way to bring awareness to an earned associate's degree or demonstrate a successful academic track record. Juliet shared, "Because I got an associate's degree and super proud of it. It was a huge journey and kind of hard to get through." Some feel this is particularly important to demonstrate for potential employers. Hal explained,

...I still think it's pretty important to what I'm trying to do. I got an associates there so that's definitely worth showing off; And I did a lot of volunteer work while I was there just to help get me a little more experience so, and those skills are definitely still relevant for what I'm trying to do right now.

Teri offered a similar practical explanation stating, "I haven't finished my four-year degree, so it kind of makes sense to say, 'Yes, I graduated from here. I do have that degree. I did finish something and then I'm continuing on.'"

Resume Concealment: “*I accidentally deleted it.*”

The sizeable minority of students whose resumes do not disclose prior community college experience offer varying explanations for this decision. Commonly, not wanting to take up limited space and/or a relatively short time spent in community college are reasons for omission. Cheryl touched on these rationales, divulging how she conceals community college honors achievements by attributing them to her time spent at UMass:

...It was just for the first semester....but I did put that the fall of 2016, when I was at the community college, I was on Dean's list. So I just put it under the UMass Dean's list or honors portion of my resume. I guess just for simplicity and also they say that you should keep your resume to one page, so I was trying to like save space.

A less artful explanation for not acknowledging community college on a resume was offered by Maria, who sheepishly shared, “I accidentally deleted it.” As a former community college transfer student with experience concealing community college from a resume, time will tell how UMass students’ resumes of evolve in the years ahead. The final chapter of this dissertation will summarize these findings and align them with the conceptual framework used for this study: stereotype threat. Important implications for future research and practice will also be presented.

Chapter Five: Discussing the Stigma, Implications, and Recommendations

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the lived experience of community college transfer students currently attending UMass Amherst. Specifically, the researcher was interested in what, if at all, the community college stigma experience is for students along this journey. Included in this chapter is a re-cap of the lived experience for community college transfer students attending UMass and how it ties to existing community college transition and stigma literature, and an application of the findings to the stereotype threat conceptual framework to illustrate the community college stigma experience for students along this journey. This chapter concludes by discussing implications for future research, limitations of this study, and recommendations for practice. The following research question guided this exploration:

What is the lived experience of community college transfer students attending University of Massachusetts Amherst (“UMass”)?

Findings presented in the previous chapter successfully answered this question and are discussed below.

The Lived Experience for Community College Transfer Students Attending UMass

The lived experience for community college transfer students attending UMass Amherst encompasses three distinct periods: Pre-UMass, the Community College-to-UMass Transition, and the time spent Being a UMass Community College Transfer Student. **Pre-UMass**, community college transfer students make the decision to attend and enroll in community college. They make this decision for a variety of reasons, most commonly its relative affordability, convenient proximity to home, and the opportunity it provides students to keep their college options open; All reasons aligning with why these institutions were established in

Massachusetts (1960) in the first place (“Massachusetts Community Colleges,” 2020). With glaring exceptions, most students receive a positive reaction to this decision. Those who do not describe confrontations with the negative perceptions and associated community college stigma held by family members, the community, and in some instances, themselves. These insights, described in detail in the following discussion of students’ community college stigma experience pre-UMass, support the literature’s myriad of findings related to the negative perceptions of community college and associated community college stigma (Alexander et al., 2009; Bahr et al., 2013; Laanan, 2004; Neumann & Riesman, 1980; Tobolowsky & Cox, 2012; Townsend, 2008).

Characteristic of students’ time in community college is being in smaller classes on an intimate campus, with accessible faculty and staff, and a diverse student body. During community college, students frequently encounter challenges associated with commuting to campus, limited social enrichment, managing competing needs, and navigating the transfer admission process seemingly alone. Overlapping each of these challenges is some students’ awareness to negative perceptions of community college and an associated community college stigma, which some perceive themselves to be attached with. These findings suggest Neumann and Riesman’s (1980) contention that, “the public perception of community colleges as being generally inferior to four-year institutions” continues to persist forty years later.

The **community college-to-UMass transition period** spans from students’ determination to transfer to UMass to having to adjustment to a significantly larger campus than accustomed to in community college. Most commonly, students transfer to UMass to pursue a particular academic program, for its relative affordability, and because of its location and proximity to home. Many cite exceptional university dining options as an added bonus, substantiated by

Princeton Review's ranking of UMass as having #1 best campus dining in the nation (Howland, 2020).

Prior to beginning coursework at UMass, most students attend transfer student orientation, space permitting, or complete an online alternative that is not transfer student-specific. UMass providing a transfer student orientation demonstrates an important step towards fostering a transfer receptive culture on campus (Jain et al., 2016). During orientation, students break into smaller groups and meet with an advisor or current UMass student to register for first semester classes. Last to register for classes on campus leaves students with limited options, making for what they describe as a stressful task, often exacerbated by students' community college transcripts not being reviewed by UMass prior to registering. These findings are reminiscent of those ascertained by Tobolowsky and Cox (2012), in which faculty and staff members cited community college transfer students being last to register for class as an institutional policy reinforcing the perception of these students as not a priority of the university. Some UMass students unable to attend transfer student orientation in-person are invited to a new student event in the Mullins Center, where speakers largely fail to mention the presence of transfer students in attendance. This oversight by UMass contradicts elements contributing to a transfer receptive culture on campus, including receiving institution acknowledgement of the lived experiences that transfer students bring to the campus (Jain et al., 2016).

If community college transfer students do not commute to campus, most live in UMass transfer housing referred to as "Sylvan." Located in the northeast corner of campus and described as looking like a prison, students offer mixed feelings and some very harsh criticism about living in the transfer-only accommodations of Sylvan. Additionally, transitioning from a manageable community college campus with relatively small student body to a "massive"

UMass environment is a nearly universally challenging adjustment for students in the community college-to-UMass transition period. This includes difficulty finding classes and learning how long it takes to get from one point to another on campus. Navigating the “humongous” UMass campus in a sea of students unlike anything experienced in community college is overwhelming for many, to the point it even exacerbates the social anxiety of some students. For a few students, relationships with an experienced transfer or non-transfer student is very beneficial in this context, confirming Flaga’s (2006) findings related to the value of relationships with non-transfer students as an important informal learning source at receiving institutions.

The lived experience for students during the time they spend **Being a UMass community college transfer student** includes a range of adjustments, encounters, and challenges.

Academically, community college transfer students must adjust to a rigorous and challenging curriculum many feel overwhelmed and/or unprepared for. This study did not extensively examine whether students experienced the type of temporary GPA dip typically associated with “transfer shock” often found to accompany community college transfer students’ first term at a new institution (Laanan, 2004); However, for at least one student on a semester academic leave of absence at the time of interview, an experienced GPA dip was not so temporary. Classes at UMass also contain significantly more students than was experienced in community college, making it difficult to talk with professors or connect with classmates and resulting in many feeling the same sense of “anonymity” discussed in the findings of Townsend and Wilson (2006).

Those needing assistance with mapping out classes must generally rely on advising provided by their UMass academic department. Students offer diverging perspectives on the effectiveness of academic advising received, with some citing detrimental reliance on an advisor

for having to spend an additional term at UMass in order to graduate. In addition to there being no designated transfer student center on campus, as can be found at “transfer centered” universities such as UCLA (Jain et al., 2011), students at UMass cite non-existent transfer-specific support services and resources. With the students at UMass left to rely on those services and resources generally available to all students regardless of transfer status, this study’s findings reflect the literature’s determination that faculty and staff are often unaware of their being distinct needs of its campus transfer student population (Nunez & Yoshimi, 2017; Tobolowsky & Cox, 2012). A number of students participate in academic and career development opportunities as well, including university research, internships, and campus employment. For some students, their community college transfer status is a barrier to these opportunities, particularly teaching assistantships with eligibility requiring a certain amount of credits to have been completed at UMass.

Outside the classroom, UMass organizes transfer student outreach events including monthly dinners, meetings, and speakers. An apparent attempt to facilitate a transfer receptive culture on campus (Jain et al., 2016), this outreach demonstrates some understanding on the part of UMass that transfer students require acute assistance as they become part of the social fabric of the university. Unfortunately, student participation with these activities is minimal with students offering a variety of explanations for their lack of attendance including ineffective advertising, age, demands of their academic workload, employment obligations, and the typically late start time of these events. Similarly, UMass community college transfer students express limited participation with student groups and events on campus, aligning with the literature’s assertion that community college transfer students are less engaged with receiving institutions than non-transfer students (Ishitani & McKittrick, 2010).

How participants currently present their college educational experience to potential employers is also included during their time spent as a UMass community college transfer student. Upon review of participants' **current resume**, the majority (75%) disclose their prior community college experience. Justification includes pride in the accomplishment, to give credit to those who helped along the journey, and to bring awareness to one's academic track record and/or earned associate's degree. A sizeable minority of students (25%) do not identify community college on their resume. As rationale for this decision, students commonly cite not wanting to waste limited space on the document or the relatively short time they spent as a community college student. Interestingly, the majority of students who conceal community college experience from a current resume are also those who reported some of the most detailed pre-UMass encounters with negative perceptions and stigma associated with community college. While these findings represent a small sample of students, they reflect Alexander et al.'s (2009) findings that UC Berkeley community college transfer students who experienced incidents of transfer rejection were six times more likely to conceal their community college transfer status. Alexander et al. concluded the results, "support[ed] the notion that concealment of a stigma 'is likely to be motivated by fears of negative evaluation and avoidance of rejection'" (8). This assertion is not conclusively supported by findings of this study, although it may certainly be the case.

Applying Stereotype Threat as a Conceptual Framework

With this newfound understanding of the lived experience of community college transfer students attending UMass, examination of what the community college stigma experience is for students along this journey is now achievable. This is an important undertaking, as it addresses a deficiency of research into the prevalence and character of stigma for community college transfer

students at receiving institutions (Bahr et al., 2013; Laanan, 2007; Townsend, 2008). Further, by using stereotype threat as a framework for this analysis, the researcher addressed calls to expand the application of stereotype threat (King, 2011), particularly to the experiences of community college transfer students at receiving institutions (Whitfield, 2005).

In using stereotype threat to illustrate students' community college stigma experience, the researcher borrowed the legal profession's practice of breaking statutes down to their core elements to create a framework for analyzing the applicability of relevant facts to the law. As presented in chapter one, the situational phenomenon of stereotype threat occurs when a group attached with a particular stigma or negative stereotype ("targets") find themselves in a situation "concerned about being judged or treated negatively on the basis of [that] stereotype" (Spencer et al., 2016, 416). The potential impact on those inflicted with stereotype threat includes diminished immediate performance (Woodcock et al., 2012), and non-performance related consequences to one's self-perception, identity, and sense of belonging (Spencer et al., 2016). From this definition, the core elements forming the stereotype threat framework include, 1.) existence of a stigmatized group, 2.) a situational "trigger" causing members of that stigmatized group ("targets") concern about being judged or treated negatively on the basis of that stigma, and 3.) consequential impact on a target's immediate performance, self-perception, identity, and/or sense of belonging.

The discussion to follow is organized in accordance with the three periods spanning students' lived experience: Pre-UMass, the Community College-to-UMass Transition, and time as a UMass Community College Transfer Student. Findings resembling elements of the stereotype threat framework within each period of students' lived experience are presented in this discussion.

Pre-UMass Community College Stigma Experience

Only findings resembling the first element of the stereotype threat framework (existence of a stigmatized group) emerged during the Pre-UMass period for community college transfer students attending UMass. As defined in chapter one, a social stigma is, “a negative attribute or identity that devalues a person within a particular context or culture” (Levin & Van Laar, 2006, 83). Pre-UMass evidence suggesting UMass students who previously attended community college are a stigmatized group includes the sentiments perceived to be held within a student’s hometown, in the views and comments of family members, and even in the perspectives of some students themselves.

Evidence of a Stigmatized Group Pre-UMass

Students confront evidence of an existing community college stigma before they ever step foot on the UMass Amherst campus. The most glaring examples are reflected in student descriptions of family members described as reacting to their community college decision with phrases such as, “pretty badly,” “really disappointed,” and even “very sympathetic.” Cheryl specifically referenced her mother’s “stigma about community college” in describing the reaction to her community college decision. While Cheryl did not define the “stigma about community college” held by her mother, she specifically identified it as the basis for her mother’s “real disappointment” and unhappiness in her decision to attend community college, reflecting the very community college stigma Neumann and Riesman (1980) declared to exist forty years ago.

Expressing understanding in her mother’s dismay, Cheryl also specifically admits to, harboring “a stigma of my own against community college” during high school. Cheryl’s admittedly negative sentiment towards community college would seem to make sense if she

attended high school in an area similar to Jerry's, where community college is perceived to be looked down upon as a place for students with no better four-year college option. These negative perceptions and community college stigma presented align with what the discussed #EndCCStigma campaign has been working to eliminate (Jaschik, 2019). Cheryl's admission and Jerry's description also seem to provide evidence in support of the campaign's aim to change the minds of high school counselors, perceived to be locked into promoting four-year institutions as the only successful pathway out of high school.

Maria's experience offers similar Pre-UMass evidence of an existing community college stigma. Maria did not specifically use the word "stigma" when describing her parent's negative sentiment towards community college as the basis for their disappointment; However, her parents' perception that community college is less prestigious and a non-traditional college track reflects the negative perceptions of community college demonstrated within the literature. Braxton et al. (2015) specifically cited the need to bolster the prestige of community college faculty as a means to tweak the culture and negative perception of these institutions. Further, King (2011) made reference to the perception of community college as a non-traditional college track, describing community college students as not fitting the demographic of a "typical college student" frequently played in movies (33). It is possible this perception of community college as a non-traditional college track has nothing to do with a negative perception of community college itself, and simply reflects a contention in the literature that Massachusetts is just, "dominated by elite and private academic traditions" (de la Torre & Wells, 2014, 5; Marcus, 2015; Neumann & Riesman, 1980). However, that the negative perception and community college stigma continues to be demonstrated during students' time enrolled in community college suggests otherwise.

Only after moving from the Dominican Republic and enrolling in a Massachusetts community college did Luna become aware of an existing community college stigma. A self-described “A” student in high school, Luna explicitly discussed the difficulty she had overcoming this stigma, which she described as people being “judged when they attend community college.” Alexander et al. (2009) makes reference to students being judged for attending community college, describing experiences of “transfer rejection” for community college transfer students attending UC Berkeley. These included students’ being perceived as intellectually inferior or not academically capable because they attended community college, and that community college students had it easy. Language some participants use to describe their own perceptions of community college classmates at the time evidences the stigma and perceived judgment that Luna described and was experienced by community college transfer students at UC Berkeley (Alexander et al., 2009). For example, demonstrating that pre-conceived notions continued with her as a community college student, Cheryl expressed satisfaction in, “the way the students behaved and presented themselves,” and how it was, “better than [she] was expecting it to be.”

The remaining evidence of an existing community college stigma Pre-UMass is demonstrated in the personal struggle some students have with accepting or talking about their community college attendance with others; Particularly amongst those who attended a four-year institution directly from high school prior to enrolling in community college. Cheryl’s distress about being a community college student and Christina’s struggle talking about it with friends again suggests some students continue harboring a community college stigma after enrolling in community college themselves. This internal struggle, coupled with the negative perceptions and explicit expressions of a community college stigma experienced by others, demonstrate a

Pre-UMass community college stigma experience littered with evidence of said stigma; The first element of the stereotype threat framework.

As presented in the discussion to follow, the community college stigma experience for students in the Community College-to-UMass Transition period goes beyond evidence confirming existence of community college stigma, encompassing several instances of potential stereotype threat triggers causing members of a stigmatized group (“targets”) concern about being judged or treated negatively on the basis of that stigma; The second element of the stereotype threat conceptual framework. An instance of the third element of the framework, consequential impact to one’s immediate performance, self-perception, identity, and/or sense of belonging, is also evidenced during this period of transition.

Community College Stigma Experience in the Community College-to-UMass Transition

Unlike students’ Pre-UMass period, consisting only of instances evidencing the first element of the stereotype threat framework (existence of a stigmatized group), the community college stigma experience for students in the community college-to-UMass transition period is colored with resemblances to the second element of the stereotype threat framework: triggers causing members of a stigmatized group (“targets”) concern about being judged or treated negatively on the basis of that stigma. As outlined in chapter one, triggers inducing stereotype threat include *overt stereotypic statements* (Woodcock et al., 2012), *situational cues* “[reminding] targets of culturally held stereotypes” ...[or] “alert[ing] targets that their group is devalued in a particular situation” (Spencer et al., 2016, 417-18), and *interpersonal interactions* with the prejudiced attitudes and/or behaviors of the “high-status” group or learning about those prejudiced beliefs from others in the targeted group (418). Additionally, one instance of the stereotype threat framework’s third element, consequential impact to one’s immediate

performance, self-perception, identity, and/or sense of belonging, is demonstrated during this transitional period.

Stereotype Threat Triggers in the Community College-to-UMass Transition

The community college stigma experience for students during the community college-to-UMass transition period includes several potential *situational cue triggers* reminding students of their attached community college stigma or suggesting community college transfer students, as a group, are devalued or less of an institutional priority to the university than non-transfer students. Potential triggers present themselves in nearly every facet of the community college-to-UMass transition including: transfer student orientation and its non-transfer-specific online alternative, the new student event in the Mullins Center, inadequate review of students' community college transcripts, and in Sylvan transfer housing accommodations. These triggers are described as *potential* to reflect that not every student experiences an event, occurrence, or interaction in the same way; Therefore, what is a stereotype threat trigger for one student may be a completely non-remarkable interaction for another.

Potential Situational Cue Triggers

For many, the community college stigma experience in the community college-to-UMass transition period begins with **transfer student orientation**. As presented in the findings, UMass transfer student orientation cannot accommodate the attendance of every new transfer student, resulting in eager students being turned away only to be offered a non-transfer specific online alternative. Students describe dismay with this short, one-day event referred to by Mark as a “glorified campus tour.” While some lament comparing it to week-long trips known to be provided transfer students at other receiving institutions, others highlight how the brevity of UMass transfer student orientation does not measure up to the two-day event provided their non-

transfer peers. Jerry succinctly pointed out, “Like transfer orientation was very brief compared to freshman orientation.”

In addition to these shortcomings, students express that UMass, through its orientation, does not demonstrate respect for the diverse backgrounds of its new transfer students. Among other attributes, this diversity includes students who are employed, commuters, non-traditional-aged, and first-generation college students. In these ways, transfer student orientation mimics institutional practices Tobolowsky and Cox (2012) found to reinforce the perception among seventeen faculty and staff members that community college transfer students were not a priority of their university, including late-date orientation. Similarly, the way it is offered, UMass transfer student orientation suggests the orientation experience of community college transfer students is being devalued by UMass in a way it is not for non-transfer students of the university. Some situational cue trigger characteristics associated with transfer student orientation are also demonstrated in the Mullins Center event hosted for new students to UMass.

As discussed, some students unable to attend transfer student orientation are invited to a new student event hosted in the Mullins Center on campus. Similar to students’ transfer orientation experience, attendance at the **Mullins Center event** represents a potential situational cue trigger for students attached with the community college stigma. Natalie detailed her experience listening to “welcome” speeches while sitting in a crowd of thousands of mostly non-transfer students. Despite prior assurances from organizers that the event was intended for both new transfer and non-transfer students alike, speakers never acknowledged the presence of the transfer students in attendance, instead addressing the audience as a homogenous group making their first foray into higher education. Following the speeches, students were asked to participate

in a group photo of a graduating class many community college transfer students would never be part of.

By not acknowledging community college transfer students in attendance, the Mullins Center new student event contributes to students' community college stigma experience as a potential stereotype threat situational cue trigger. Failing to deliver a program that acknowledges students' transfer journey threatens to alert them to being devalued in a way unlike the non-transfer students in attendance, for whom the event caters to. Further, acknowledgement of the diverse lived experience transfer students bring to campus is discussed by Jain et al. (2016) as a critical component to a receiving institution's fostering of a transfer receptive culture. Ideally, this might mean an event that recognizes the diversity of its community college transfer student body, including its first-generation, parent, post-traditional aged, veteran, and other demographically underrepresented students. Natalie's suggestion UMass speakers at the very least reference transfer students in attendance may help: "Even just adding the word, 'Transfer students' into the first speech would have made me feel like I'm not completely wasting my time by sitting here for an hour, because it was also really boring." As it is currently presented, however, the UMass Mullins Center event, like transfer student orientation, fails to acknowledge and respect the lived experience community college transfer students bring to campus.

Whether or not community college transfer students attend the Mullins Center new student event, they are dismayed with the university's handling and inadequate review of their **community college transcripts** as they transition into UMass. As discussed, this neglect has significant consequences for students when registering for classes; A process some students already describe both as stressful and as an academic barrier to be overcome. Some community college transfer students perceive the failure to review transcripts as distinct from their non-

transfer peers entering UMass directly from high school with advanced placement (AP) credits. Mark reflected on this frustration stating, "...Just the fact that it wasn't analyzed when I transferred in. So that one specific area is really, I think, unique to transfer students because AP credit is pretty easy." This neglect resembles another potential situational cue trigger, alerting students to the possibility their academic transition is being devalued as an institutional priority, especially compared to what is perceived to be a seamless transition for non-transfer students; A devaluation Townsend (2008) finds often relates to people's negative perceptions of community college.

Sylvan transfer housing represents a final situational cue trigger in students' community college-to-UMass transition period. Students ascribe markedly subpar attributes to Sylvan transfer housing, including that it feels isolated from the rest of campus, looks like prison, and that nobody wants to live there. This, coupled with students' perception of Sylvan accommodations as distinctly inferior to every other residential option on campus, may alert students that their campus residential experience, compared to non-transfers, is being devalued by UMass; A devaluation notably tied to people's negative perceptions associated with community college (Townsend, 2008). These attributes make Sylvan a final potential stereotype threat situational cue trigger contributing to students' community college stigma experience in the community college-to-UMass transition period.

Consequential Impact On Students' Sense of Belonging Transitioning to UMass

Coupled with the underlying community college stigma demonstrated across the literature and within the lived experience for students in the Pre-UMass period, the outlined situational cue triggers alerting some to possibly being devalued on the basis of that stigma can result in a *consequential impact* for some community college transfer students at UMass: the

third element of the stereotype threat conceptual framework. As previously discussed, stereotype threat triggers can have a consequential impact on targets' immediate performance, self-perception, identity, and/or sense of belonging (Spencer et al., 2016). The community college stigma experience for students in the community college-to-UMass transition period includes a consequential impact of transfer student orientation as a situational cue trigger on students' sense of belonging transitioning into the university.

Students expressed how their experience with the one-day transfer student orientation, described as failing to appreciate the diversity of new transfer students and not fostering relationships between students, directly contributed to a sense of isolation transitioning to UMass. Juliet shared, "...For transfer students, it's like you're thrown into like whatever crowd for orientation, you're probably not going to connect with those kids. So you're also gonna come to school on the first day and just be by yourself." This is important to be aware of as students who perceive their social ability diminished by feelings of isolation entering UMass are less likely to participate in university student groups and campus organizations (Laanan, 2007), which, as discussed, the findings indicate to be the case for community college transfer students at UMass.

This is also particularly concerning as, along with reporting limited participation on campus, findings indicate UMass community college transfer students have a difficult time developing relationships with others, both on campus and inside the classroom. Although this is in line with Townsend's (2008) findings that community college transfer students at receiving institutions have difficulty making friends transitioning to campus, a diminished sense of belonging can lead to withdraw, loss of motivation, and/or domain commitment (Spencer et al., 2016), an examination of which was beyond the scope of this study. Therefore, this

consequential impact of transfer student orientation as a stereotype threat trigger on students' sense of belonging as they transition to UMass should not be overlooked. Several additional stereotype threat triggers, including some with a demonstrative consequential impact, are shown lie ahead for students during their time being UMass community college transfer student.

Community College Stigma Experience at UMass

All three elements of the stereotype threat conceptual framework contribute to students' community college stigma experience being a UMass community college transfer student. How some students describe their current perception of a community college education demonstrates persisting evidence of an existing community college stigma, the first element of the stereotype threat framework. The second element of the framework, stereotype threat triggers in the form of overt stereotypic statements, situational cues, and interactions with the prejudiced attitudes and/or behaviors of non-transfer students, all present themselves during this period as well. Lastly, a consequential impact by some of these triggers on students' immediate academic performance, self-perceptions, and sense of belonging at UMass is also demonstrated; The third element of the stereotype threat conceptual framework.

Evidence of A Stigmatized Group at UMass

Evidence the community college stigma persists into students' time as a UMass community college transfer student is demonstrated in perceptions of some of the students themselves. Assessing instructors encountered during one semester spent in community college, Jerry offered an assumption-filled diatribe mirroring the negative perception of a community college education highlighted in chapter two of this dissertation. This community college transfer student's perception of community college as a place of low-quality instruction stemming from poorly paid professors waiting on retirement reflects the same community

college stigma evidenced in students' Pre-UMass period and discussed in the literature. Specifically, this sentiment not only supports Townsend's (2008) assertion that negative perceptions of community college contribute to students being devalued at receiving institutions, but that those perceptions can be held by community college transfer students themselves.

Stereotype Threat Triggers at UMass

As a reminder, the third element of the stereotype threat conceptual framework are triggers causing members of a stigmatized group ("targets") concern about being judged or treated negatively on the basis of that stigma. Triggers inducing stereotype threat include *overt stereotypic statements* (Woodcock et al., 2012), *situational cues* "[reminding] targets of culturally held stereotypes" ...[or] "alert[ing] targets that their group is devalued in a particular situation" (Spencer et al., 2016, 417-18), and *interpersonal interactions* with the prejudiced attitudes and/or behaviors of the "high-status" group or learning about those prejudiced beliefs from others in the targeted group (418). Unlike students' Community College-to-UMass Transition period, where only stereotype threat situational cue triggers were presented, each form of stereotype threat-inducing trigger contributes to the community college stigma experience for community college transfer students during their time at UMass. The two forms of stereotype threat triggers contributing least frequently to students' community college stigma experience, overt stereotypic statements and interpersonal interactions, are discussed first, followed by several situational cue triggers confronted by UMass community college transfer students.

Overt Stereotypic Statement Triggers

Few overt stereotypic statement triggers contribute to students' community college stigma experience at UMass. In fact, many students described the UMass community as largely welcoming and accepting of their community college background, with Christina crediting this

to the fact all students, regardless of transfer status, are just trying to get through the rigor of UMass together. In direct contrast, however, Luna described an office hour's interaction she and another community college transfer student had with a **biology professor** who, upon learning of their community college background stated, "This class is not for community college student transfers." Similar overt stereotypic statements grounded in the negative perception of community college transfer students as not academically prepared were directed at Adam while taking classes at the private colleges in the **five college consortium**. There, Adam explained how private college classmates directed statements at him suggesting, "Oh, you're not qualified to work on anything."

Overt stereotypic statements proclaiming inadequate academic preparation of community college transfer students at UMass mirror the negative perception of community college transfer students' academic preparation and ability Tobolowsky and Cox (2012) found to be held by the faculty and staff of a receiving institution. For some, the judgement underlying sentiments expressed by this professor and student define what it is to be a community college transfer student at UMass. Luna professed, "People think that you're, you know, less. People think that you can't to do it..." In addition to these overt stereotypic statements, a prejudiced attitude towards those with a community college background is also reflected in the interpersonal interaction triggers some experience at UMass.

Interpersonal Interaction Triggers

Community college stigma is exhibited in more than just overt stereotypic statement triggers committed by UMass professors and students of the five college consortium. Spencer et al. (2016) explained that stereotype threat-inducing triggers can include *interpersonal interactions* with the prejudiced attitudes and/or behaviors of the "high-status" group (418). The

community college stigma experience for students at UMass includes interpersonal classroom interactions with the prejudiced attitudes and behaviors of non-transfer students. For some, this stems from commonly being **older than non-transfer classmates**, having spent several years in community college prior to transfer and/or because they take their major's course requirements later than non-transfer students. Christina detailed interactions with the prejudiced attitudes of her non-transfer classmates when she felt judged on the basis of this typical community college transfer student trait: "...It's kind of like, 'Oh, you're a sophomore and you're in this freshman class?'"

Being targeted by classmates' prejudiced attitudes because they are older is not the only basis for experienced interpersonal interaction triggers in the classroom. As previously discussed, students must adjust to having substantially more classmates at UMass than in community college. Newly surrounded by hundreds of classmates in a crowded lecture hall makes it particularly difficult for students to ask questions of professors during class time; Common place in community college, but can be the basis of **classmate scorn** at UMass. As Luna explained, "...Everybody would just look around and be like, 'What is this kid doing? You don't do that with that many people.'" Experiences like this seemingly demonstrate the value Flaga (2006) ascribes to non-transfer students as a potential informal learning resource and connection to a receiving institution's social environment for community college transfer students. Similar future interpersonal interactions might be avoided for community college transfer students enlightened of unspoken UMass classroom norms by an insightful non-transfer student. As it is, each of these interpersonal interactions with the prejudiced attitude and behavior of "high status," non-transfer students at UMass resulting in students feeling judged for

being older or lacking awareness to common classroom practices exemplify additional stereotype threat triggers experienced at UMass.

Potential Situational Cue Triggers

As is the case in the Community College-to-UMass transition period, the most prevalent form of stereotype threat triggers encountered by community college transfer students at UMass are in the form of *potential situational cue triggers*. As a reminder, stereotype threat situational cue triggers are those *reminding targets of their attachment with a culturally held stereotype or alerting them to being devalued in a particular situation on the basis of that stereotype* (Spencer et al., 2016). Community college transfer students at UMass encounter several potential stereotype threat situational cue triggers including: struggling with the academic rigor, disruptive classmates, confronting faculty assumptions, teaching assistantship ineligibility, ineffective academic advising, unavailability of transfer-specific services and resources, and inadequate social support.

Struggle with the academic rigor of UMass. Despite some advantages students attribute to having attended community college, students are largely overwhelmed by the academic rigor of UMass. Comparing himself to non-transfer peers, Max lamented feeling he was the only student struggling with difficult physics material; Something never experienced in community college: “It just seemed like people understood what I was supposed to understand and I was just like, ‘Why am I having such a hard time understanding it?’” Community college transfer students from across academic disciplines attribute this to feeling less prepared for the curriculum than non-transfer classmates entering UMass directly from high school. Jerry, an English major, explained, “I very much...feel like I was playing catch-up. Felt like, constantly behind people that had been here and knew the UMass, had gone through the UMass curriculum,

and were on par for what the professors expected.” Similarly, Lauren, majoring in biology, shared, “...I feel like for me it's definitely because I'm the community college student, but maybe not.”

Because students attribute struggling with the academic rigor of UMass to being unprepared by community college, this struggle represents a potential situational cue trigger for community college transfer students at UMass. This struggle has the potential of reminding students of their attachment with the community college stigma, marked by people's perception of them as less academically prepared or capable (Tobolowsky and Cox, 2012), intellectually inferior, having it easy in community college, or that it was easy for them to be accepted to UMass as a transfer student (Alexander et al., 2009). This reminder is demonstrated to cause some students' concern about being judged or treated negatively on the basis of their attachment to the community college stigma. Mark, a physics major who was homeschooled in high school, explained, “I think it's just, there's a little bit of concern in being I don't want to represent either transfer students or homeschooling or whatever it is, you know, in a negative light.” That students' academic struggle at UMass reminds them of feeling unprepared in community college, and subsequently causes some students' concern for being judged on this basis, students' struggle with the academic rigor of UMass represents a potential situational cue trigger contributing to students' community college stigma experience.

Disruptive classmates. While most described having generally pleasant interactions with UMass classmates, there are classroom interactions that remind community college transfer students they are distinct from non-transfer peers; Situations leading some to alter how they would otherwise respond if not for being a community college transfer student. Lauren described this situation when students behind her in a crowded lecture hall rudely carried on a conversation

unrelated to the lecture: "... They sit right behind me in the second row of a really big lecture hall, and talk almost nonstop." Yet, because she is a community college transfer student, Lauren feared she did not have the stature to ask her talkative peers to stop the disruptive conversation:

And at one point I really wanted to turn around and be like, "For the love of God, I just need you to stop talking!" ...Did I say that? No. Would I have said that if I was in community college? Yes, I would.

Lauren's admission she would have confidently spoken out in community college reinforces this classmate encounter as a potential situational cue trigger. This situation reminded her that as a community college transfer student at UMass, she may not have the requisite stature to ask talkative peers to stop disruptive conversation detrimental to her comprehension of the material. The feeling of not having the same requisite stature to speak up that is held by non-transfer classmates may remind students of being attached to the community college stigma's misperception that it was easy for them to be accepted to UMass as a community college transfer student (Alexander et al., 2009). As this reminder appears to cause students' concern for being judged on the basis of having less classroom stature if they were to exercise clout they are not perceived to have, this represents another potential situational cue trigger during students' time at UMass.

Confronting faculty assumptions. As discussed in chapter four, UMass professors are shown to be a source of validation for students. Amelie shared, "... all the professors... are super accepting and it's just nice to officially feel like a UMass student now." However, professors are also a source of situational cue triggers for community college transfer students, regularly expressing an assumption classes are a homogenous group of students whose entire

college education was received at UMass. Students offered specific instances of professors communicating expectations or citing examples from prior UMass classes without taking into consideration the students in the classroom who transferred in from community college.

These assumptions are reflected in comments made by teaching assistants as well. A teaching assistant expressed the assumption every student in a particular physics class was confused with the material in the same way, discounting the fact community college transfer students like Max did not take the same prior calculus sequence. Faculty assuming every student completed all prior coursework at UMass threatens to alert students their community college education is being devalued by important institutional agents, with whom relationships are considered to be a crucial university experience to transfer student adjustment (Nunez & Yoshimi, 2017). As this devaluation of students' prior education may cause students concern their community college background is being judged as inferior due to the attached stigma, faculty assumptions represent another potential situational cue trigger contributing to students' community college stigma experience at UMass.

Teaching assistantship ineligibility. Some community college transfer students find themselves ineligible for highly desired teaching assistantships (“TA”) at UMass. Though some have attained them, others described being ineligible as a direct result of completing prior education elsewhere. As Christina stated, “I've seen some TA positions or job opportunities where you need X amount of experience at UMass, or you need consecutive semesters of this specific course, and because I've transferred a lot of that doesn't come with me.”

As with faculty assumptions, the requirement TA candidates complete a set number of units at UMass devalues the academic qualifications of students who transferred from community college. This may send a message to community college transfer students, that in

certain corners of the university, their academic preparation is being judged as inferior to non-transfer students, despite otherwise having the requisite subject matter knowledge for the position. As a result, teaching assistantship ineligibility because students received prior education in community college represents another potential situational cue trigger contributing to students' community college stigma experience at UMass.

Ineffective academic advising. Ineffective academic advising is a common aspect of the lived experience for community college transfer students at UMass. For some this included inability to even procure advising within their own department. This was particularly distressing for transfer students in the biology department, where numerous students were said to share a central advising unit rather than be assigned an individual advisor, which is perceived to be the status quo in other departments on campus. Once enrolled, the department's failure to actively solicit community college transfer students to receive academic advising is cited for why some students wasted significant time not knowing which classes to take towards graduating. As Natalie explained,

So you don't get an individual advisor, you get to go to an advising office, and you have to go, and they didn't solicit me coming to the advising office at all when I transferred. So I had no idea what classes I was supposed to take... so I spent at least the first year not really knowing what I was doing, and it felt like that was really an oversight for transfer students, especially in biology because transfer students in other areas do get an advisor and they do meet with them.”

The perception community college transfer students in other departments are assigned an individual advisors causes ineffective advising in the biology department to resemble a potential situational cue trigger for students.

For receiving institutions to facilitate a transfer receptive culture on campus, Jain et al. (2016) asserts they must establish transfer students as a high institutional priority. Providing ineffective advising to community college transfer students suggests this is not taking place in the UMass biology department. Instead, the perceived disparity between advising provided transfer students in other departments and what is provided in biology may alert community college transfer students to being a devalued priority of the department. As this may cause concern they are receiving ineffective advising on the basis of their devaluation as a transfer student, ineffective academic advising resembles another potential situational cue trigger contributing to the community college stigma experience at UMass.

Unavailability of transfer-specific services and resources. Universities have taken substantial steps towards developing a transfer receptive culture on campus. At UCLA, referred to in the literature as the “flagship transfer-receiving institution” of the university of California system (Jain et al., 2011), this even includes establishment of a designated transfer student center, designed to meet the unique needs of its diverse transfer student population. In contrast, students lament the fact there are no available transfer-specific services or resources available on the UMass Amherst campus. As Luna explained,

...There's not a lot of support, the kind of support that we need. So after you enroll in your classes, after you pick your housing and after you go to one day of orientation, there's basically nothing else. You got to fend for yourself.

Students perceive this UMass omission as a reflection of their indifference towards its community college transfer student body. As Natalie stated, “...Academically I think there really isn't anything transfer specific. It's just like, ‘Now you're a student here, so do the ‘student here’ things.’”

In addition to not having access to dedicated transfer services and resources, students described having to actively seek out what is generally available to all UMass students on campus. Described as having to “fend for yourselves,” many never located needed support, such as tutoring services and scholarship information. As Max stated, “...There’s a bunch of stuff here that they have, you know? It’s not on paper or anything and you know, how do you find out?”

The perceived non-investment UMass makes to transfer-specific services and resources and the failure to guide community college transfer students to what is available to them on campus causes students to question their value to the university. As Mark cynically described it, “I think it’s a bit of like...transfer students aren’t their bread and butter. I get it from an administrative standpoint...like you’re not going to make as much money.” As the result of students feeling devalued in this way is concern for being disadvantaged in knowing about information and opportunities that could increase likelihood of success, the unavailability of transfer-specific services and resources represents another potential situational cue trigger contributing to students’ community college stigma experience at UMass.

Inadequate social support. Ishitani and McKittrick (2010) found that, despite the importance of meaningful interactions and relationships to one’s university experiences (Flaga, 2006; Laanan, 2007), community college transfer students are less engaged with their receiving institution than non-transfer students. Apparently contributing to a similar lack of engagement at UMass is that community college transfer students are provided what they describe as inadequate social support critically impacting their social adjustment to the university. Cheryl illustrated this point venting,

...The social aspect was literally the worst and the hardest part. That is what I feel really needs to be changed, because no one, I know you're an adult technically, but you still need to...have that social support around you and when you're not even trying to help students in that way, it's just you're not really setting them up for success.

That some students describe the social aspect at UMass as “literally the worst and the hardest part” runs counter to the scant literature related to community college transfer student self-perceptions. Using interviews with eleven former community college transfer students, Nunez and Yoshimi (2017), identified students’ self-perception as being more concerned with academic and post-graduation career success than “co-curricular activity” involvement. Conversely, UMass community college transfer students offered unsolicited suggestions for how the university could facilitate their social adjustment to campus, including frequent transfer student meetup events and guidance to campus student groups and how to join them. For example, offering the same informational fairs provided to non-transfer freshman.

The perception UMass is “not even trying to help” community college transfer students’ social adjustment, while at the same time providing campus informational fairs to non-transfer students, suggests community college transfer students’ university experience is being devalued. That this devaluation appears to cause students concern their social adjustment to campus is being significantly harmed, inadequate social support resembles a final potential situational cue trigger contributing to students’ community college stigma experience at UMass.

Consequential Impact of Potential Stereotype Threat Triggers at UMass

A consequential impact of some of the potential stereotype threat triggers was evidenced for community college transfer students at UMass; The third element of the stereotype threat conceptual framework. As discussed, a consequential impact of a stereotype threat trigger may

be demonstrated through one's immediate performance, self-perception, identity, and/or sense of belonging (Spencer et al., 2016). Those potential stereotype threat triggers demonstrating a consequential impact contributing to students' community college stigma experience at UMass are discussed.

Impact of Interpersonal Interaction Triggers

For some, the stigma experience for community college transfer students at UMass includes interpersonal interactions with the prejudiced attitude of classmates. This was evidenced in Christina's experience being targeted as an "older" student with the prejudiced attitudes of her mostly younger, non-transfer classmates. Discussing the consequential impact this potential stereotype threat trigger had on her sense of belonging with non-transfer classmates at UMass, Christina explained feeling, "A little bit out of place, somewhat, cause I would see all my peers who are my age going, you know, strides ahead." Beyond this interpersonal interaction trigger in the classroom, a diminished sense of belonging was the consequential impact for some potential situational cue triggers as well.

Impact of Struggling with the Academic Rigor of UMass

The struggle students experience grappling with the academic rigor of UMass and their association of that struggle to being unprepared in community college is a potential stereotype threat trigger with a demonstrable consequential impact to students' immediate academic performance, self-perception, and sense of belonging.

Failing her first chemistry exam reminded Amelie of the possibility of not being adequately prepared in community college for the academic rigor of UMass. As a result, Amelie determined studying for chemistry was useless to her comprehension of the material and gave up on studying for the next exam. As Amelie shared:

Then, oh my God, we had the first exam and I got the worst grade ever...it made me question everything. I was like, "...Am I really prepared for this?" ...So the second exam I did awful again, because I didn't even study for it and I was like, "What's the point?" Doing "awful again" on her second exam demonstrates a consequential impact to Amelie's *immediate academic performance*. It resulted from her struggle with the academic rigor of UMass triggering thoughts of being inadequately prepared in community college, a common negative perception attached to community college transfer students (Alexander et al., 2009; Tobolowsky & Cox, 2012), leading to her decision to give up on studying altogether.

In addition to a consequential impact to one's immediate academic performance, struggling with the academic rigor of UMass was shown to consequentially impact students' *self-perceptions* and *sense of belonging*. This included self-perceived intellectual inferiority and under-preparedness compared to non-transfer classmates, despite at times possessing a strong background in the material, as well as students describing themselves as feeling "out of their league" in class.

When asked about any academic barriers or challenges overcome related to being a community college transfer student at UMass, students specifically described self-perceived inferiority due to struggling with the academic rigor of UMass. As Jerry shared, "So I mean, of course the inferiority and that stuff." Scott detailed his self-perceived intellectual inferiority to non-transfer students developed as a result of struggling with the academic rigor of UMass. He confided, "It does make you feel a little bit uncomfortable, and also makes you question yourself. Cause again, I feel like sometimes they out smart me...". And for Amelie, being made to feel unprepared for the academic rigor of UMass stripped away self-confidence in her ability to comprehend chemistry material:

...I was like, "I am going to fail," cause it was just stuff I was not prepared for at all.

Even taking micro-bio at CC and having a good strong science background, once I got to chem I was like, "There's no way I'm making it out alive."

Struggling with the academic rigor not only impacted these students' self-perceptions, but it seemingly diminished the sense of belonging others felt taking classes at UMass. Max glumly confessed, "I felt like I was out of my league last semester, which I didn't like."

By hampering students' immediate academic performance, fostering self-perceptions of intellectual inferiority under-preparedness compared to non-transfer students, and diminishing one's sense of belonging taking classes at UMass, a consequential impact of struggling with the academic rigor of UMass contributes to students' community college stigma experience at the university.

Impact of Inadequate Services and Resources

That community college transfer students accessing needed services and resources is not perceived to be a UMass priority has a consequential impact on students' self-perceptions and sense of belonging to the university. Cheryl expressed the impact this devaluation had on her self-perceived awareness to the same institutional information non-transfer students are seemingly made privy to:

So I feel like a lot of things like getting involved with research, getting involved with labs on campus, just talking to graduate students and professors, I didn't realize how important it was until probably last year. So I felt like I wasn't given that information at, which might've been accessible to people who were like fall semester freshmen.

Limited institutional awareness resulting from the lack of accessible services and resources on campus also contributed to students' diminished sense of belonging at UMass. Max described this as feeling: "Like you're outside and not inside...", while Natalie felt a consequential impact to both her sense of belonging at the university and self-perceived value as a community college transfer student at UMass:

So it seems like kind of an easy fix for some of these things, but that *we're just not important enough*. You know, we're only a fraction of the student body. They have a lot of other stuff to do. They have buildings to tear down and redo. So it's, there's definitely a sense of, they probably know that there are problems and they just don't spend the energy to fix it, which also *puts a damper on your feeling like this is a nice school you want to be at*.

Juliet summed up the consequential impact inadequate services and resources can have on community college transfer students' sense of belonging at UMass. Describing the feeling of being alienated by the university, Juliet pleaded with UMass to, "...listen to transfer students and [understand] you're kind of, you know, alienating a whole part of your college, and that [you are] not just made out of freshmen. There's a lot of incoming students from transfer."

Summary of Community College Stigma Experience for Community College Transfer

Students Attending UMass

The community college stigma experience gleaned through the lived experience of community college transfer students attending UMass Amherst encompasses every element of the stereotype threat conceptual framework. The stigma experience for students **pre-UMass** consists of instances and insights establishing the first element of the stereotype threat framework: *existence of a stigmatized group*. This was exemplified by explicit references to a

community college stigma as the basis for family member disappointment in students' community college decision, student admissions to harboring their own community college stigma, the negative perception of community college held in one's community, the perception of community college as less prestigious and a non-traditional college track, perceptions of being judged for attending community college, and students' internal distress in accepting or talking about their community college enrollment. Not only do each of these pre-UMass examples resemble the first element of the stereotype threat framework (existence of a stigmatized group), but they suggest, "the public perception of community colleges as being generally inferior to four-year institutions" continues to persist four decades after Neumann and Riesman's original contention (1980, 54).

The community college stigma experience for students in the **community college-to-UMass transition** period is comprised of several potential stereotype threat triggers, the second element of the stereotype threat conceptual framework. Transfer orientation and its online alternative, the new student event in the Mullins Center, inadequate handling and review of community college transcripts, and Sylvan transfer housing accommodations each resemble *potential situational cue triggers*. Each of these occurrences resemble potential situational cue triggers, threatening community college transfer students to feel devalued as an institutional priority of UMass, particularly compared with the experiences, support, and accommodations perceived to be provided to non-transfer peers. Evidence of a *consequential impact* of transfer student orientation on students' sense of belonging at UMass was also demonstrated during this transitional period of students' lived experience; The third element of the stereotype threat conceptual framework.

Students' community college stigma experience **post-transfer at UMass** includes every element of the stereotype threat conceptual framework. Evidence of an *existing community college stigma* is demonstrated in at least one student's current negative perception of community college and the education received there. Numerous potential *stereotype threat triggers*, the framework's second element, present themselves at UMass as well. These include: *overt stereotypic statements* made by a professor during office hours and a private school classmate within the Five College Consortium, and *interpersonal interactions* with the prejudiced attitudes and/or behaviors of non-transfer students related to community college transfer students being older than most classmates and failing to conform to unknown classroom norms. Several potential *situational cue triggers* reminding community college transfer students of community college stereotypes or alerting them to being devalued in a particular situation also occur during this period for students. Potential situational cue triggers presented post-transfer include struggling with the academic rigor of UMass, disruptive classroom encounters, confronting faculty assumptions, teaching assistant ineligibility, ineffective academic advising, unavailable transfer-specific services and resources, and inadequate social support from UMass.

The third element of the stereotype threat framework, a consequential impact of stereotype threat triggers, contributes to students' community college stigma experience during their time at UMass as well. An interpersonal interaction with the prejudiced attitude of non-transfer classmates diminished a student's sense of belonging in a UMass classroom; Struggling with the academic rigor of UMass impaired a student's immediate academic performance while altering the self-perceptions and sense of belonging of others; And inadequate services and resources diminished a student's perceived value to UMass and sense of belonging to a, "nice school you want to be at."

Implications and Recommendations

This qualitative phenomenological study explored the lived experience for community college transfer students at the most highly-ranked public university in Massachusetts: UMass Amherst. Findings using phenomenological data analysis demonstrated three distinct periods spanning the lived experience for community college transfer students attending UMass: Pre-UMass, the Community College-to-UMass Transition, and time spent as a UMass Community College Transfer Student. The concept of stereotype threat was then used as a framework to evaluate the community college stigma experience for students along this journey. All three elements of the stereotype threat framework presented themselves at some point across these three periods, combining to form students' community college stigma experience along this transfer journey. This glimpse into the lived experience and confronted community college stigma for students attending UMass has important implications for research and institutional practice.

Implications for Research

Completes first-step in addressing Neumann and Reisman (1980) MA/CA community college stigma dichotomy. This study served its purpose of gleaning insight into the community college stigma experience for students attending UMass Amherst. All three elements of the stereotype threat framework contributed to the community college stigma experience for these students in Massachusetts. This included substantial evidence the community college stigma identified by Neumann and Riesman (1980) continues to exist, numerous potential stereotype threat triggers encountered as students transition into and attend UMass, including overt stereotypic statements, interpersonal interactions with the prejudiced attitudes and behaviors of non-transfer classmates, and several potential situational cue triggers

causing students' concern for being judged or treated negatively on the basis of the community college stigma. At least four of these stereotype threat triggers were demonstrated to have a consequential impact on students' sense of belonging, self-perceptions, and/or immediate academic performance at UMass.

This completes a necessary first step towards addressing the forty-year-old unsubstantiated contention of Harvard's William Neumann and David Riesman (1980) that, "There is, no doubt, less stigma..." for attending community college in California than in Massachusetts (54). With an examination of the community college stigma experience for students in Massachusetts complete, future research replicating this study at a similarly highly-ranked public university in California is needed in order to definitively support or contradict this decades old contention in the literature; An exploration the researcher anticipates completing in the near future.

Pioneered stereotype threat as a framework for future exploration of community college stigma. With stereotypes rampant on college campuses (King, 2011), scholars specifically called for research expanding application of stereotype threat to community college transfer students at receiving institutions (Whitfield, 2005). By pioneering the use of stereotype threat as a framework to explore the community college stigma experience for students currently attending UMass, this study's findings begin to address this critical gap in the literature. As with all pioneers, however, it is not meant to be the last. A key factor in predicting the existence and extent of community college stigma is the institutional culture of a receiving institution (Bahr et al., 2013), influenced in part by its size, selectivity, competitiveness, and location (Laanan, 2007). Therefore, future research should lean on this study as a framework for exploring community college stigma encountered within the lived experience of students at receiving

institutions across the United States. The researcher's anticipated study exploring the lived experience for community college transfer students attending a highly ranked public receiving institution in California will contribute to this purpose.

Passes the torch to examine potential effects of stereotype threat on community college transfer students at receiving institutions. All three elements of the stereotype threat framework contributed to the community college stigma experience for students attending UMass Amherst. This suggests community college transfer students, at least at UMass, are a stigmatized group susceptible to the consequences of chronic stereotype threat. Consequences of endured stereotype threat can include domain dis-identification, marked by “members of negatively stereotyped groups progressively plac[ing] less importance on their performance in the stereotyped domain,” and domain abandonment, in which a target no longer links self-worth to performance within the domain (Woodcock et al., 2005, 635). Examination into these potential consequences of stereotype threat was outside the scope of the current study. Future research by a knowledgeable stereotype threat expert is needed to explore whether these consequences are experienced by community college transfer students subjected to chronic stereotype threat, and what, if any, short and long-term effects they may have on student baccalaureate achievement.

Post-UMass resume concealment. This study found a sizable minority of participants concealed their community college education from the resume provided. Resembling Alexander et al. (2009) findings that community college transfer students at UC Berkeley who experienced incidents of transfer rejection were several times more likely to subsequently conceal their transfer status, most UMass participants who concealed community college also reported some of the most detailed Pre-UMass encounters with the negative perceptions and stigma associated

with community college. Future research should be conducted examining the prevalence of community college resume concealment after students graduate. Particular exploration should be made into how students perceive disclosure or concealment of their community college past to have impacted potential and/or realized post-graduation employment opportunities, if at all. This research might shed light on whether students' community college stigma experience continues even after graduating from the university.

Recommendations for Practice

Establish a transfer student center. Findings from this study underlined the fact community college transfer students attending UMass do not perceive sufficient services and resources available on campus to address particular needs transitioning to and attending the university. Comprised of 1,085 transfer students making up approximately 16% of fall 2019 new student enrollments, this is a significant population of students being seemingly overlooked (University of Massachusetts Amherst, 2020b). UMass must consider establishing a dedicated transfer student center on campus to both meet the needs of these students and foster a transfer receptive culture amongst the UMass community (Jain et al., 2016). The UCLA Transfer Student Center, discussed in chapter two, could be used as a model for the type of services and resources proven beneficial to students at a large public receiving institution like UMass. A similar Transfer Mentorship Program could also go a long way towards fostering relationships between UMass community college transfer students, found to have difficulty identifying students on campus who could act as an important informal learning resource at UMass (Flaga, 2006). Additionally, a “one-stop-shop” UMass Transfer Student Center could provide students with the guidance they seek related to joining student groups and campus organizations.

Celebrate community college transfer students. As Juliet's final plea suggested, to avoid alienating community college transfer students on campus, UMass should acknowledge and celebrate the valuable contribution this considerable population of students brings to campus. This is important because the more community college transfer students perceive themselves to be academically and socially supported by their institution, the more likely they are to be satisfied with their overall university experience (Zhang et al., 2017). Raising awareness to the presence of community college transfer students could be as simple as banners placed throughout campus highlighting achievements of these students, spotlighting these students on the university's homepage, and participating in National Transfer Student Week, held once every October to celebrate transfer students and their campus allies (National Institute for the Study of Transfer Students, 2020). Taking these or similar actions to celebrate transfer students will create awareness to the strengths and accomplishments they bring to the UMass community. Further, they could help diminish the negative perceptions of community colleges and their students, found to be at the core of the community college stigma.

Counselors in tune with the occurrence and consequences of experienced stereotype threat. As discussed, community college transfer students at UMass represent a stigmatized group susceptible to the consequences of stereotype threat. Before this stigma can be reduced or eliminated, it must first be acknowledged. The UMass Center for Counseling and Psychological Health must acknowledge community college transfer students as a stigmatized group on campus. UMass counselors must be prepared to talk with UMass community college transfer students about perceived stigma experiences and how they might cope with stereotype threat triggers encountered on campus.

APPENDIX Figure 1

UMass Faculty/Staff Outreach Email

Greetings _____,

My name is Eric Michael, a doctoral candidate in Education at Claremont Graduate University in Los Angeles. As FACULTY/STAFF POSITION for the UMass DEPARTMENT/ COLLEGE/ CENTER/ PROGRAM, I understand you likely have access to community college transfer students within the DEPARTMENT/ COLLEGE/ CENTER/ PROGRAM. I would like to request you graciously consider forwarding a pre-drafted recruitment email on my behalf to UMass community college transfer students within your network around the start of the fall semester (September 3rd).

My dissertation study will explore and compare the community college transfer student experience at selective public universities in Massachusetts, California, and North Carolina. This will be a qualitative study relying solely on interviews with current community college transfer students at each institution. I have already defended my dissertation proposal and have been approved by the UMass Human Research Protection Office to actively recruit students to participate in my study (see attached).

If you have the time and are willing, it would be great to speak with you in the coming weeks to further introduce myself and answer any questions you may have. Also, I have already booked my travel to conduct interviews in Massachusetts between October 3-11. I would love the opportunity to meet and discuss with you in person during that time as well.

Thank you so much for your time and consideration. I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Sincerely,
Eric

(Researcher's phone number)

Eric M. Michael, MPA, JD
Doctoral Candidate, Doctor of Education
Claremont Graduate University

APPENDIX Figure 2

UMass Student Recruitment Email

Dear UMass Amherst Community College Transfer Students:

My name is Eric Michael, a doctoral candidate in the School of Educational Studies at Claremont Graduate University in Los Angeles and former community college transfer student. As an undergraduate transfer student, you may meet the criteria to participate in an interview for my dissertation study on the community college transfer student experience at UMass Amherst. All student interview participants will receive a **\$15 Target gift card** upon completion of their interview.

This study seeks to explore the lived experiences of **community college transfer students at UMass Amherst**. The stories shared by UMass students will be compared with students currently attending selective public universities in two other regions of the United States. The purpose of this study is to better understand the experiences of this unique group of students and aid educators on how to better serve and address the particular challenges they face.

If you are a community college transfer student at UMass Amherst and interested in participating in a relatively short 30-60-minute **interview** about your experience, please call Eric Michael at _____, or email him at Eric.Michael@cgu.edu. Please note, just prior to the interview, you will be asked to review and sign an Informed Consent Form and to complete a brief Pre-Interview Demographic Survey. All information collected will be kept confidential and coded to ensure your privacy, and participation in this study is completely voluntary. The interview sessions will be scheduled at a mutually convenient time and location on the **UMass campus between Thursday, October 3 and Friday, October 11, 2019**.

It is important that UMass understand the experience of their community college transfer students and that your voice finally be heard within the field of higher education! The faculty sponsor of this study is Dr. Linda Perkins from the School of Educational Studies at Claremont Graduate University. Should you have any questions, do not hesitate to contact Eric at _____ or Eric.Michael@cgu.edu.

Thank you so much for your time and consideration.

Best,
Eric

Eric M. Michael, MPA, JD
Doctoral Candidate, Doctor of Education
Claremont Graduate University

APPENDIX Figure 3

PRE-INTERVIEW DEMOGRAPHIC SURVEY

Thank you for your interest in participating in this important study on the community college transfer student experience at UMass! My name is Eric Michael, a UCLA community college transfer student alumnus, class of 2005. As a former community college transfer student and current doctoral candidate in the School of Educational Studies at Claremont Graduate University, my dissertation research aims to provide a voice to a community of students who deserve to be heard within the higher education literature. In my opinion, the best and only way to learn the details of this unique experience is by hearing the stories from the students themselves.

This study will consist of one interview lasting approximately 30 – 60 minutes. Should you agree to participate, you will receive a \$15 gift card to Target upon completion of your interview.

If you are interested in participating in this study by sharing your community college transfer student experience, please answer the short, 17-question demographic survey below and either email it to me at **Eric.Michael@cgu.edu** or you can call my cell phone to arrange a convenient time to meet at

Thank you so much for your consideration to participate!

Eric Michael, J.D.

UCLA Community College Transfer Student Alumnus, Class '05

Doctoral Candidate, School of Educational Studies, Claremont Graduate University

1. What is your name?
2. Date of birth?
3. What is your gender identity?
4. What is your ethnic identity? (Please list all that apply)
5. What year did you graduate from high school?
6. When was the last academic term and year that you attended and/or graduated from community college?
7. Did you receive an Associate's Degree from your community college?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
8. Are you the first member of your family to attend college?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
9. What was your first academic term at UMass?
10. What is your major(s) or planned major(s)?
11. Are you working while attending school?
 - a. Yes. Hours per week: _____
 - b. No
12. Do you live in university housing?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
13. Are you a commuter student?
 - a. Yes. Commute time in minutes: _____
 - b. No
14. Are you a parent?
 - a. Yes. Age of child(ren): _____
 - b. No
15. Are you a veteran of the United States military?
 - a. Yes. Branch: _____
 - b. No
16. When do you expect to graduate from UMass (Term and Year)
17. Do you plan to attend graduate or professional school after graduation?
 - a. Yes. Type: _____ (Examples: law, business, medical, graduate school)
 - b. No

APPENDIX Figure 4

Interview Protocol

Pre-Transfer Experience

1. Please describe how you thought about college during high school and how you made the decision to attend community college?
2. How would you describe your decision to go to community college was received by the people in your life? (i.e. friends, family, classmates, teachers, etc.)
 - a. How did their response make you feel?
3. Please tell me about your experience as a community college student? (i.e. in class, coursework, faculty, support services, AA degree? classmates? student groups? school events? etc.)
4. Describe any significant barriers and/or challenges you had to overcome as a community college student (i.e. academically, socially, personally?)
 - a. How did it make you feel to overcome those barriers and/or challenges?
5. The resume you provided me references/does not reference your community college education. Why? / Why not?
6. What was your motivation to transfer to UMass?

Post-Transfer Experience

7. What has been your experience in terms of being a community college transfer student at UMass?
8. What context or situations have typically influenced or affected your experience being a community college transfer student at UMass?
9. How would you characterize the culture towards community college transfer students at UMass?
 - a. Are there adequate transfer specific resources and/or services available on campus?
 - b. What is your experience with those resources and/or services, if any?
10. How would you describe your participation with student groups and university events at UMass?
11. Describe how you have been received by members of the UMass community (i.e. non-transfer students, faculty, staff, etc.).
 - a. Do you feel accepted as a student of the UMass community?
 - i. How does this make you feel?
 - b. Describe any instances in which you were made to feel academically and/or socially inferior because you transferred from a community college?
 - i. How did this make you feel?
 - ii. How did you respond?
12. What significant barriers and/or challenges have you had to overcome related to being a community college transfer student at UMass, if any? (i.e. academic, social, personal, career).
 - a. Are there any you anticipate having to face going forward?

13. How, if at all, would you describe your post-transfer experiences and/or opportunities have been impacted because of your status as a community college transfer student?
(i.e. Personal/Academic/Social/Employment)
 - a. How does this make you feel?
14. What were any advantages to starting your college education at community college?
 - a. Any disadvantages?
15. Is there anything else about your experience as a community college transfer student at UMass that we did not cover but you think is important for me to know?

APPENDIX Figure 5

Informed Consent Form

AGREEMENT TO PARTICIPATE IN *A COMPARATIVE PHENOMENOLOGY OF COMMUNITY COLLEGE TRANSFER STUDENTS*

STUDY LEADERSHIP. You are being asked to take part in a research project that is led by Eric Michael, J.D., a doctoral candidate at Claremont Graduate University (“CGU”), who is being supervised by dissertation committee chair, Linda Perkins, Ph.D, Professor of Education at CGU.

PURPOSE. The purpose of this study is to explore and compare characterizations of the post-transfer experience of community college transfer students at three public research universities.

ELIGIBILITY. To be in this study, you must be a community college transfer student 18 years of age or older, and must have completed at least one academic year of study since transferring from community college.

PARTICIPATION. In agreeing to participate in this study, you will be asked to complete a brief pre-interview demographic survey and engage in a one-on-one interview with lead researcher, Eric Michael, that will take between 30-60 minutes. Survey and interview questions will ask about your family background, education, academic and social experiences pre and post-transfer, and your general experience as a community college transfer student at your institution.

Follow-up contact is not expected, however, may be requested of you for any necessary clarification of a particular interview response. If necessary, follow-up contact of this nature should take no more than about 10-15 minutes.

RISKS OF PARTICIPATION. The risks that you run by taking part in this study are minimal, including the potential of disclosing and discussing a pre and/or post-transfer experience that may induce some emotional discomfort by sharing. To manage this risk, you have the freedom to decide whether or not to answer any and all questions throughout the course of the interview without penalty or consequence. If additional assistance is needed, you can also contact the UMass Amherst Dean of Students Office located in the Administration Building at 227 Whitmore, telephone number (413) 545-2684, or the UMass Center for Counseling and Psychological Health located in Middlesex House at 111 County Circle, and telephone number (413) 545-2337.

BENEFITS OF PARTICIPATION. While you may enjoy reflecting upon, evaluating, and sharing your academic journey, this study is not expected to benefit you directly.

This study will benefit the principal investigator by helping to complete a doctoral dissertation at Claremont Graduate University, in addition to the possibility of publishing the results in an academic journal and/or at an academic conference.

This study is also intended to benefit university officials at **UMass Amherst** in understanding and addressing the experiences, concerns, and challenges of community college transfer students at

their institution. Further, this study is intended to benefit the study of higher education, specifically advancing knowledge related to the community college transfer student experience at selective public research universities in the United States.

COMPENSATION. For taking part in this study, you will be given a \$15 Target gift card after completing the full interview. Should the interview take more than one session to complete, you will receive the \$15 gift card after completion of the final interview session. Please note, the interview is expected to be completed within one 30–60-minute session.

VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION. Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. The recording of your interview is also completely voluntary, and you may participate in the study even if you refuse to be recorded. You may stop or withdraw from the study at any time or refuse to answer any particular question for any reason without it being held against you. Your decision whether or not to participate will have no effect on your current or future connection with anyone at CGU or **UMass Amherst**.

CONFIDENTIALITY. Your individual privacy will be protected in all papers, books, talks, posts, or stories resulting from this study. We may share the data we collect with other researchers, but we will not reveal your identity with it. In order to protect the confidentiality of your responses and ensure your anonymity, pseudonyms will be used instead of personal identifiers, and all interview data will be stored within an iCloud storage drive on a personal, password protected iPhone and/or Mac laptop device for which only the principal investigator will have the ability to access.

Unless you object prior to or during the interview, all participant interviews will be audio recorded and transcribed. Interview transcripts will subsequently be coded and analyzed for development into study findings. Upon completion of serving intended research purposes for this study, all audio recordings of participant interviews will be erased in order to ensure ongoing protection of participant privacy.

While participants' identities will be protected with pseudonyms used in lieu of personal identifiers, the university attended by each participant may be used in the final research documents related to this study. As a result, participant responses will only be known to be associated with a community college transfer student at the participant's institution.

FURTHER INFORMATION. If you have any questions or would like additional information about this study, please contact Eric Michael, J.D. by telephone at _____, office mailing at Mission Viejo, CA, or email at eric.michael@cgu.edu.

You may also contact my faculty advisor, Linda Perkins, Ph.D. at 909-607-7964, office mailing at Claremont Graduate University, 209 Harper Hall, 150 E. 10th Street, Claremont, CA 91711, or email at linda.perkins@cgu.edu.

The CGU Institutional Review Board has certified this project as exempt. You may contact the CGU Board with any questions or issues at (909) 607-9406 or at irb@cgu.edu. A copy of this form will be given to you if you wish to keep it.

CONSENT. Your signature below means that you understand the information on this form, that someone has answered any and all questions you may have about this study, and you voluntarily agree to participate in it.

Signature of Participant _____ Date _____

Printed Name of Participant _____

The undersigned researcher has reviewed the information in this consent form with the participant and answered any of his or her questions about the study.

Signature of Researcher _____ Date _____

Printed Name of Researcher _____

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