TAPPING INTO TRANSFER STUDENTS:
UNDERSTANDING MOTIVATIONS AND THE BARRIERS TO EDUCATIONAL GOALS

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ABSTRACT

Transfer students represent a significant opportunity for UNC Asheville. Efforts to recruit community college students to four-year institutions, however, requires a deep understanding of the motivations for and barriers to pursuing a bachelor’s degree. Through in-depth interviews, this thesis project uncovered the perspectives of both UNC Asheville’s current transfer students and prospective transfer students from local community colleges—specifically, their educational goals, professional goals, college search and decision-making processes, and their level of satisfaction with their educational experiences thus far. Several central themes emerged to reveal common characteristics, perspectives, and experiences among transfer students. The paths that transfer students take to earn their bachelor’s degrees vary and are largely influenced by external factors. Students enroll in community college as an affordable way to explore fields of interest and careers, with the goal of transferring to a four-year institution to complete their bachelor’s degrees. While they are career-driven, self-fulfillment is also a professional priority for them. They encounter unique challenges along their educational journeys, balance many obligations outside of their coursework, and need specific support to ensure a smooth transition and acclimation from community college to their four-year institution. Findings informed the development of a best practices manual to help undergraduate admissions and marketing professionals better understand this underserved, but significant, student population.
INTRODUCTION

For many American high school students, going to college is a given. Friends and family do not ask students if they are going; they ask where they are going. It is widely accepted that earning a high school diploma is not sufficient specialized education to make job seekers attractive to employers; among the working- and middle-class, earning a bachelor’s degree is a way to ensure financial stability. Within two years of graduating from high school, 85% of middle-class students enroll in college, with more than two-thirds of students seeking bachelor’s degrees (Silva & Snellman, 2018).

When asked about higher education students, 63% of Americans said they believe the average college student is 20 years old, yet their actual average age is 26.4 (Fishman et al., 2017). Undergraduate enrollment of first-year, first-time degree seeking students—those who go directly from high school to college, also known as traditional students—has been trending downward across the U.S. for almost a decade (Student National Clearinghouse Research Center, 2019). Due to population trends, a shortage of eligible traditional college students is projected to continue into the mid-2020s (Livingston & Cohn, 2010).

In addition to a shrinking market, the COVID-19 pandemic is creating more barriers for students who seek higher education, including financial struggles, job insecurity, additional caretaking duties, and working more to support their families. According to spring 2021 data from the National Center for Education Statistics, enrollment at colleges and universities has declined about four percent in the past year.

Institutions are competing for students now more than ever. With about 5,000 colleges and universities in the U.S. from which to choose, it is a buyer’s market for prospective students.
Enrollment often determines whether or not a school remains afloat, especially public institutions that receive state funding based on number of students being served.

Enrollment efforts, particularly recruitment marketing, focus primarily on first-time first-year students, recent high school graduates who have never attended college. These students comprise a large market; about 3.7 million U.S. students are expected to graduate from high school in 2020-2021 (National Center on Education Statistics, 2019). However, the college enrollment landscape also includes a significant number of nontraditional students, a broad categorization that varies across institutions but typically includes students who do not enroll full time at a postsecondary institution immediately following earning their high school diplomas. According to the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center’s 2019 *Some College, No Degree* report, 36 million Americans have some postsecondary education but have not completed a degree and are no longer enrolled—a market tenfold the size of 2020-2021’s traditional students.

A particularly interesting and under-researched subset of nontraditional students includes transfer students—those who attend more than one postsecondary institution. Transfer students include students who plan to transfer from a community college to a four-year institution as well as students who will transfer between four-year institutions. About 80% of U.S. community college students plan to transfer (Rash, 2020), and according to 2018 National Student Clearinghouse data, almost 20% of students attending four-year institutions plan to transfer to another four-year institution. During the past 20 years, transfers have increased by almost 250% (Rash, 2020).

Although moving from institution to institution is common, many universities primarily focus on recruiting and supporting first-year, first-time degree-seeking students, including the
University of North Carolina Asheville. This target audience can be easier to understand, track and target, whereas the college search and decision process for transfer students is not as predictable. Colleges and universities typically rely on enrolling transfers from their local community colleges; to encourage students to continue their educations at four-year institutions, many have articulation and direct admission agreements in place to facilitate transferring credits for general requirements and specific degree programs. For example, UNC Asheville offers direct admission to students enrolled at three local community colleges who meet specific criteria, including earning a minimum GPA and completing or working toward completion of an associate’s degree.

As the traditional applicant pool shrinks, competition for transfer students is on the rise. This is, in part, due to the National Association for College Admission Counseling’s (NACAC) recent removal of provisions that previously prevented schools from recruiting students who have committed to or are currently attending other universities, or were previous applicants (Hoover, 2020). Thirty-five percent of enrollment leaders are now considering actively recruiting students currently enrolled at other schools.

Some admissions professionals consider this to be a controversial strategy, but it could be an advantageous one, particularly for those in North Carolina. While 33% of community college students successfully transfer nationally in six years, only 24% do so in North Carolina (Rash, 2020). Considering that 80% of community college students plan to transfer, but almost 50% do not, four-year institutions have an opportunity to help this student population reach their educational goals.

The goal of this project is to understand the perspectives of both UNC Asheville’s current transfer students and prospective transfer students from local community colleges—specifically,
their educational goals, professional goals, college search and decision-making process, and their level of satisfaction with their educational experience thus far. Findings will inform the development of a best practices manual to reach this underserved population of students.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Current University Recruitment Landscape

Universities across the nation are concerned about the future due to enrollment declines during the past several years and the shortage of eligible college students. This decline is projected to continue into the mid-2020s (Livingston & Cohn, 2010). At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that the U.S. grew by 19.5 million people from 2010-2019, with Hispanic people contributing 10 million to that number. Combined, Asian Americans, Black Americans and those of two or more races contributed 9.2 million (Frey, 2021). Younger generations are becoming more diverse, but these populations tend to come from low-income families, making the cost of college unaffordable for many. For example, in 2015-2016, 60% of Black undergraduates and 53% of Hispanic undergraduates were low-income as compared to 34% of White undergraduates (Taylor & Turk, 2019).

The COVID-19 pandemic has further exacerbated cost sensitivity and a decline in enrollment. According to the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (2021), spring 2021 U.S. postsecondary enrollment decreased 3.5%, from 17.5 million in fall 2020 to 16.9 million in spring 2021; specific postsecondary student populations, such as community college students, cite COVID-related obstacles as primary causes for their lack of enrollment.

Recruiting more transfer students is one strategy to stabilize or minimize the decline of enrollment levels at four-year postsecondary institutions. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, total transfer student enrollment in 2019 was about 1.36 million.
However, the community college student population, which comprises 80% of transfer students (Rash, 2020), also is in decline. According to the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, community college enrollment decreased 9.5% in spring 2021 from fall 2020 levels.

Two studies suggest there will be longer-term effects as the number of part-time students appears to be increasing as students continue to experience the effects of the pandemic, including job loss, reduced working hours, and increased caretaking duties. A national survey of more than 1,000 participants, including caregivers and Black and Latinx students, showed that 53% of students believe the worst of the pandemic is over, and 85% report they are likely to re-enroll at their current college in fall 2021 (Third Way, 2021). However, 18% of respondents estimate it will take longer to complete their degree than planned, especially for caregivers. Eighty percent are concerned about their job prospects due to the pandemic and economic recession, and 65% are not sure higher education is worth the cost, up from 57% who expressed cost concerns in December 2020 (Third Way, 2021).

Similarly, a spring 2021 EducationNC survey of 5,000 North Carolina community college students found that 77% of respondents said the pandemic did not impact their college plans; however, 17% reported enrolling part-time instead of full-time (Osborne, 2021). This is in comparison to the May 2020 survey, in which 80% of students reported being enrolled full-time, while nine percent dropped one or more classes and two percent withdrew (Osborne, 2020).

Effects of the pandemic on community college students might be more intense and longer-lasting than on traditional college students. Historically, community college students come largely from underserved populations (Baker-Smith et al., 2020), and the pandemic has magnified their financial insecurity. For example, Osborne (2021) found when asked how easy
or difficult it would be for students to access $500 within a month for an unforeseen expense, 47% of community college students said it would be pretty or very difficult, while 21% of students said it would be pretty or very easy. Black and Latinx students were more likely to say pretty or very difficult. This will have implications for community college recruitment in the future.

**Understanding the Transfer Student Population**

According to the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center’s 2015 *Transfer & Mobility Report*, more than one-third of college students will transfer, and nearly half of those students will transfer more than once. The majority of students who attend community college do so with the intention of transferring to a four-year college or university to earn a bachelor’s degree (Rash, 2020).

Shapiro (2017) examined the demographics of the fall 2013 cohort of about 850,000 first-time degree-seeking students nationally who started at two-year institutions and found that:

- About 40% of freshmen began their educations at community colleges.
- Forty-two percent of students who started their postsecondary education at two-year public institutions were from low-income families.
- Within six years, 41% of transfer students earned a certificate or associate’s degree; 46% earned a bachelor’s degree.
- Only 39% of lower income transfer students earned a bachelor’s degree.
- Women made up 51% of community college enrollment, and they transferred at a slightly higher rate than men did (33% compared to 30%, respectively).

While data on race and ethnicity was not available for the fall 2013 cohort, Shapiro’s
2018 *Transfer and Mobility* report on the cohort that enrolled in fall 2011 (2.8 million students) does include such data (see Figure 1). More Black and Hispanic students were enrolled in two-year public institutions than White students (48.5% and 51.4%, respectively, as compared to 34.6%). More White students were enrolled in four-year public institutions (44.6%) than Black and Hispanic students (about 37% for both populations). Asian students had the highest four-year public enrollment at 47.7% and the lowest two-year public institution enrollment at 34.2%.

**Figure 1**

*Total Initial Enrollments by Sector and Control of Starting Institution by Race and Ethnicity, Fall 2011 Cohort*

![Figure 1 Diagram](image)

*Note.* This figure shows the percentages of Asian, Black, Hispanic and White students enrolled at four-year private, four-year public, and two-year public institutions in the U.S. Source: Shapiro, D. et al. (2018).

As seen in Figure 2, the breakdown of non-transfer students compared to transfer students is more consistent across races and ethnicities in the fall 2011 cohort, with about 43%
of White and Hispanic students being transfers. Forty-seven percent of Black students and 45% of Asian students were transfers (Shapiro, 2018).

**Figure 2**

*Transfer and Mobility of Students by Race and Ethnicity, Fall 2011 Cohort*

![Transfer and Mobility of Students by Race and Ethnicity, Fall 2011 Cohort](image)

*Note.* This figure shows the percentages of Asian, Black, Hispanic and White students in the U.S. who are transfer and nontransfer students. Source: Shapiro, D. et al. (2018).

These findings support other research, which suggests that students enrolled in two-year institutions are often from lower income families and take longer to complete degree programs, largely due to part-time enrollment. Just over one-third of these students will earn bachelor’s degrees.

Nontraditional students, a broad population defined as those who do not enroll full-time at a postsecondary institution right after graduating from high school, those who did not receive a high school diploma but earned a certificate of completion, such as a GED, and those who have dependents, are generally considered to be over the age of 24 (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.). While transfer students might have characteristics that make them nontraditional
students, those who attend a two-year institution full time immediately after graduating high school are closer to the age of traditional college students. Thus, it is difficult to calculate an average age for transfer students and might be more beneficial to classify their characteristics in generational terms to better understand their perspectives on higher education and communication preferences.

Today college students in their 20s are part of Generation Z (also known as Gen Z), those born between 1995 and 2010. Growing up during the Great Recession of 2008, members of this generation have seen their parents and families struggle financially, even those who received a college education. Therefore, they are cost-conscious, wary of taking on college debt, and want their education to lead to careers and financial stability (Gutfreund, 2016). They value learning experiences that allow for real-world application of skills, such as internships. Eighty-five percent think colleges should teach financial literacy, and 72% want to be able to create their own programs of study to meet their specific career interests and goals (Loveland, 2017). At the same time, they describe themselves as “influential, thoughtful, loyal, compassionate, open-minded, and responsible” and embrace entrepreneurialism (Loveland, 2017, p. 16). In this way, Gen Z is cautiously idealistic.

In terms of communication preferences, Gen Z craves authenticity. As digital natives (those born after 1984 who have grown up using computers and the internet), Gen Z spends a significant amount of time online connecting with contacts and favorite brands. They can be distrustful of authority figures, including brands, and they are keenly aware of when they are being marketed to (Gutfreund, 2016). They want to get to know the human side of a brand and prefer a “show, not tell” approach. For example, Gen Z wants to hear real stories from current students to better understand the experience at different institutions (Loveland, 2017). They
expect brands to know who they are and serve them content based on that information, reiterating their desire for brands to connect them with them authentically through a personalized approach (Loveland, 2017). They also want to gather information that is relevant to them on their own terms (Gutfreund, 2016).

**Understanding the Transfer Student Decision Journey**

Despite being part of the same generation as incoming first-time degree-seeking students, the college search and decision process is very different for transfer students. Admissions marketers must understand the transfer journey to effectively communicate to this audience. Although there is a lack of research about transfer student recruitment strategies per se, there is research about the decision-making process and the unique needs and motivations that influence the decision of where and when to transfer.

*The College Search and Decision Process*

Lukszo and Hayes (2019) highlight how college choice theory has evolved during the past few decades, moving from a sequential, three-phase model in which students progress from predisposition, search and choice proposed by Hossler and Gallagher (1987) to an ecological model (Iloh, 2018) that accounts for “the ecosystem around the person.”

As seen in Figure 3, the Hossler and Gallagher Model consists of three phases: predisposition, search, and choice. During the predisposition phase, students decide to attend college. In the search phase, they research and apply to schools of interest. Finally, students in grades 11 and 12 make their college decision in the third phase, choice.

*Figure 3*

*The Hossler & Gallagher Model*
Note. This figure shows the linear, three-phase college search and decision-making process as theorized by Hossler and Gallagher.

While the Hossler and Gallagher (1987) model assumes that students will go through the college search and decision process only once, the Iloh (2018) model accounts for students who might attend more than one institution, making it more applicable to the transfer student population. As seen in Figure 4, three non-sequential, interconnected forces influence the college decision: information, time and opportunity. While earlier choice theories applied primarily to first-time degree-seeking college students, Iloh’s model focuses on the contexts that might affect students, either traditional or nontraditional, and how they make their college choices. Information, time, and opportunity are particularly relevant to transfer students; however, these three variables vary from student to student, making it challenging to understand their choice process as a cohesive group.

Figure 4

The Iloh Model
This figure illustrates the Iloh Model of Opportunity, Information, Time in students’ college decision-making process.

In this model, information gathering is a key step in the college search process, but not all students have equitable access to information relevant to their needs (Iloh, 2018). For example, nontraditional prospective students might be “far removed from updated information pertinent to quality decision making” (Iloh, 2018, p. 236). In contrast, first-time first-year students have many ways to gather information about schools during their search process and are typically guided by school counselors, teachers or family members. They are also bombarded with print and digital advertising from institutions, as purchasing lists of high schoolers to market to is a common practice in higher education.

Transfer students, on the other hand, must seek out the specific information they need. The E-Expectations® of Transfer Students: A 2020 Trend Report notes that transfer student recruitment strategies are often “underpowered” and do not meet the needs of a group that has already experienced the enrollment process at least once (Ruffalo Noel Levitz et al., 2020). Sixty-five percent of respondents are Gen Z students born in 2000 or 2001. Much of their information-gathering habits are similar to those of traditional students. The top three
information sources for both 2020 transfer students and 2019 high school students were the school’s website, email from the school, and results from a financial aid or scholarship calculator.

Not surprisingly, transfers found the transfer calculator and transfer student testimonials to be more influential than high school students did. On a scale of 1-5 with 5 being the most influential, they ranked billboards, public display ads, and radio or TV ads about 2.3, whereas these did not rank with 2019 high school students. High school students also reported virtual reality videos as more influential (3.35 compared to 2.88 for transfer students), indicating traditional students might be more interested in seeing a school’s facilities and getting a feel for campus life (Ruffalo Noel Levitz et al., 2020).

Further, in terms of reaching out to schools for information, 24% of transfer students will call the institution as compared to 13% of high school students, and just 38% of transfers will fill out an information request form on the website as compared to 76% of high school students. Thirty-nine percent of high school students reported they will respond to mailed brochures or letters as compared to just seven percent of transfer students. Twenty-nine percent of transfers said they would call a school if they couldn’t find the information they were looking for on the website (Ruffalo Noel Levitz et al., 2020). This data suggests that transfer students are more likely to reach out for the specific information they need, as the exploratory phase of their college search might be more narrowed than that of traditional students.

The Iloh (2018) model also emphasizes the concept of time as it relates to the age and specific experiences of a student as well as the historical context of societal events. Unlike traditional students, transfers tend to be more aware of their target institutions before they begin searching, especially those that are local to them, as compared to traditional students. As a result,
transfer students might not conduct as much exploratory searching as traditional students who, as of fall 2014, apply to an average of seven schools (Clinedinst, 2019). Additionally, transfer students desire content that is relevant to the specific stage of their educational journey, such as credit equivalency calculators and recommended course “pathways” for academic programs (Ruffalo Noel Levitz et al., 2020). Because transfer students tend to be concerned with cost and constrained by other duties outside of attending college, ensuring they will complete their degree in a timely manner is particularly important to them.

Finally, Iloh’s (2018) model considers the role of opportunity in the decision-making process. Aside from seeking out information from institutions, how do transfer students evaluate their options? The search and decision process differs for students transferring from two-year institutions as compared to students transferring from four-year institutions (Lukszo & Hayes, 2019). Typically, students transferring from a two-year institution to a four-year set out to transfer from the beginning in order to pursue a bachelor’s degree, which Lukszo and Hayes define as an internal decision. These transfer students might already have target institutions. In contrast, students transferring from one four-year to another are primarily driven by external factors related to their sending institution’s characteristics, making it an external decision.

The context of opportunity is largely shaped by students’ identities and their cultural, familial and social environments (Iloh, 2018). For transfer students, higher education opportunities might be limited by their finances, location, lack of childcare, work obligations, or an inflexible schedule. Conversely, first-time degree-seeking students who follow Hossler and Gallagher’s linear college search and decision process in their high school years might not experience the same information, time and opportunity constraints that transfer students do.

Motivations and barriers
In applying Iloh’s model, the motivations and barriers of transfer students are also illuminated. Understanding transfer students’ unique motivations and barriers is critical for institutions that seek to effectively recruit and retain students. Consider the following verbatim quotes from three transfer students interviewed about their student experience at a midsized historically Black college in North Carolina (Walker & Okpala, 2017).

“Traditional students have a head start. They know the lingo that pertains and is used regarding their majors. They are already using the technological aspects, some to their fullest potential. As a transfer student, I find myself playing catch-up. […] I feel like an outsider.”

“[I] may be wrong but if [the university doesn’t have a department for transfer students] they need to create one to make sure transfer students have everything they need to stay on track and to graduate.”

“I work third shift. […] Some days, I found myself up for 24 to 36 hours without any sleep attempting to meet deadlines. One professor would not accept my work because it was one hour late. I attempted to explain to him that my hours are not normal working hours. He refused to accept my work.”

These three examples suggest several considerations unique to transfer students: a lack of community and sense of belonging, feeling behind academically, and the need for flexibility from faculty due to work obligations. Other participants in the study noted that school administrators could do more to recognize transfer students as a unique student population and have more awareness of their specific challenges.

Additional research about the lived experiences of transfer students sheds light on individual thought processes and considerations that go into making their decision. For example,
a 2020 survey of 94,710 Texas community college students showed that location, cost, student-to-faculty ratio, graduation rates and demographics were all factors with varying degrees of importance, depending on the student’s background (Jabbar & Edwards, 2020).

On average, students chose universities that were about 230 miles from their community college; however, low-income students, students of color and students with families were particularly concerned with distance and preferred a university closer to home.

While total enrollment size of a school didn’t seem to be an influence, non-economically disadvantaged students preferred larger student-to-faculty ratios, whereas low-income students preferred smaller student-to-faculty ratios, indicating they might seek more direct contact with their professors or prefer a more supportive academic environment. Students of color reported that they generally favored schools that demographically matched their own racial or ethnic identity, yet at the same time, there was a negative relationship between choice and schools with HBCU designation among all students, including under-represented minorities.

All students, no matter demographics, said they were more likely to transfer to institutions with higher graduation rates, indicating that outcomes are a top priority (Jabbar & Edwards, 2020). Cost was another top factor that outweighed all others, including location. Ninety-eight percent of transfers went to public schools, with 74% choosing research universities and 80% of students receiving some kind of financial aid (Jabbar & Edwards, 2020).

While the cost to attend college increases, so does the value of a college education. In 2013, the earnings gap between millennials (those born between 1980-1996) with a bachelor’s degree and high school graduates was about $27,000 annually; comparatively, in 1979, the earnings gap between Early Boomers (those born between 1946-1964) with a bachelor’s degree and high school graduates was only about $9,000 annually (Caumont, 2014).
Data show college is still a valuable experience; however, how families perceive the college experience depends on their class. According to Browne (2016), “Those who consider themselves part of the lower and lower-middle classes are more likely than those in the middle or upper-middle/upper classes to say a college education is key to being middle class.”

Now more than ever, colleges must show how their specific experience and education will offer long-term value that’s worth the investment, especially for low-income transfer students who chose to attend community college for affordability.

**State of Enrollment at UNC Asheville**

Examining UNC Asheville’s (UNCA) enrollment trends from 2016-2017 to 2020-2021, particularly transfer student enrollment, demographics, retention and graduation rates, highlights the differences between this population and first-year, first-time degree-seeking students and establishes a baseline for institutional enrollment and retention trends among transfer students.

UNCA is a state-funded, liberal arts and sciences university with a student body of about 3,300. As such, even a small decrease of 50-100 students can greatly impact the operating budget and available institutional financial aid.

According to UNCA’s institutional data, enrollment and application volume has fluctuated in the fall semesters during the past five years. As seen in Figure 5, completed applications have ranged from a high of 4,030 in 2016 to a low of 3,635 in 2020, a 10% decrease, with the largest decrease of 14% from 2018 to 2019. The number of admitted students increased steadily from 2016 to 2019 but decreased by seven percent to a five-year low in 2020.

**Figure 5**

*2016-2020 Completed Applications, Admitted Students & Enrolled Students*
Note. This chart shows the total number of completed applications, admitted students and enrolled students at UNC Asheville from 2016 to 2020.

This might, in part, be due to impacts related to the COVID-19 pandemic. However, to increase enrollment in 2017 and 2018, UNCA admitted a greater number of students (83% and 94% of students who completed an application, respectively, as compared to 79% in 2016), despite receiving fewer applications than in 2016. Although more students enrolled in those two academic years, UNCA’s attrition also increased. At 899, the number of students who enrolled in 2020 is similar to the number of students who enrolled in 2016 and 2019 (980 and 946, respectively).

Enrollment of admitted students also increased steadily from 2016 to 2018, with 980 students enrolling in 2016 and 1,113 students enrolling in 2018. However, enrollment dipped to 946 students in 2019, despite the university receiving the most completed applications (4,244).
and the highest number of admitted students (3,604) in this five-year timeframe. The percentage of admitted students who enrolled ranged from a low of 26% in 2019 to a high of 32% in 2018. As the data from 2019 illustrate, an increase in completed applications and admitted students does not always increase yield.

Since 2016-2017 to 2020-2021, the proportion of transfer students enrolled has remained consistent (see Figure 6); however, part-time transfer student enrollment has increased while full-time transfer student enrollment has decreased. UNCA’s total enrollment of degree-seeking students in the 2016-2017 academic year was 3,798; of that, 1,457, or 38%, were transfer students. In 2020-2021, UNCA’s enrollment was 3,502, with transfers making up 36% of the student population. The number of enrolled full-time transfer students has decreased from about 1,000 in 2016-2017 to 836 in 2020-21, a 16% decline. The number of part-time transfer students was about 375 from 2017-2020, but that number increased by 20% to 451 in 2020-2021—a return to what it was in 2016.

**Figure 6**

*Degree-Seeking Students: Traditional & Transfers, 2016-17 and 2020-21*

*Note.* These charts show the percentages of UNCA’s transfer and traditional students in

This aligns with data collected in the spring 2021 EducationNC survey of 5,000 North Carolina community college students, of whom 17% reported they enrolled part-time instead of full-time as previously planned before the impacts of the pandemic. Additionally, 18% of community college students who participated in a national survey estimated it will take them longer to complete their degree than planned, especially for caregivers (Third Way, 2021).

Retention and Graduation Rates

Figure 7 presents UNCA’s retention rates. Because most transfer students enter UNCA with two years of academic credits from other institutions, UNCA’s data show they are outperforming new first-years in graduation rates yet have similar retention rates from 1-2 years after entry. From 2010-2019, the average retention rate of transfer students for one year after entry was 78%; however, this decreased to 55% two years after entry. On average, retention rates decrease from about 20% in the third year of entry to seven percent in the fourth year and two percent in the fifth year.

Figure 7

*UNC Asheville’s Retention Rates – Transfer and First-Year Students*
Note. This chart compares the retention rates of first-year students and transfer students from years after enrolling at UNCA between 2010-2019.

New first-year students have a comparable retention rate for one year after entry, but they have a higher average retention rate for two years after entry (66%). Due to the variation in the timeline for degree completion between these two student populations, the largest disparity occurs in the third year of entry, with 21% of transfers retaining compared to 61% of first-year students.

As seen in Figure 8, on average, 45% of transfers graduate after their third year of entry. However, this percentage dropped to 31% for the 2018 cohort. Graduation rates of transfer students, however, were higher than those of first-year students. Sixty to 67% of transfers graduate after their fourth, fifth and sixth years of entry compared to 40-62% of first-year students. This might be due to the fact that transfers enter UNCA with some college credit.
Figure 8

UNC Asheville’s Graduation Rates – Transfer and First-Year Students

Note. This chart shows, after the number of years of enrolling at UNCA, the percentages of transfer and first-year students who graduate.

Transfer Institutions

The majority of enrolled transfer students (72%) came from two-year institutions, with 28% of transfer students coming from four-year institutions. Most students who transferred from two-year institutions came from two local community colleges with which UNCA maintains articulation agreements: Asheville-Buncombe Technical Community College (A-B Tech) and Blue Ridge Community College-Flat Rock (BRCC). Students who transferred from four-year universities primarily came from other Western North Carolina-based schools in the UNC System, including Appalachian State University and Western Carolina University.
Transfer Student Demographics

Since 2016, the median age of UNCA’s transfer students has been 23, while the media age of those who enter as new first-year students is between 19 and 20, indicating most students from these two populations are part of the same generation. In 2020-2021, about 50% of transfer students identified as female as compared to about 60% of new first-years.

In terms of race, there is virtually no difference between transfer and new first-year students. In 2020-2021, White students made up the majority of both transfers and new first-years, 70% and 74%, respectively. The proportion of students who identify as Hispanic has increased for both populations since 2016, representing seven percent of transfer students and nine percent of new first-years. And while there has been a slight increase from 4.8% in 2016-2017 to 6.3% in 2020-21 in the proportion of Black or African American new first-years, the proportion of transfer students has hovered around 3.8%.

Top Programs of Study

During the past five years, transfer students and new first-years alike tend to major in psychology, biology, and environmental studies, indicating an interest in the natural and social sciences. Conversely, while management and computer science have grown in popularity with transfer students between 2016 and 2020, new first-years tend to major in health and wellness promotion and mass communication.

High Impact Experiences

High impact experiences are defined as optional learning experiences that typically take place outside of the classroom or have application-based components. These experiences include study abroad, undergraduate research, service-learning and internships.
From 2016 to 2019, the percentage of transfer students completing at least one of these experiences increased from 76% to 85%; however, participation decreased to 81% in 2019-2020. Yet, the percentage of students who have completed two or more of these experiences has increased from 26% to 36% from 2015 to 2019. New first-year students surpass transfers in this area, with 89% completing at least one experience and 54% completing two or more in 2019-2020.

From existing research, we know that transfer students have a range of motivations and barriers when it comes to pursuing higher education. Generally, cost, location/proximity and outcomes, particularly graduation rates, are key deciding factors in their college search and decision process. New research on how the pandemic is affecting students reveals that these limitations are exacerbated by job loss, financial instability and added caregiving duties. Additionally, the transfer search and decision process is not singular or linear, as it commonly is for traditional students.

While UNCA has quantitative data on transfer student enrollment, demographics, retention and graduation rates, the university does not have qualitative data about why these students chose UNCA, their educational experiences at the institution, and why they do or do not retain. Accordingly, the following research questions will help undergraduate admission and marketing professionals better understand the motivations and needs of current UNCA transfer students and prospective transfer students.

*Current UNCA Transfer Students:*

RQ1: What are the psychographic profiles of this student population?

RQ2: What are their educational goals?

RQ3: What factors influenced their college decision?
RQ4: What are their perceived benefits and barriers of their educational journey?
RQ5: What are their professional goals?

Prospective Transfer Students

RQ1: What are the psychographic profiles of these students?
RQ2: What are their educational goals?
RQ3: What is the college search and decision-making process they are undertaking?
RQ4: What are their perceived benefits and barriers of their educational journey?
RQ5: What are their professional goals?

METHOD AND PROCEDURE

This section outlines the steps I took to conduct in-depth interviews with currently enrolled UNCA transfer students and prospective transfer students to answer the preceding research questions and inform the development of a best practices guide.

Recruitment

To recruit current UNCA students, I requested email addresses for all currently enrolled transfer students from the Office of the Registrar, excluding students who entered UNCA from high schools with early college or dual enrollment credits. Each transfer student received an email inviting them to participate in the study (Appendix B).

To recruit prospective UNCA transfer students, I consulted with UNCA’s transfer admission counselor to identify the two primary feeder community colleges—Asheville-Buncombe Technical College (A-B Tech) and Blue Ridge Community College-Flat Rock (BRCC). The transfer admission counselor also provided contact information for her counterparts who work with prospective transfer students at the two community colleges. I
reached out to these contacts via a standardized email providing information about the research study and requested they share it with their students (Appendix A).

In an effort to achieve representation, each recruitment email included a link to a screener questionnaire Google Form to identify the race, gender and age of transfer students interested in participating (Appendices C and D). Because the median age of UNCA’s transfer student population is 23, I chose not to interview students over 30.

I followed up with eligible students via a standardized email that included a consent form, instructions for a pre-interview projective exercise designed to help me understand their lifestyles, attitudes and values, and a request for days and times they were available for an interview (Appendix E). Interviews were then scheduled, and participants were asked to complete and return the consent form and the projective exercise at least one day before their scheduled interview took place.

Because current and prospective transfer students are at different stages in their educational journeys, I developed an interview guide for each participant type based on the research questions.

**Collecting Data**

I conducted the interviews virtually via Zoom to increase access and adhere to COVID-19 health and safety best practices. Each interview lasted about one hour, and each participant received a $15 Visa gift card as an incentive.

At the beginning of each interview, I reviewed the information in the signed consent form to confirm the participant understood the purpose of the interview, reiterating that identifiers would not be included in any reports, presentations or publications and that responses would
remain anonymous. After providing participants the opportunity to ask questions, the interview commenced using the appropriate interview guide (Appendices F and G).

**Analyzing Data**

Following the in-depth interviews, I reviewed the audio recordings and transcriptions, along with my notes taken during the interviews. Using grounded theory to “discover or construct theory from data, systematically obtained and analysed using comparative analysis” (Chun Tie et al., 2019), I utilized open, axial and selective coding system to identify and organize common themes that emerged from participants’ responses to the interview questions. This coding method “provides researchers with nuanced access to study informants’ thoughts, perspectives, and reactions to study topics” (Williams & Moser, 2019) and can enable researchers to reconsider or abandon preconceived theories or perceptions (Charmaz, 2021). The following sections describe the steps in the grounded theory process.

*Open coding*

After transcribing all eight interviews, I went through the participants’ responses line-by-line and highlighted key words and phrases that captured their perspectives and insights to identify “distinct concepts and themes for categorization” (Williams & Moser, 2019). In this first level of coding, I used these snippets of text to generate about 30 open codes for each interview (see Appendix H). I also wrote an accompanying summary of each interview that included the central themes and notable quotes from participants.

*Axial coding*

In this second level of coding, I reviewed the open codes for each interview to find relationships or connections between the codes; I then organized them into categories (axial
codes) based on these relationships (Williams & Moser, 2019). The categories formed were abstract, overarching ideas or themes that encompassed multiple open codes.

Selective coding

In this final level of coding, I looked for further connections between the categories created in the axial coding stage. These connections were used to develop overarching categories, or selective codes (see Appendix I). These selective codes are the central emerging themes detailed in the findings (Williams & Moser, 2019).

Disseminating Findings

After analyzing the data from the interviews using grounded theory, I described the emerging themes that addressed each research question and used the themes to create a best practices manual. This publication is intended to be used by four-year institutions seeking to improve their transfer student enrollment and retention.

Limitations

While I was able to achieve theoretical saturation, several limitations of this study should be considered.

Small Sample Size

I planned to conduct interviews with 12 participants—six prospective transfer students and six current UNCA transfer students. However, recruiting participants and confirming interviews proved to be more challenging than expected. Although nearly 50 interested individuals completed the initial screening questionnaire, I was able to secure just eight interviews: four with prospective transfer students and four with current UNCA transfer students. Additionally, I was only able to recruit one student from Blue Ridge Community College, so perspectives from prospective transfer students at that community college are limited.
It is likely that the timing of this study made it challenging for students to participate. I first contacted students and the community college transfer counselors with the research opportunity in mid-October, which is typically a peak time in the fall semester; workloads tend to increase as students head into midterms around that time.

The ongoing pandemic also has caused additional fatigue and stress for students during an already taxing time. UNCA has seen an increase in requests for counseling services and mental health support from current students in the fall 2021 semester. Anecdotally, faculty have reported more absences and requests for extensions on assignments from students. Students may not have had the mental energy to give up an hour of their time to participate in an optional research study, despite the $15 incentive.

**Lack of Diversity**

Notably, students of color are not represented in this research. All participants were White. Twelve of the initial 48 respondents indicated they were either Black or African American, Hispanic, or multiracial, yet just eight students were within age range eligibility. However, none of the eligible participants of color responded to follow-up requests to schedule interviews.

As noted in the literature review, 3.8% of UNCA’s transfer students in 2020-2021 were Black or African American, seven percent were Hispanic, and 70% were White; increasing racial diversity is a priority for the university. It also known that, nationally, the majority of community college students come from underserved populations (Baker-Smith et al., 2020), so these perspectives should be included in future studies.

In terms of gender, two participants identified as male (one UNCA transfer student and one prospective transfer student), six participants identified as female, and no participants
identified as non-binary. While I do not have data on the gender breakdowns at the two community colleges, the sample of participants is not reflective of the gender breakdown of UNCA’s transfer students enrolled in 2020-2021, as about 50% identified as female and about 50% identified as male.

**Researcher’s Positionality**

As a staff member in UNCA’s Communication and Marketing Department, I rarely work with students. However, the current UNCA transfer students may have perceived me to be in a position of power simply because I am employed by the university, which may have influenced their responses. To encourage participants to speak freely, the interview consent form noted that no faculty or administrators would be present for their interviews or would have access to interview notes or transcriptions, and it was reiterated in the interview introduction that no identifying information would be reported in any presentations or publications.

Further, due to my professional role, I regularly access existing research on undergraduate students’ college search and decision-making process to inform UNCA’s recruitment marketing strategy. I worked to remain neutral by listening to the lived experiences of this specific sample of prospective and current transfer students without comparing them to what I have already learned about traditional and non-traditional college students.

**FINDINGS**

By using grounded theory to code participants’ responses, two to three common themes emerged for each of the research question topics.

**Psychographics**
Research question one asked about the psychographic profiles of transfer students. To learn about the participants’ lifestyles, personal experiences, and values, participants were asked to briefly discuss their pre-interview exercise, a photo or image that illustrated a perfect day in the participant’s life, which was submitted to me by the participant in advance of the interview. More specifically, participants were asked about how they spend their time outside of school, what they are most passionate about in life, and their most important relationships. Three themes emerged: self-supporting, mental health challenges, and valuing quality of life.

**Self-supporting**

All participants were between the ages of 20 and 26. Five of the eight participants live with roommates or partners, while three live with family members. None were caregivers or had dependents, except for one student who is the “head of household” for their mother and young adult sister who live in another part of the state. All participants receive financial aid, and six participants work at least part-time, about 15 hours per week. The two participants who do not work have been encouraged by their families to focus solely on their coursework; in addition to financial aid, they receive financial support from their families to cover tuition and expenses.

Three participants reported working full-time at some point while enrolled in college. One prospective transfer student currently works full-time and attends community college online, while two current UNCA transfer students worked full-time jobs (housekeeping and grocery) until the fall 2021 semester. Neither enjoyed these jobs and quit due to increasing workloads and stress in their positions caused by COVID-19, along with increases in their school workloads. One prospective transfer student who lives with family members was fired after missing too much work due to quarantining after exposure to COVID-19, requiring them to find another part-time job.
Mental health challenges

All but one participant discussed their experiences struggling with mental health before and throughout COVID-19. While participants were still able to perform regular functions of daily life, such as attending classes, working and taking care of themselves, most reported feeling anxious, isolated and “burned out.”

Two participants discussed specific diagnoses, including addiction to drugs and alcohol and autism, and how their mental health has been impacted, particularly due to a lack of socializing caused by these issues. Family dynamics were also cited as a source of conflict and trauma. Five participants specified they had “difficult home lives” growing up and that their parents were now divorced. All current UNCA transfer students went to college, in part, to escape their situations at home.

Support networks varied among the participants. Three prospective transfer students and two current UNCA transfer students said they wished they more friends to spend time with and acknowledged that COVID-19 had made forging new friendships and maintaining existing friendships difficult. On the other hand, almost all participants mentioned maintaining good relationships with their siblings.

Valuing quality of life

When asked about their passions and how they spend their free time, practicing creative activities, such as writing, crafting, painting and dancing were discussed by five participants. All but one participant mentioned that they enjoy “spending time in nature” and would do more outdoor activities, such as hiking, if they had more free time. Travelling, studying abroad and experiencing other cultures were also common goals among five participants, and a few mentioned they enjoy studying other languages. Other interests included yoga, reading, spending
time with friends and family, and relaxing. These activities provide opportunities for joy, personal growth and fulfillment, and an enhanced quality of life.

Educational Goals

Research question two asked about transfer student educational goals. In discussing their motivations for attending college, degree paths and experiential learning opportunities of interest to the participants, two primary themes emerged: career-driven and lifelong learning/self-improvement.

Career-driven

The ultimate educational goal for all participants is to establish a long-term career in their field of interest. All but one of the participants had decided on a major and knew what types of positions they plan to pursue in their fields.

The way students came to these conclusions varied. A few knew what they wanted to do professionally before enrolling in college. For example, one participant was inspired to become an elementary school teacher by her own exceptional kindergarten teacher. Two others have used writing as an emotional and creative outlet for several years and hope to go into writing for film or comedy, while another has been in therapy since they were child and wants to become an adolescent therapist to help other children.

On the other hand, two participants discussed changing career paths after declaring a major in community college. One had planned to go into hospitality, but after working as a housekeeper and taking courses to earn their associate’s degree in hospitality, they decided they were no longer interested in the industry. Because of their interest in true crime cases, they decided to study biology instead, with the goal of working in forensics. Another decided against
studying archeology due to limited jobs in the field and has channeled their passion for “asking questions and learning new things” into pursuing a career in genetics.

All students hoped to get hands-on learning experience to better prepare for their careers through internships, field work, or by conducting research, and one participant was already interning in their chosen field of media.

When asked about whether they had considered pursuing an advanced degree in the future, answers depended on the career path. Students in the natural and social sciences, specifically those going into forensics, genetics and therapy, acknowledged that they would most likely need an advanced degree to move beyond entry-level positions. Those going into creative fields plan to see what positions they can find without an advanced degree and may return to graduate school if job prospects are limited. Drivers of these career choices are discussed in the professional goals section of the findings.

*Lifelong learning/self-improvement*

At the same time, careers were not the only educational goals participants identified. All cited their “love of learning” as a primary motivator behind their decision to attend college, as it brings them personal joy and fulfillment. While they discussed building on their knowledge in their areas of study, they also wanted to improve their skills in the areas of time management, meeting deadlines, and socializing.

**College Decision Factors**

Research question three for current UNCA transfer students asked about the factors that influenced their college decision. They were asked to discuss why they chose to begin their college educations by attending community college, what criteria they considered when selecting a four-year university, and what information that sought out to inform their decision. When
asked about their college search and decision-making process, prospective transfer students also discussed the criteria they are considering as they search for four-year institutions. The participants’ educational goals drove their primary choice factor, preferred program of study. Secondary choice factors included affordability and access.

_Preferred Program of Study_

All but one participant had either completed the search process for a four-year institution or were currently conducting their search. All, excluding the student who had not started their search yet, reported that availability of their chosen degree program was the most important factor in their search; it determined whether or not they chose to further consider a school. Most participants used community college to explore their major(s) of interest and decided on what degree program to pursue before researching transfer institutions.

_Affordability_

The next most important factor to participants was affordability. As previously noted, all participants receive financial aid, and most work at least part-time to pay for tuition and support themselves. One current UNCA transfer student is a recipient of the CORE Scholarship (Connecting Opportunities for Regional Excellence), a partnership between UNCA and A-B Tech that provides students with a full scholarship at A-B Tech for two years while earning an associate’s degree and for two years at UNCA, while completing their bachelor’s degree.

_Access_

Other factors of a secondary level of importance are related to access and include location, small class size, and flexible class schedules with online options that can accommodate part-time or full-time work schedules.
Most participants said they chose their current institution because of proximity; they did not relocate to Asheville specifically to attend the local community colleges or UNCA. Those who moved to Asheville before enrolling in college did so because they have family in the area or had heard it was an interesting place to live. Location and affordability go hand-in-hand, as students who had completed their four-year college search and those still in the search process specified that they were primarily looking at schools in North Carolina in order to get in-state tuition rates.

Small class size, for the purposes of making connections with faculty and receiving personalized support when needed, was also a common preference. Overall, the total enrollment of an institution wasn’t of concern, although a few participants commented that larger schools seem like they would have more resources to offer, such as funding for research and engagement opportunities for students.

**College Search and Decision-Making Process**

Research question three for prospective transfer students asked them to describe their college search and decision-making process. Current UNCA transfer students also discussed their college search and decision-making process when asked about their college choice factors. Two themes emerged among all participants: online information gathering and in-person information-gathering.

*Online information-gathering*

All participants who are conducting their college search or have completed their college search consulted institutions’ websites first. Some participants looked specifically for information designed for transfer students, while others pieced together information by browsing different sections of the websites, including academics, admissions and financial aid, and used
tools such as net price calculators and transfer credit equivalency tools. A few participants noted that it was often difficult to find relevant information for transfer students and would have preferred to have it “all in one place.” They also mentioned a desire for “degree maps” and sample course schedules to help them understand how long it might take them to earn their bachelor’s degrees. In terms of the type of content students preferred, most participants said they preferred to read text on a webpage as the primary way to get information about institutions; however, a few said they may also watch videos in addition to reading text.

College aggregator websites, such as CollegeBoard.com, were used secondarily by a few participants to compare institutions, learn about schools they were not of aware, and see what schools might fit their academic profile. Three participants said they looked at institutions’ social media to get “a sense of daily life” but only after they had looked at an institution’s website. The other participants did not use social media in their college search.

*In-person information-gathering*

Almost all participants noted that they spoke with a counselor from their community college and/or a counselor from their prospective institutions about the transfer process. Those who consulted with UNCA’s transfer admission counselor reported good experiences, although one participant noted that they “didn’t know everything they needed to know or what questions to ask.”

Perspectives from friends and family were also considered, with word of mouth serving to reinforce participants’ opinions of institutions. For example, one current UNCA transfer student noted that they had heard about a violent incident at a four-year institution in Western North Carolina, which gave them a negative impression of the school. They then decided not to
apply after having a “creepy” interaction with a student who went there. Two participants reported that they visited campuses in person once they were seriously considering a school.

**Educational Journeys**

Research question four asked about transfer students’ perceived benefits and barriers of their educational journeys. Prospective transfer students were asked to discuss any challenges they have encountered while in college and how they feel about the prospect of transferring to a four-year university. Current UNCA students were asked to discuss the transition from community college to a four-year university and how their experience at UNCA has been so far. All students were asked to describe how COVID-19 has impacted them or their educations, if at all. Participants shared three commonalities: non-linear paths, taking a practical approach, and a desire for support.

*Non-linear paths*

None of the participants cited an internal drive to go to college. They reported that their families either expected them to attend after graduating from high school, or they enrolled in college to escape a difficult home life. As a result, two current UNCA transfer students transferred three times, as they started their college careers at four-year institutions, dropped out, enrolled in community college, and then transferred to UNCA. They felt prepared academically, but not emotionally, for a four-year university, and struggled with “fitting in” and managing their schedules.

Two prospective transfer students were in their second enrollment at a community college. During their first attempt at community college, they didn’t know what they wanted to study and “didn’t take classes seriously.” After being out in the working low-wage jobs for a couple of years, they realized they would need a degree to qualify for higher-paying and more
fulfilling jobs, so they returned to A-B Tech. Now, they are on a focused degree path that excited them. The other student originally went to a four-year university for two years, dropped out due to a struggle with substance abuse, enrolled in a community college, and then transferred to A-B Tech after relocating to Asheville.

**Practical approach**

All participants cited affordability and the ability to explore majors as the primary reasons they chose to attend community college. Generally, participants felt that enrolling in community college was the right decision for them, and they would choose the same path if embarking on their educational journey now. Online classes allowed them to work as needed, and they were able to complete general education requirements for less than what they would pay at a four-year institution.

At the same time, a few participants do wish they could complete their bachelor’s degrees faster. The student who received the CORE Scholarship was required to get an associate’s degree; however, they pointed out that getting their associate’s required them to take some classes that did not fulfill their major requirements at UNCA. Another student expected more credits to transfer and also had to drop a class in the fall 2021 semester due to COVID-19 burn-out, further delaying their graduation timeline.

**Desire for support**

A few participants cited poor advising experiences and a lack of community at their community colleges. However, most current UNCA transfer students highlighted the sense of community on campus, despite the isolation created by COVID-19, along with good advising experiences. They still recommended having a dedicated academic advisor for current transfer students, just as the university has a dedicated transfer counselor for admissions, due to the
unique needs of the population. A participant who lived in UNCA’s transfer student living-learning community (LLC) on campus suggested allowing all transfer students to participate in the LLC’s events and workshops to help them connect with one another.

**Professional Goals**

Research question five asked about the professional goals of transfer students. Participants were asked to describe where they see themselves in the short- and long-term (one year and 10 years) after graduating with a bachelor’s degree. Despite taking various professional paths, two overarching themes emerged: helping others and personal fulfillment.

*Helping others*

Participants’ fields of interest spanned the natural and social sciences as well as the arts, including forensics, genetics, ecology, adolescent therapy, teaching, screenwriting and comedy. Yet, no matter the career, all participants said their primary professional goal is to make a difference in the world—as one participant explained, “help others be their best selves.”

Specifically, participants in the natural and social sciences discussed their desire to solve problems. For example, those who want to go into forensics and genetics said they want to work in investigative units searching for missing persons and solving crimes, while the ecology student wants to teach others about the healing properties of plants so they can live healthier lives. Those in the arts discussed using storytelling to spark emotion in their audiences and help them “find their purpose and meaning.”

*Personal Fulfillment*

When asked what they hope to achieve through their careers, all participants responded with a variation of “personal fulfillment.” A few participants mentioned being happy, while others said they want to feel confident in their professional skills and expertise. Another
participant noted they hope they get to travel as part of their career, a personal passion. Notably, no participants mentioned financial goals.
DELIIVERABLE

These findings informed the creation of a best practices guide that includes recommendations for recruiting and retaining transfer students. To inform these recommendations, I have developed two transfer student personas included in the best practices guide—one to represent current UNCA transfer students and one to represent prospective transfer students. The personas and recommendations are based on the common characteristics, experiences, perspectives and goals of the participants who were interviewed. This manual is intended to be used by undergraduate admissions and marketing professionals, along with academic and student life administrators, to create a marketing strategy to recruit transfer students and implement programs and resources to support them.

DISCUSSION/IMPLICATIONS

This research aimed to better understand transfer students as individuals and as students, with the purpose of revealing the challenges and opportunities they have experienced throughout their educational journeys as well as their educational and professional goals. By conducting in-depth interviews with current UNCA transfer students and prospective transfer students, I was able to discern their shared characteristics, perspectives and values that have impacted, and will continue to impact, their educational journeys. Direct quotations, included below, added context to their experiences and echo the themes detailed in the findings.

Psychographics

The pre-interview exercise helped me get a sense of the participants’ personalities and what makes them happy. In describing the image they provided that represented an ideal day in their lives, most students expressed the desire to have a relaxing, “effortless” day. Some saw
themselves traveling abroad, while others wanted a quiet day filled with simple pleasures, like spending time with close friends or family, going on hikes or enjoying nature, practicing their hobbies and having free time with no obligations. This established that the participants value their close relationships, leisure time and self-care.

*Self-supporting*

While participants were in their early- to mid-20s, I was surprised that none of them were caregivers and only one had financial dependents. Still, between working to support themselves and going to school, most participants said they had very little free time. As one student said when discussing how it seems like first-year, first-time degree-seeking students get more support from faculty and staff, “In reality, I think the transfer students are the ones that are kind of like spinning seven plates on sticks and not really knowing where they’re going because we live off campus and we work.”

It also became clear that transfer students would benefit from more financial support, as all receive financial aid. Since affordability is so important to these students, that was not surprising. One current UNCA transfer student described how important a scholarship from A-B Tech to UNCA has been for them:

It [the CORE Scholarship, Connecting Opportunities for Regional Excellence] gave me the security that I at least have most of it [college] paid for. It covered tuition, and since I wasn’t living on campus, I didn’t have to pay room and board fees.

For students with a 3.0 GPA, this scholarship pays tuition for two years at A-B Tech while a student earns their associate’s degree and pays tuition for two years at UNCA while they earn their bachelor’s degree. Only one participant specifically mentioned having a scholarship as part of their financial aid, but this type of scholarship is a major benefit to transfers students.
Mental health challenges

Because of my work at a higher education institution, I was not surprised that almost all participants discussed struggling with their mental health. This is well-documented among college students, and it has only increased since COVID-19 started. One participant, who identified as being on the autism spectrum, discussed how pleased they were with the support they have received from their community college:

...I have a hard time with mental health, but as far as A-B Tech is concerned, they've been better than I would expect a college to be about it. I found the teachers to be really supportive and understanding and just the whole system to be supportive and understanding.

It is notable that A-B Tech exceeded the participant’s expectations for support. While this is only one perspective, there may be a perception among students that colleges might not provide the mental health support they need.

Valuing quality of life

Experiencing nature is something almost all participants highly value, with one participant stating:

It's just the sense of being in the presence of something that's much larger or more complex than what is inside your personal daily bubble, if that makes sense. It’s like walking into a whole new ecosystem and being able to appreciate that beauty.

Considering UNCA’s location in the mountains in Asheville, NC, the participants’ appreciation for the natural world and outdoor activities is not surprising. Others discussed wanting to learn new languages and travel abroad, underscoring a desire to expand their worldviews and exposure to other cultures.
Educational Goals

Career-driven

I was expecting participants to discuss careers as a primary goal for earning a bachelor’s degree, and they reinforced the idea that community college is an affordable way to explore different fields of interest and potential careers:

I did see UNCA on the radar before I moved here [to Asheville, NC], however, I didn't really engage in it, because I couldn't afford it. Community college was better for me because it was affordable, and it would give me time to decide what I wanted to do because it was just the liberal arts core [UNCA’s general requirements] rather than the major program.

It is also noteworthy that the participants have chosen their prospective careers based on their interests and personal passions. One participant who wants to go into genetics spoke about this as their reason for going back to community college after dropping out.

During my three-year hiatus [after failing out of their first year of community college], I realized how important a college degree was. I worked several dead-end jobs that had no future. I wanted to have a lifelong career that I enjoyed so I decided to come back and figure out what I wanted to do.

By the time students were ready to transfer to UNCA, they already knew what they wanted to major in, and no current UNCA transfer students reported changing their majors after they enrolled. That also aligns with participants’ desires to gain more experience in their chosen fields through internships, research and other hands-on learning experiences.

Lifelong learning and self-improvement
On the other hand, I did not expect participants to cite their “love of learning” as a primary motivator for going to college. While establishing a career is a necessity, learning for the sake of learning is for personal growth and fulfillment.

I like knowledge and I like absorbing it [...] I used to not be like that, like in middle school and the first part of high school. I got horrible grades, but I picked up the value of learning and I love it, so I wanted to go to college for that reason.

**College Decision Factors**

*Preferred Program of Study*

Since most participants discussed using community college as a way to explore different majors, it is not surprising that the most important factor in their college decision was making sure an institution had their desired degree program. If not, participants would not continue to research a school. This aligns with transfer students’ career-driven nature.

Secondary factors, including affordability and overall accessibility, determined whether or not they chose to further consider a school. Most participants used community college to explore their major(s) of interest and decided on what degree program to pursue before researching transfer institutions.

*Affordability*

Participants emphasized the importance of affordability when choosing a four-year university, making it the second-most important factor following program of study. Most participants stressed that they do not want to incur college debt and have loans to pay back. One participant, who attended a four-year university right after graduating high school, was on academic probation one semester due to their self-described “emotional immaturity” and had to
take a loan out after losing their scholarship. Now, the loan is in default, and they are working to pay it off.

Affordability is also tied closely to location. Most students discussed keeping their college search to North Carolina so they could pay in-state tuition:

Before I thought of NC State, I was considering UNC Pembroke. They have a Bachelor's in Microbiology. It doesn't get as specific as NC State’s, but they have one, and they have the set tuition of $500, so it was low cost.

This is noteworthy for schools considering marketing to out-of-state transfer students, or for those who highlight location over other characteristics/offerings.

**Access**

Participants noted that online options for specific classes, or fully online degree programs, would better accommodate their work schedules. Most discussed being comfortable with online learning since they had to take some online classes during COVID-19. One participant noted that they “didn’t realize North Carolina had so many schools who offered online programs” until they found a website that aggregated various degree programs.

Even though they would like online options, they still want to make personal connections with faculty and desire small class sizes. One participant who wants to become an adolescent therapist noted the specific benefits of connecting with faculty:

I have a lot of professors that have really valuable experience in the field and advice to offer, and so making those connections and being able to have role models in your own career, I think it's a big thing for me.

**College Search and Decision-Making**

*Online information-gathering*
It was not surprising that all participants who are conducting their college search or have completed their college search consulted institutions’ websites first. While some were able to piece together information they needed from various areas of the website (i.e. application deadlines, programs of study, financial aid), some looked specifically for pages dedicated to transfer students with the hopes of finding all information in one place. One participant relayed that they had difficulty finding information about on-campus housing:

As someone who was coming from a community college to a four-year, I really did not understand campus housing and how that worked because I already had my apartment set-up and everything, and I remember I emailed housing, or maybe it was financial aid, to ask about how that applied to housing and they responded with, ‘You can find it on our website.’ But I couldn’t find it and just had to hope it would work out.

Not only does this make it easier for students to gather information when relevant information is consolidated, it also helps students compare multiple institutions more efficiently. The desire to easily compare institutions was noted by the few participants who discussed using college aggregator websites.

It was also interesting to me that these students prefer to read text on a webpage rather than watch videos. In recruitment marketing research and best practices, video is generally touted as more engaging than text. However, these students’ research could be considered less exploratory and more purposeful, when compared to the research process of first-year, first-time degree-seeking students. Transfer students tend to look for specific pieces of information and tools, such as degree maps and net price calculator tools, and webpages allow them to quickly scan to find what they are looking for. This aligns with their preference to go to institutional websites rather than find out more about schools through social media.
In-person information-gathering

Students who accessed UNCA’s transfer admission counselor reported good experiences:

I do really like Lindsey [UNCA’s transfer admission counselor]. I always enjoyed getting to talk to her. She told me about her personal experience because she actually did the program [Education] too and talked about what her school experiences were like. I trust her, and I think she gave me lots of great advice.

At the same time one participant noted that they “didn’t know everything they needed to know or what questions to ask,” implying that they felt the onus was on students to proactively seek help and already have an understanding of the transfer process.

Educational Journeys

Non-linear paths

Attending college was not a priority for participants; it was either an expectation of their families or a way for participants to change an undesirable living situation. However, once they discovered a field of interest and decided to earn a bachelor’s degree, they became more engaged and focused on transferring to a four-year institution.

The transfer process posed challenges for some students, though. Two participants who earned associate’s degrees did not see the benefit since they are not planning on using those degrees. They also had issues with getting transfer credits for some classes that they expected would transfer. One participant described their experience:

Most of my credits did transfer in. The only hiccup I had was that A-B Tech has a joint program where, if you get an associate’s, it knocks out all of your liberal arts requirements at UNCA. But I failed one math class before transferring, and I wasn’t willing to stick around at A-B Tech for another semester, just to take that one class. So I
transferred in without the associate’s and earned my associate’s by transferring back my credits to A-B Tech because I passed it [the math class] at UNCA. But UNCA wouldn't knock out my remaining liberal arts core requirements because I was already an enrolled student at that point.

Practical approach

Again, all participants reiterated that affordability and the ability to explore majors were the drivers behind their choosing to attend community college, and they were pleased that they had made the decision to enroll. They described community college as an accessible and “low-stakes” option; one participant said it was a way for them to “dip their toes in” to taking college classes. It is noteworthy that for these participants, choosing community college first was not a last resort or an unfavorable path; it was an advantageous way to complete part of their bachelor’s degree.

Desire for support

While participants would still choose the transfer student path, they stressed that this particular population of students needs specialized support. Some current UNCA transfer students do have a stronger sense of community than they did in community college:

It [their community college experience] was pretty good. It wasn’t anything like UNCA, though. I just didn't feel very connected to any of the professors or any of the students. It was a very, like, you walk in and do your time kind of thing, but it wasn't necessarily negative. It was just very neutral.

They went on to say: “In high school it was something [making friends] I struggled with personally, and then here at UNCA, I really haven't had a problem making friends, so I've really been valuing those connections and relationships a lot.”
However, another participant who is a few years older does not share that perspective: “We all have masks on, we all make weird eye contact with each other. I’m almost 10 years older than everybody and. Just seems like I have different priorities.” That same participant also had a rough start with their advisor. After switching to another faculty member, they felt more supported. They made a suggestion to have a dedicated advisor for transfer students:

I think that there should be a transfer advisor that is allotted to transfer students, where they check up on them like quarterly or on some kind of schedule, where they offer support that transfer students don’t have to reach out to get.

**Professional Goals**

Drivers behind career choices include personal interests and personal experiences. Similar to participants’ educational goals, professional goals have both external and internal outcomes.

*Helping others*

Participants define professional success as the ability to help others, an external goal, through their careers. Some view “helping others” as achieving something specific or solving a problem for others. One participant illustrated this in their reasoning for going into forensics work:

I really want to have a forensics position and do DNA profiling with investigative units for missing persons or other crimes. I’ve always been interested in true crime and the science behind solving the cases. It’s a way I could help families find closure. They want to channel a personal interest into a career that makes a difference in others’ lives.
On the other hand, the participant who wants to become an adolescent therapist wants to do so because they have experienced first-hand the benefits of receiving therapy as a child, and now they hope to “pay it forward” and help other children.

**Personal Fulfillment**

Personal fulfillment is an internal goal. Much like participants’ desires for lifelong learning and the joy they gain from learning, they seek professional lives that are personally rewarding. As one participant noted, “My biggest challenge with jobs is not having the opportunity to grow and learn something new every day. And I just get stuck there and I think with this career path [genetics], I’ll be able to do that.”

It was compelling to me that participants did not name specific achievements or milestones, particularly financial ambitions, considering their financial struggles and how much they value an affordable college education. They might feel they will achieve financial stability as long as they have a bachelor’s degree and are able to attain their chosen career.

**CONCLUSION**

I began this research to better understand UNCA’s current and prospective transfer students and their educational journeys. As the literature review demonstrates, there is national quantitative data on transfer student trends as well as research on distinct populations of transfer students. While UNCA also collects quantitative and demographic data on its current transfer students, qualitative data about who these students are, and their perceived challenges and opportunities had not been gathered before.

Historically, UNCA has put more resources into recruiting and retaining first-year, first-time degree-seeking students; it has been assumed that transfer students will seek out the university as the next step in their path to a bachelor’s degree regardless of marketing efforts.
Yet, declining enrollment of this population shows a different reality. UNCA must understand its own current transfer students and the prospective transfer populations in its market in order to improve recruitment and retention of these students.

After conducting eight in-depth interviews (four with current UNCA transfer students and four with prospective transfer students from two local community colleges), several themes emerged regarding their psychographics, college search and decision-making processes, educational goals, educational journeys, and professional goals.

The findings of this research revealed that this group of students’ primary goal is to become actualized individuals who contribute to improving the lives of others, and as a result, the world. They used community college as an affordable way to explore their interests and career options, and they are happy with their decision to start their educations at community college. While they are career-driven, they are not driven to achieve great wealth or notoriety but to help others, become experts in their fields and gain personal fulfillment.

While they all set out to eventually earn a bachelor’s degree, the paths they are on to achieve that goal differ. Primarily, this is due to their personal circumstances, such as family dynamics, struggles with mental health or financial hardships. These external factors affect students in different ways; as a result, they need specialized support throughout all phases of their educational journeys, particularly when planning their transfer to a four-year institution. Because most transfer students are a few years older than first-year, first-time degree-seeking students, they tend to live off campus and are self-supporting. They have less time to socialize or become part of a community, yet that is something they desire.

It is noteworthy that all participants were White and had no caregiving obligations. Only one had financial dependents, but they were not children. Future studies would benefit from
including participants of other racial ethnicities and those with parental responsibilities. It might also be beneficial for future studies to include transfer student alumni to learn about their professional trajectories and how they were, or were not, prepared by their educational journeys. Additionally, follow-up interviews with the participants of this study at future stages in their educational journeys might also shed light on whether students’ expectations for their college experiences are being met, if they encounter unforeseen obstacles, and what resources might have been useful to them in the past.

To summarize, the findings of this research illustrate why four-year institutions must focus on current and prospective transfer students by providing insight into these students’ unique characteristics, experiences, and goals. The primary call to action derived from the findings is to provide dedicated communications, support and resources designed to meet these students’ needs.
References


Gutfreund, J. (2016). Move over, Millennials: Generation Z is changing the consumer


https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d19/


Appendix A

Recruitment Email to Community College Counselors

Dear <Community College Counselor>,

My name is Casey Hulme, and I work in UNC Asheville’s Communication & Marketing Department. I am also a graduate student in the UNC Hussman School of Journalism and Media.

UNC Asheville’s Transfer Admission Counselor Lindsey Prather gave me your contact information so I could reach out with a research opportunity for your students who are planning to transfer to any four-year university or college.

I am conducting a research study on the transfer student experience and am looking for prospective transfer students between the ages of 18-30 to interview. Their valuable input will be used to help UNCA improve its communications with transfer students so the university can better recruit prospective students and serve current students.

The details of the research study are outlined below:

- I will conduct one-on-one interviews with participants in mid-October to learn more about their daily lives and educational goals and journeys.
- Each interview will take an hour and be conducted via Zoom.
- All participants will receive a **$15 Visa gift card** for their time.
- All research collected will remain anonymous. No personally identifiable information will be included in reports, publications or presentations.

Students who are interested in participating should complete this brief screener questionnaire: https://forms.gle/x8tJRNessjazoruKA

I will follow up with eligible participants to schedule their interview and request they complete a brief pre-interview exercise and a consent form.

Please pass this opportunity on to students who may be interested. I have also attached a flyer you can share with them, and they can email me if they have any questions.

Please let me know if you have any questions.

Thank you for your consideration!

Casey Hulme
caseyhu@live.unc.edu
828-545-0000
Appendix B

Recruitment Email to Current UNCA Transfer Students

Dear <Currently enrolled UNCA transfer student>,

My name is Casey Hulme, and I work in UNC Asheville’s Communication & Marketing Department. I am also a graduate student in the UNC Hussman School of Journalism and Media.

I am conducting a research study on the transfer student experience and am looking for currently enrolled UNC Asheville transfer students between the ages of 18-30 to interview. Your valuable input will be used to help UNCA improve its communications with transfer students so the university can better recruit prospective students and serve current students.

The details of the research study are outlined below:

- I will conduct one-on-one interviews with participants in late October/early November to learn more about their daily lives and educational journeys thus far.
- Each interview will take an hour and be conducted via Zoom.
- **All participants will receive a $15 Visa gift card** for their time.
- All research collected will remain anonymous. No personally identifiable information will be included in reports, publications or presentations.

If you are interested in participating, please complete this brief screener questionnaire: [https://forms.gle/x8tJRNessjazoruKA](https://forms.gle/x8tJRNessjazoruKA)

I will follow up with eligible participants to schedule their interview and request they complete a brief pre-interview exercise and a consent form.

Please let me know if you have any questions.

Thank you for your consideration!

Casey Hulme
caseyhu@live.unc.edu
828-545-0000
Appendix C

Screener Questionnaire for Prospective Transfer Students (Google Form)

Screener Questionnaire

Thank you for your interest in being interviewed for my research study on the transfer student experience. Please complete this brief demographic questionnaire so I can determine your eligibility to participate in the study. If you are eligible to participate, I will send you a follow-up email to:

- Schedule a one-hour interview with you
- Request that you complete a brief pre-interview exercise and email it to me at least one day before your scheduled interview
- Electronically sign a consent form confirming you understand the study and agree to participate and return it to me via email at least one day before your scheduled interview

All data collected in this questionnaire and in the interview will remain secure and confidential. No identifying information will be reported in any reports, publications or presentations.

Email *

Your email

What is your age? *

Your answer

What is your gender? *

- Non-binary
- Female
- Male
- Other: ____________________________
To which race or group(s) do you most identify? *

- Black or African-American
- Asian/Pacific Islanders
- White or Caucasian
- Native American
- Other: _______________________

Please specify your ethnicity. *

- Hispanic or Latinx
- Not Hispanic or Latinx

What is your zip code? *

Your answer _______________________

Did you transfer to UNC Asheville from a community college or a four-year college or university? *

- Community college
- Four-year college or university

All study participants will receive a $15 Visa gift card following their interview. If you are selected to participate, would you prefer to receive the gift card by email or mail? Please list the email address or mailing address you would like the card sent to below. *

Your answer _______________________

Appendix D

Screener Questionnaire for Current UNCA Transfer Students (Google Form)

**Screener Questionnaire**

Thank you for your interest in being interviewed for my research study on the transfer student experience. Please complete this brief demographic questionnaire so I can determine your eligibility to participate in the study. If you are eligible to participate, I will send you a follow-up email to:

- Schedule a one-hour interview with you
- Request that you complete a brief pre-interview exercise and email it to me at least one day before your scheduled interview
- Electronically sign a consent form confirming you understand the study and agree to participate and return it to me via email at least one day before your scheduled interview

All data collected in this questionnaire and in the interview will remain secure and confidential. No identifying information will be reported in any reports, publications or presentations.

---

**Email**

Your email

---

**What is your age?**

Your answer

---

**What is your gender?**

- Non-binary
- Female
- Male
- Other:
To which race or group(s) do you most identify? *

- Black or African-American
- Asian/Pacific Islanders
- White or Caucasian
- Native American
- Other: __________________________

Please specify your ethnicity. *

- Hispanic or Latinx
- Not Hispanic or Latinx

What is your zip code? *

Your answer

Did you transfer to UNC Asheville from a community college or a four-year college or university? *

- Community college
- Four-year college or university

All study participants will receive a $15 Visa gift card following their interview. If you are selected to participate, would you prefer to receive the gift card by email or mail? Please list the email address or mailing address you would like the card sent to below. *

Your answer
Appendix E

Participation Confirmation Email

Hello!

Thank you for your interest in participating in my research study on the transfer student experience. In this email, you will find:

- Consent form
- Pre-interview exercise instructions
- A request to schedule the interview

Please complete the consent form and pre-interview exercise and email them back to me at least one day before your interview.

**Consent Form**

Please review and electronically sign the attached consent form to confirm your participation in the study.

**Pre-Interview Exercise**

Imagine a perfect day in your life. What kinds of things would you do? Who would you spend time with? How would you feel? Please take or find an existing photo or image that represents this perfect day. We will discuss the image you provide during the interview.

**Scheduling the Interview**

Please let me know three dates and times you are available between the hours of 7 a.m.-9 p.m. between Oct. 29-Nov. 6. I will respond via email to confirm the date and time of your interview.

Here is the Zoom link to join the interview: [https://unca-edu.zoom.us/j/7536948376](https://unca-edu.zoom.us/j/7536948376)

I will also send you a reminder email with this information the day before our interview.

Please let me know if you have any questions.

Thank you again for your willingness to participate in my study!

Casey Hulme
Appendix F

Interview Guide for Prospective Transfer Students

Thank you for taking the time to speak with me today. I’m Casey Hulme, and I’m a graduate student in the UNC Hussman School of Journalism and Media at Chapel Hill. I’m interviewing prospective transfer students like you to learn more about you and your educational goals and experiences. I’ll be asking you about your personal interests, your college search and decision-making process, and your educational and professional goals. Our discussion will last about an hour and your responses are completely confidential. As noted in the screener questionnaire you completed, you will receive a $15 Visa gift card for your participation following the interview. [Confirm the method by which they said they wanted to receive the gift card and the contact information provided.]

All identifying information, such as names and places will be removed from the interview transcript and will not be included in any reports, presentations or publications. If it is alright with you, I will be taking notes and recording the audio from our interview to make sure that I capture your thoughts accurately. Does that sound okay?

If you’d prefer I call you by a different name during the interview to further preserve your anonymity, please let me know now what you’d like to be called. Do you have any questions before we begin?

First, I’d like to take a few minutes to talk about the pre-interview exercise you completed to get to know you a bit better. You were asked to take or find an existing photo that represents a perfect day in your life. I’ll share my screen now so we can look at the image you selected together. Tell me about this image.

- How does it represent a perfect day in your life?
- Why did you choose it?
- How does it make you feel?

(RQ: Research Questions: These are to guide the interview but will not actually be asked)
(IQ: Interview Questions, ○: Probes)

RQ1: What is the psychographic profile of transfer students?
Thank you. Now we’ll move on to the interview questions. I’d like to start by learning more about you and your daily life.

IQ1: Outside of school, how do you spend your time?
   ○ What obligations or responsibilities do you have, if any?
   ○ What do you do for personal fulfillment, such as hobbies? Why?
   ○ If you had more free time, how would you spend it? Why?

IQ2: What are your most important relationships, and why?

IQ3: What are the two things you’re most passionate about in life, and why?
   ○ How did you discover your passion for them?

RQ2: What are the educational goals of transfer students?

Great. Now let’s talk about your educational goals.

IQ1: Why did you decide to attend college?
   ○ Has attending college always been a goal for you? Why or why not?

IQ2: What four-year degree do you plan on pursuing, and why?
   ○ Is that what you planned when you started community college?
     ■ If not, why did you change paths?

IQ3: Aside from completing your degree, what do you hope to gain from your time in college?
   ○ Alumni network?
   ○ Prepare for graduate school?
   ○ Lifelong friendships?
   ○ Leadership skills?

IQ4: What experiential learning opportunities are of interest to you?
   ○ Internships?
   ○ Undergraduate research?
   ○ Taking service-learning courses?
   ○ Joining student clubs or organizations?
IQ5: Have you thought about earning an advanced degree? Why or why not?

RQ3: What is the college search and decision-making process they are undertaking?

Since you’re planning on transferring to a four-year university to complete your degree, you may have started researching schools. I’d like to learn more about your college search process and how you’re going to make your decision.

IQ1: Why did you decide to attend community college to start?
  ○ Why did you choose to enroll in this community college?
  ○ How do you feel about your experience?

IQ2: Why are you going to transfer to a four-year institution?
  ○ Have you always planned to transfer or was it a change in plan?
    ■ If it was a change in plan, why?

IQ3: How is your search for a college to transfer to going so far?
  ○ What is going well?
  ○ What challenges did you experience, if any?

IQ4: Tell me about criteria you considering.
  ○ Do you have a school, or multiple schools, in mind?
  ○ What are you looking for in a school?
  ○ What are you not looking for in a school?
  ○ Are there other factors you’re considering, and why?

IQ5: What information about potential schools are you seeking out?
  ○ Where are you finding that information?
  ○ How do you prefer to get your information?
    ■ For example, do you prefer watching videos? Reading text on university websites? Finding information on social media?
  ○ Are you consulting anyone for advice?

RQ4: What are the perceived benefits and barriers of the educational journey of transfer students?
Great. So now I’d like you to imagine what it will be like to transfer.

IQ1: How do you feel about the prospect of transferring to a four-year university?
   ○ Do you feel prepared? Why or why not?
   ○ What kind of supports might transfer students like you need that might be different from students who attend a four-year university right after graduating from high school?

IQ2: Do you know how long it will take you to complete your degree?
   ○ Why is that so?
   ○ How do you feel about that timeline?

Now think back on your entire college experience, from when you first enrolled in community college to where you are today.

IQ3: What challenges have you encountered while in college, if any?
   ○ How have they impacted you and your educational journey?
   ○ If you could go back in time, would you choose the same path (community college to four-year university)? Why or why not?

IQ4: Has COVID-19 impacted you or your education?
   ○ If so, how?

RQ5: What are the professional goals of transfer students?

IQ1: Imagine your life a year after you graduate with your bachelor’s degree. What are you doing professionally?
   ○ How do you feel when you think about your professional future? Why?
   ○ Why have you chosen this career?
   ○ Do you have an alternative career in mind if you need to switch gears?

IQ2: Now, imagine your life 10 years after graduation. What are you doing professionally?
   ○ What do you hope to achieve with your career? Why?
Appendix G

Interview Guide for Current UNCA Transfer Students

Thank you for taking the time to speak with me today. I’m Casey Hulme, and I’m a graduate student in the UNC Hussman School of Journalism and Media at Chapel Hill. I’m interviewing transfer students like you to learn more about you and your educational goals and experiences. I’ll be asking you about your personal interests, your college search and decision-making process, and your educational and professional goals. Our discussion will last about an hour and your responses are completely confidential. As noted in the screener questionnaire you completed, you will receive a $15 Visa gift card for your participation following the interview. [Confirm the method by which they said they wanted to receive the gift card and the contact information provided.]

All identifying information, such as names and places will be removed from the interview transcript and will not be included in any reports, presentations or publications. If it is alright with you, I will be taking notes and recording the audio from our interview to make sure that I capture your thoughts accurately. Does that sound okay?

If you’d prefer I call you by a different name during the interview to further preserve your anonymity, please let me know now what you’d like to be called. Do you have any questions before we begin?

First, I’d like to take a few minutes to talk about the pre-interview exercise you completed to get to know you a bit better. You were asked to take or find an existing photo that represents a perfect day in your life. I’ll share my screen now so we can look at the image you selected together. Tell me about this image.

○ How does it represent a perfect day in your life?
○ Why did you choose it?
○ How does it make you feel?

(RQ: Research Questions: These are to guide the interview but will not actually be asked)
(IQ: Interview Questions, ○: Probes)

RQ1: What is the psychographic profile of transfer students?
Thank you. Now we’ll move on to the interview questions. I’d like to start by learning more about you and your daily life.

IQ1: Outside of school, how do you spend your time?
  ○ What obligations or responsibilities do you have, if any?
  ○ What do you do for personal fulfillment, such as hobbies? Why?
  ○ If you had more free time, how would you spend it? Why?

IQ2: What are your most important relationships, and why?

IQ3: What are the two things you’re most passionate about in life, and why?
  ○ How did you discover your passion for them?

RQ2: What are the educational goals of transfer students?

Great. Now let’s talk about your educational goals.

IQ1: Why did you decide to attend college?
  ○ Has attending college always been a goal for you? Why or why not?

IQ2: What degree are you pursuing, and why?
  ○ Is that what you planned when you transferred to UNCA?
    ■ If not, why did you change paths?

IQ3: Aside from completing your degree, what do you hope to gain from your time at UNCA, and why?
  ○ Alumni network?
  ○ Prepare for graduate school?
  ○ Lifelong friendships?
  ○ Leadership skills?

IQ4: What experiential learning opportunities at UNCA are of interest to you?
  ○ Internships?
  ○ Undergraduate research?
  ○ Taking service-learning courses?
  ○ Participating in student clubs or organizations?
IQ5: Have you thought about earning an advanced degree? Why or why not?

RQ3: What factors influence the college decision of transfer students?

Now I’d like for you to think back to the time you decided you wanted to transfer to a four-year institution. I’d like to learn more about your college search process.

IQ1: Why did you decide to attend community college to start?
   ○ How do you feel about your experience there?

IQ2: Why did you decide to transfer to a four-year institution?
   ○ Did you always plan to transfer or was it a change in plan?
     ■ If it was a change in plan, why?

IQ3: How did your search for a college to transfer to go?
   ○ What went well?
   ○ What challenges did you experience, if any?

IQ4: Tell me about criteria you considered.
   ○ Did you have a school, or multiple schools, in mind?
   ○ What were you looking for in a school?
   ○ What were you not looking for in a school?
   ○ Were there other factors you considered, and why?

IQ5: What information about potential schools did you seek out?
   ○ Where did you find that information?
   ○ How did you prefer to get your information?
     ■ For example, did you prefer watching videos? Reading text on the university’s website? Find it on social media?
   ○ Did you make your college decision on your own, or did you consult anyone for advice?

IQ3: What drew you to UNCA specifically, and why?

RQ4: What are the perceived benefits and barriers of the educational journey of transfer students?
Great. So now I’d like you to think about your experience being a transfer student at UNCA.

IQ1: How long is it taking to complete your degree?
   ○ Why is that so?
   ○ Is that the timeline you had planned?

IQ2: How has the transition from community college to UNCA been for you?
   ○ What went well and why?
   ○ What was a struggle and why?

IQ3: How would you describe your experience at UNCA so far?
   ○ Is it what you expected?
   ○ What are your classes like?
   ○ How is your social life?
   ○ What kind of supports might transfer students like you need that might be different from students who attend UNCA right after graduating from high school?

IQ4: Has COVID-19 impacted you or your education?
   ○ If so, how?

Now think back on your entire college experience, from when you first enrolled in community college to where you are today.

IQ5: What challenges have you encountered while in college, if any?
   ○ How have they impacted you and your educational journey?
   ○ If you could go back in time, would you choose the same path (community college to four-year university)? Why or why not?

RQ5: What are the professional goals of transfer students?

IQ1: Imagine your life a year after you graduate from UNCA. What are you doing professionally?
   ○ How do you feel when you think about your professional future? Why?
   ○ Why have you chosen this career?
   ○ Do you have an alternative career in mind if you need to switch gears?
IQ2: Now, imagine your life 10 years after graduation. What are you doing professionally?

○ What do you hope to achieve with your career? Why?
Appendix H

Open Coding Visualization

*Note: The example below includes open codes from one of the in-depth interviews.*

- Has a few close relationships
- Advanced degree plans depend on career path
- Affordability of community college
- Average experience at community college; fewer personal connections
- Being practical about career
- Considering advanced degree depends on career path
- Desires timely degree completion
- Difficult family dynamics
- Doesn’t go out much
- Doesn’t want student debt
- Wants to complete degree in a timely way
- Feelings of isolation caused by pandemic
- Financial stress is “challenging but manageable”
- Importance of creativity
- Importance of quality of life
- Lives off campus
- Love of learning
- “Low-stakes” nature of community college
- Multiple part-time jobs that can be flexible
- Multiple transfers
- Needs to feel engaged/immersed with work
- No concrete plans to attend college
- Online options needed for those who work
- Prefers reading first, then watching videos to supplement
- Receives financial aid
- Scholarship provides security
- School choice based on proximity
- Sense of responsibility
- Some difficulty in transferring credits
- Struggles with mental health
- Struggles with anxiety
- Taking summer classes to catch up
- Time-management is a challenge
- Timely degree completion
- Works part-time, about 15 hours/week
- Undecided on earning an advanced degree
- Used community college to explore majors/career options
Appendix I

Coding Process

Note: This visualization illustrates an example of the coding process, from beginning with open codes to the formation of selective codes.