

# EXPLORING REVERSE TRANSFER IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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## INTRODUCTION

The vertical movement of students from community colleges to four-year institutions has been recognized as a major function of undergraduate student transition and has been heavily studied (see Bahr, 2012; Ishitani, 2010; Kalogrides & Grodsky, 2011; Laanan et al., 2011; Townsend, 2008; Wang, 2009), while students who begin their undergraduate education at a four-year college or universities and subsequently transferred to a community college, a type of student mobility referred to as **reverse transfer**, has received far less attention despite 14 percent of students participating in reverse transfer behavior (de los Santos & Wright, 1990; Hossler et al., 2012).

Reverse transfer students are often referred to as non-completers due to their lack of completing a bachelor's degree before enrolling at a community college (Catanzaro, 1999; Winter & Harris, 1999). However, this study helps contribute to the existing literature that shows undergraduate reverse transfer students have a variety of educational goals and reasons for their reverse transfer movement, including wanting to attain an associate's degree or a technical degree or certificate, complete coursework necessary for transfer back to four-year college or university, and financial benefits given the comparative cost at a community college is lower (Catanzaro, 1999; Winter & Harris, 1999; Townsend, 2001; Ishitani & Flood, 2018; Hillman, Lum, & Hossler, 2008).

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What are the educational backgrounds of students who reverse transfer?
2. How do students describe their experiences, both in and out of the college environment, leading up to the decision to transfer from their four-year institution to a community college?
3. For what reasons do students engage in reverse transfer?
4. What are the educational goals of students who reverse transfer?

## METHODOLOGY

This study utilizes a multiple-case study design to answer 'how' and 'why' questions and uncover contextual conditions relevant to the phenomenon of reverse transfer (Yin, 2003). A multiple-case study design, in which each participant is considered a case, allows for the exploration of differences within and between cases (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 students who recently (no longer than two years ago) transferred from a four-year institution to a community college. Each student was interviewed for 60 to 90 minutes.

## RESULTS

### Educational Background

All but one student in the study is considered a first-generation college student, defined as neither parent has earned a baccalaureate degree. Five students attended large comprehensive high schools, one a mid-size high school, and four attended small high schools. Eight of the students attended both high school and college in California while the other two attended high school and college in Michigan.

### Experiences at Initial Four-Year Institution

There were varying experiences at the initial four-year institution that ranged from students really enjoying their experience to strong feelings of dislike. However, a majority of students in the study described their experiences in negative ways.

**Grace:** *"Nothing there clicked for me. A majority of my feelings throughout the first year were, 'I don't want to be doing this.' I just didn't find my element [there] at all. But I didn't really feel like I had the option to not be there."*

**Sofia:** *"I was just kind of lost and unmotivated."*

**Noah:** *"I thought that, you know, I was getting a good education there, I just didn't like the experience."*

### Reasons for Reverse Transfer & Educational Goals

There were three main themes for the reasons students in the study decided to transfer to a community college.

#### Financial

**Noah:** *"I didn't know what I wanted to do, and I didn't love it there, so I might as well go back to the community college and save money."*

**James:** *"I decided I don't want to do this anymore. I don't want to spend a bunch of money and then struggle to figure out what I want to do. So I transferred to the community college so I can test some stuff out at a lower cost."*

**Hannah:** *"I had a grant to go the community college, so I decided I was going to go and get my associate degree and then transfer to a bigger 4-year school with better grades."*

#### Academic

**Rosa:** *"In my second year [at the college] I started thinking that I didn't want to do nursing anymore and was thinking of switching to dental hygiene, which the community college had a program for."*

**James:** *"I felt kind of got burned out of the whole college thing, so I decided to go a different route, which is when I started looking into the skilled trades, which is something that I've always been good at, working with my hands."*

**Lucero:** *"I couldn't get into any of the classes I needed [at the 4-year college]. In my second year I started talking to people who attended the community college and they seemed to be having a better experience."*

## RESULTS (CONTINUED)

### Fit

**Grace:** *"I was so desperately miserable. I told me parents I am not doing this anymore. My mom asked, well what are you going to do instead? I said, I don't know, go to the local community college."*

**Emily:** *"I was just not having a good time there, it was just so depressing."*

## DISCUSSION & CONCLUSIONS

These findings suggest that students who engage in reverse transfer patterns do so for a variety of reasons and with diverse goals. For many, a poor institutional fit is what primarily led to the decision to transfer to a community college. Finance was another reason students indicated their decision to leave, noting the high cost of the four-year institution as compared to the lower cost of the community college. And lastly, a change in educational goals led many students in the study to feel the community college was a better fit for them.

The term reverse transfer comes from the idea that moving from a four-year institution to a community college is viewed as a backward movement. However, the participants in this study did not label their reverse transfer movement as "backward" but rather described how reverse transferring gave them an opportunity to complete general education, figure out their major, or set them on a new career path. Students reported being happy at their current community college and in pursuit of their new goals.

**Noah:** *"The best thing I've ever done has been me going from a four-year program to a two-year program. You're not going backwards; you're actually going forward because you're finding out what you want to do."*

Some students did note that this institutional movement did result in delays. For example, Lucero liked the community college but felt that the experience did delay her. Looking at the time it has taken students to complete their education, or their expected completion date, reverse transferring has added years to their postsecondary educational journey.

It is important to understand why students reverse transfer. Potential implications include thinking about how student support service professionals (e.g., counselors) advise students during their pre-college and college years. Another implication lies in the area of enrollment management for both four-year and two-year institutions.

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