

## INTRODUCTION

Four-year colleges commonly accept transfer students for fall or spring entry terms. Transfer students come to 4-year universities from all walks of life and from diverse backgrounds seeking a more rigorous academic experience and a broader student-life experience (Wickert, 2009). During the transition to a new university, college transfer students face many psychological, physical, emotional, and academic struggles (Thomas et al., 2021). Areas of struggle include but are not limited to academic advising, student involvement, financial burdens, change in environment, commuting between campus and home, and working (Thomas et al., 2021). While these are issues faced by most college students, they can be heightened for transfer students during their time of transition to a new university, especially within the first semester. Following their adjustment to a new university, transfer students often experience feelings of impostor syndrome, transfer shock, acts of othering, and various other stressors from being in a new environment (Hills, 1965; Townsend, 2008). We chose to focus on undergraduate transfer students because of the need for more literature focused on the extent to which they are able to thrive and feel as if they matter or are marginalized on campus within their first semester.

## RESEARCH PURPOSE

The purpose of this study was to understand the undergraduate transfer-student entry experience and, specifically, the lived experiences contributing to perceptions of mattering and marginality. Our goal included but were not limited to understanding the undergraduate transfer student entry experience, identifying perceptions of mattering and marginality, conceptualizing differences in spring and fall entry experiences, contribute to thin literature on transfers student experience, and inform policy & procedure that supports transfers student mattering.

## METHODS

### Design

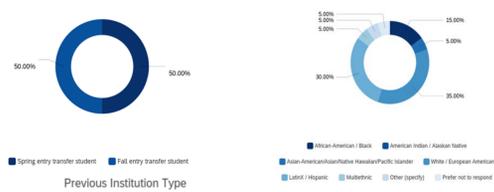
We employed a multiple-category, focus-group design (Krueger & Kasey, 2014). Focus groups are frequently used as a qualitative approach to gain an in-depth understanding of social issues (Nyumba et al., 2018), in this case, the transfer-student entry experience. Focus groups aim to obtain data from a purposely selected group of individuals rather than from a statistically representative sample of a broader population (Nyumba et al., 2018). Two categories of transfer student were identified at the research site based on their term of entry—fall or spring. Three “mini-focus groups” were conducted for each category for a total of six focus groups. Krueger and Kasey (1994) endorsed the use of these very small focus groups (p. 17); they include three (Morgan, 1997) or four (Krueger & Kasey, 1994) participants who have specialized knowledge and/or experiences to discuss in the group.

### Setting, Recruitment, and Sample

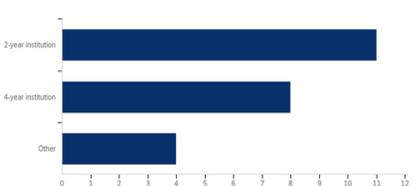
The setting was a midsized, urban, liberal arts university in the southern United States. The research site enrolls more than 12,000 students annually, with approximately 6,800 undergraduates ([Research Site], n.d.). Of the 6,800 undergraduates, approximately 1,200 (18%) are transfer students ([Research Site], n.d.). To achieve the research purpose, we utilized a purposive sampling method (Creswell, 2013). A roster (Marsden, 2005) was obtained from the research site’s student information system of the accessible population of 971 transfer students admitted to the university between spring 2018 and spring 2021 and who remained active with their enrollment during the summer 2021 term. The timeframe was determined given the unique sociocultural changes at the research site. For instance, major changes to the new-student orientation program and university curriculum were made in 2018 that conceivably could influence the transfer-student entry experience.

We employed a tailored-design recruitment method (Dillman et al., 2014). We invited the accessible population via personalized email (i.e., name, transfer student, entry term) to their university email address. Participants received up to four email reminders and four text messages to participate. A dining credit of \$10 was offered to students who participated in a 1.5-hr mini-focus group. Interested participants were invited to click on a link to sign up for one of up to four online focus-group times based on their entry term (i.e., fall or spring). Times were varied to include offerings during the business day, over lunch, and after hours to accommodate as many schedules as possible. The varied recruitment avenues (i.e., email and text), personal communications, incentives, and varied focus-group times were intentional to increase participation (Dillman et al., 2014). A total of 58 participants signed up using the online system.

Entry Cohort	Population		Sample	
	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage
Spring 2018	15	2%	0	0%
Fall 2018	61	6%	0	0%
Spring 2019	109	11%	1	5%
Fall 2019	209	22%	0	0%
Spring 2020	148	15%	2	10%
Fall 2020	291	30%	11	55%
Spring 2021	138	14%	6	30%
Entry Term	971	100%	20	100%



Previous Institution Type



## RESULTS

The primary purpose of our research study was to describe the lived experiences of mattering and marginalization of collegiate transfer students during their first term. Our findings are organized using Schlossberg’s framework, and we attempt to provide rich, thick descriptions of these experiences using participant quotes and field notes from each focus group.

### Marginality

- **Invisibility:** *not being seen or heard*
  - “Instead of helping me out, they would just look at me and say, oh, you can figure out on your own since you transferred here” -Suz
- **Confliction:** *receiving mixed signals about their value to a community*
  - “is very intriguing for low-income students, especially because I feel like they're pretty good at offering scholarships, at the beginning. But once you actually get in, it was weird because it was actually harder to get scholarships and that assistance” -Lizbeth
- **Belonging/fit:** *difficulty connecting with peers and feeling a lack of inclusivity*
  - “I even had a professor that made a joke and stuff about me being older” – Suz
- **Isolation:** *not being a part of the majority*
  - “you're not a freshman, so you miss out on those freshmen events and everything like that, where you meet more people as well was kind of difficult. So, I definitely was pretty lonely” -Shayfi

### Mattering

- **Ego-extension:** *personal successes and failures*
  - “My family was really proud of me and they really were excited that I was able to get into SMU, since they always heard it was a really good school” – Andy
  - “You're going from one of the premier institutions in the country. You can't sell your opportunity, that kind of stuff, keeping motivated. But yeah, I mean, even some friends from high school, they think of it as a really esteemed institution as well” – Don
- **Attention:** *commands the interest or notice of another person*
  - “My professors knew me by name” – Celeste
  - “I feel loved from a distance” – Carl
- **Importance:** *others care about one's thoughts, desires and actions*
  - “they were genuinely concerned for me” – Carl
- **Appreciation:** *mentioning that a person has made positive contribution(s)*
  - felt appreciated when faculty made an effort to schedule office hours

Reflection Upon First Semester at SMU

#	Field	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Somewhat agree	Agree	Strongly agree	Total						
1	Other people seemed to make friends more easily than I did.	0.00%	10.00%	2	15.00%	3	25.00%	5	35.00%	7	15.00%	3	20	
2	Being a student in this program filled an important need in my life.	5.00%	1	5.00%	1	15.00%	3	20.00%	4	35.00%	7	20.00%	4	20
3	I spent time making a difference in other people's lives.	0.00%	0	30.00%	6	15.00%	3	35.00%	7	10.00%	2	10.00%	2	20
4	I felt proud of the college or university I had chosen to attend.	5.00%	1	0.00%	0	10.00%	2	30.00%	6	25.00%	5	30.00%	6	20
5	I didn't have as many close friends as I wish I had.	0.00%	0	15.00%	3	0.00%	0	15.00%	3	25.00%	5	45.00%	9	20
6	There was a strong sense of community among students in my degree program.	20.00%	4	25.00%	5	10.00%	2	30.00%	6	15.00%	3	0.00%	0	20
7	I valued interacting with people whose viewpoints were different from my own.	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	5.00%	1	25.00%	5	50.00%	10	20.00%	4	20
8	I felt like my friends really care about me.	0.00%	0	10.00%	2	25.00%	5	25.00%	5	20.00%	4	20.00%	4	20
9	I knew that I could make a difference in my community.	0.00%	0	20.00%	4	20.00%	4	15.00%	3	30.00%	6	15.00%	3	20
10	It was important to me to become aware of the perspectives of individuals from different backgrounds.	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	25.00%	5	75.00%	15		20	

Reflection Upon First Semester at SMU

#	Field	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Somewhat agree	Agree	Strongly agree	Total						
1	I felt content with the kinds of friendships I currently have.	0.00%	0	10.00%	2	25.00%	5	15.00%	3	25.00%	5	25.00%	5	20
2	My spiritual or religious beliefs provided me with a sense of strength when life is difficult.	0.00%	0	15.00%	3	20.00%	4	25.00%	5	25.00%	5	15.00%	3	20
3	When I was faced with a problem in my life, I was usually able to think of several ways to solve it.	0.00%	0	10.00%	2	10.00%	2	10.00%	2	50.00%	10	20.00%	4	20
4	My perspective on life was that I tended to see the glass as "half full" rather than "half empty."	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	20.00%	4	25.00%	5	30.00%	6	25.00%	5	20
5	My spiritual or religious beliefs gave meaning and purpose to my life.	0.00%	0	15.00%	3	20.00%	4	30.00%	6	20.00%	4	15.00%	3	20
6	It was hard to make friends in my degree program.	5.00%	1	5.00%	1	10.00%	2	25.00%	5	25.00%	5	30.00%	6	20
7	It was important for me to make a contribution to my community.	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	15.00%	3	35.00%	7	25.00%	5	25.00%	5	20
8	I looked for the best in situations, even when things seemed hopeless.	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	20.00%	4	10.00%	2	30.00%	6	40.00%	8	20
9	My knowledge or opinions were influenced or changed by becoming more aware of the perspectives of individuals from different backgrounds.	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	15.00%	3	50.00%	10	35.00%	7	20
10	I often felt lonely because I had only a few close friends with whom to share my concerns.	0.00%	0	10.00%	2	10.00%	2	20.00%	4	25.00%	5	35.00%	7	20

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### Curriculum, Advising, & Transfer Credits

- Transfer specific advising would allow for transfer students to not feel marginalized, thus resulting in an overall improved academic experience
- Accessible advising
- Individuation of advising
- A pre-transfer program or presentation that provides education about the institution's curriculum requirements and degree plans is needed for the success of post-transfer students
- Consistent Information
- School of major specific information
- Semesterly Workshops

### Transfer Student Involvement & the Student Experience

- Opportunities for pre-transfer students to network or connect with other pre-transfer students would help improve the student experience
- Social media
- Social or networking events
- Pre-transfer groups (similar to Stampede)
- Utilize existing student organizations or create new ones to foster feelings of attention and appreciation among transfer students
- Transfer-specific groups
- Raise awareness of these groups to student population

### Tailored Communications Emphasizing Transfer Students

- Reaching out to pre-transfer students to help them begin to integrate to SMU before coming to campus would help ease the transition
- One-stop-shop for all transfer communications
- Focus on clear and concise communication to transfer students
- Communication campaign for transfer students that spans admissions and the first semester
- High frequency of communication made transfer students feel appreciated
- Postcards, mail, and other tangible forms of communication were specifically mentioned

## CONCLUSION

With it being that institutions desire for transfer students to matriculate into their institutions, Higher Educational Professionals (HEIs) must develop a better understanding of the needs of transfer students during their first semester. Transfer students choose their new institutions in search of better opportunities to further their college experiences through academic endeavors, social involvement, and personal development. HEIs must consider how these three concepts can positively influence a transfer student to achieve success.

**Our research specifically emphasizes the phenomenon of transfer students having diverse backgrounds and experiences that shape their feelings of mattering and marginality based on their entry term.** From this, HEIs should understand that there is a need for improved accessible academic advising resources, transfer student tailored communication, and programmatic opportunities to alleviate transfer shock. Our findings demonstrate that in these areas, transfer students struggled with their adjustment to new curriculum, understanding university policies, and their overall social connectedness. Thus, HEIs that interact and support transfer students bear the responsibility of ensuring that transfer students have equitable access to all of the resources that are available to them so that they can begin their entry term on equal grounds like everyone else.

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