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# Joint-Admissions Explored: Determining the Existence of a Transfer-Affirming Culture Between Owensboro Community and Technical College and Western Kentucky University-Owensboro

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JOINT-ADMISSIONS EXPLORED: DETERMINING THE EXISTENCE  
OF A TRANSFER-AFFIRMING CULTURE BETWEEN  
OWENSBORO COMMUNITY AND TECHNICAL COLLEGE  
AND WESTERN KENTUCKY UNIVERSITY-OWENSBORO

A Dissertation  
Presented to  
The Faculty of the Educational Leadership Doctoral Program  
Western Kentucky University  
Bowling Green, Kentucky

In Partial Fulfillment  
Of the Requirements for the Degree  
Doctor of Education

By  
Angela Loretta Higdon

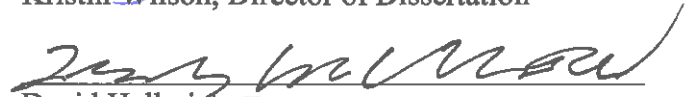
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COMMUNITY AND TECHNICAL COLLEGE AND WESTERN  
KENTUCKY UNIVERSITY-OWENSBORO

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 4/6/18  
Dean, Graduate School Date

I dedicate this dissertation, first, to my amazing husband, Marty, for encouraging and supporting me throughout this entire program. You are not only my companion through so many adventures, but you are also my soulmate.

I love you with all of my heart, now and forever.

I also dedicate this to my precious daughter, Gracie, for inspiring me to achieve my goals. It is my great joy to watch you grow into a powerful, intelligent, beautiful young lady. My hope is that you will maintain your motivation and continue your pursuit of excellence for your entire life.

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A growing number of postsecondary students transfer from a two-year to a four-year institution. The joint admissions program between Owensboro Community and Technical College (OCTC) and Western Kentucky University-Owensboro (WKU-O) is a unique example of such a transfer relationship. Research is needed to understand the nature of the joint admissions relationship. The purpose of this case study was to explore the joint admissions relationship between OCTC and WKU-O, in order to determine the existence of a transfer-affirming culture, in accordance with Handel's (2011) transfer-affirming conceptual framework.

The case study was bounded by time, including the previous three academic years (2014-2015, 2015-2016, 2016-2017), and by location, limited to the OCTC and WKU-O campuses. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with senior leadership from each institution, two members of the advising staff from each institution, 20 jointly-admitted students who chose to transfer to WKU-O, and four jointly-admitted students who chose not to transfer to WKU-O. Analysis of the Joint Admissions Agreement signed by both institutions in 2009 was also conducted through the application of an instrument inspired by Handel's framework. Finally, statistical analysis was also performed whereby jointly-admitted student performance

data was compared to non-jointly admitted transfer student performance data, including variables such as persistence, GPA, and degree attainment.

The study confirmed the existence of a transfer-affirming culture between OCTC and WKU-O, which is nurtured by but not exclusive to the joint admissions program, as non-jointly admitted transfer students received similar services to that of jointly-admitted students. Comparison of student performance data revealed no statistical significance in the performance of non-jointly admitted transfer students to that of jointly-admitted students. Senior leadership and advising staff contributed significantly to the presence of a transfer-affirming culture through the established partnership and strong personal relationships. Many students in the study perceived the joint admissions program as essential to their success and baccalaureate completion as they received the required support necessary to achieve their goals. Furthermore, many of the students in the study indicated that without WKU-O, they would have been unable to earn a bachelor's degree.

## CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

### Introduction

Transfer partnerships among two-year and four-year institutions are designed to offer students a viable pathway to earning a baccalaureate degree. Owensboro Community and Technical College (OCTC) and Western Kentucky University-Owensboro (WKU-O), a regional campus anchored at Western Kentucky University in Bowling Green, Kentucky, signed a type of transfer partnership in 2009, which is referred to as a *joint-admissions agreement*. The motivation behind the agreement was not only to ease the potential burden of the transfer process, but also to encourage community college students to complete a bachelor's degree at WKU-O.

Through the joint-admissions agreement, an OCTC student has the option to apply for jointly-admitted status at WKU-O, whereby the student completes his or her associate degree at OCTC and then transfers immediately to WKU-O to pursue a bachelor's degree. Introductory courses, such as those on the 100- and 200-level, are not offered at WKU-O and through joint admissions, the student makes a commitment to attend WKU-O to finish completion of a bachelor's degree. Jointly-admitted students have access to the benefits of cooperative advising services from both OCTC and WKU-O to eliminate transfer shock and offer a seamless transfer experience.

The rationale behind the joint-admissions process is the perception that a jointly-admitted student taking classes at OCTC will feel like a "Hilltopper" (nickname for WKU students) from the inception of their college experience, thus forging an early relationship with the transfer institution. Driving students to persist

and succeed via the joint-admissions model is the idea that students have already established a relationship with WKU-O and have established their intention of earning a bachelor's degree through WKU-O. A jointly-admitted student can theoretically benefit from such a close association between institutions, which creates an atmosphere that provides a navigable pathway to baccalaureate completion. Given that OCTC and WKU-O are across the street from one another, the pathway is both literal and metaphorical.

However, while there is an overwhelming presence of literature devoted to community college transfer issues, there is little research on the joint-admissions model as exists between OCTC and WKU-O. When the program was implemented, the hope was that the joint-admissions relationship would result in a transfer-saturated environment, thus leading to an increase in baccalaureate attainment. While the goal inherent in the joint-admissions relationship seems viable, no study has yet been conducted to determine if the joint-admissions relationship between OCTC and WKU-O has been successful.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this case study was to explore the joint-admissions relationship between Owensboro Community and Technical College and Western Kentucky University-Owensboro to determine the existence of a transfer-affirming culture. The intrinsic case study was bound to the OCTC and WKU-O joint-admissions transfer partnership and was also limited to the previous three academic years of the partnership, including 2014-2015, 2015-2016, and 2016-2017. Data sources included semi-structured interviews of jointly-admitted students, as well as

advising staff and senior leadership at both institutions; the joint-admissions agreement signed in 2009; and finally, statistical comparisons of jointly-admitted and non-jointly admitted student GPA, persistence, and degree attainment data.

### **Need and Significance of the Study**

The nature of the relationship between two-year and four-year institutions plays a significant role in forming a pathway to earning a bachelor's degree, and the closer the relationship between the institutions, the more likely the student is to achieve (Alfonso, 2006; Gose, 2017; Mobelini, 2013). At a time when many postsecondary institutions are facing budget problems and competitive recruitment is now a central endeavor of many campuses, universities might benefit from simplifying transfer agreements and pursue opportunities to embrace the transfer student.

Community colleges are more relevant than ever in the national conversation on the nation's higher education goals. According to a study conducted by Arguijo and Howard (2010), approximately 50% of individuals seeking postsecondary education enrolled in a community college at some point in their academic pursuits. Arguijo and Howard's findings are also supported through the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, whose findings, derived from national student performance data in 2015-2016, determined that 49% of students who earned a bachelor's degree had previously enrolled in a two-year institution, with 63% of the students enrolled at a two-year institution for three or more terms (National Student Clearinghouse, 2017). In addition, Aulck and West (2017) found that students who enter higher education at a community college often have higher grade point averages than those who begin at a four-year institution. Given the compelling data surrounding the number of students who



enroll at community colleges and the conspicuous nature of community college transfer issues in the literature, the relationship between two-year and four-year institutions invited careful examination.

Joint-admissions relationships were created as a model for institutions hoping to ease the transfer transition and increase baccalaureate attainment. The proximity of OCTC to WKU-O; the interaction of students with faculty and staff at both institutions; and the interaction of faculty, staff, and leadership between the institutions provided a distinct research opportunity. Strong relationships between community colleges and universities have the potential to yield encouraging results for students, and the joint-admissions relationship between OCTC and WKU-O was one such compelling opportunity for study.

### **Research Questions**

RQ1: Does/how does the joint-admissions relationship between Owensboro Community and Technical College and Western Kentucky University-Owensboro foster a transfer-affirming culture?

RQ2: Do/how do the advising staff and leadership at Owensboro Community and Technical College and Western Kentucky University-Owensboro encourage and contribute to a transfer-affirming culture?

RQ3: Do/how do the jointly-admitted students perceive the joint-admissions relationship between Owensboro Community and Technical College and Western Kentucky University-Owensboro as contributing to their success and baccalaureate completion?

## **Rationale for Methodology**

The selected research paradigm was a case study, whereby the exploration and understanding of joint admissions was central to answering the research questions. I collected data from the previous three academic years, including 2014-2015, 2015-2016, and 2016-2017. The data sources, discussed thoroughly in chapter 3, included the *Joint-Admissions Agreement* signed in 2009 between OCTC and WKU-O; semi-structured student, staff, and senior leadership interviews; and statistical data illuminating jointly-admitted student GPA, persistence rates, and graduation rates. By analyzing these data, I made a determination as to the existence of a transfer affirming culture between OCTC and WKU-O.

This case study was conducted through the application of Handel's (2011) transfer-affirming theoretical framework, which stressed institutional partnerships as essential to the formation of a transfer environment, thus leading to increased student baccalaureate completion. Handel established five characteristics which institutions must possess to be regarded as having a transfer-affirming culture, including the following:

- I. Transfer as a *shared responsibility* between a two-year and four-year institution
- II. Baccalaureate attainment is not only a possibility but is encouraged and expected
- III. The presence of academic support
- IV. Maximizing the social capital students obtain from transfer preparedness as a result of the cooperative services provided by the two-year and four-year institution
- V. Transfer as a prominent feature of both the two-year and four-institutions' mission and strategic goal

The *Joint-Admissions Agreement* was designed to create a specialized institutional partnership which supports, encourages, and expects transfer from OCTC to WKU-O, but determining the existence of a transfer-affirming culture between these institutions using the rubric of Handel's theoretical framework has been applied for the first time in this study.

### **Nature of the Research Design for the Study**

Handel's (2011) five-pronged approach to a transfer-affirming culture was the measurement instrument for this case study, as each part of the data was evaluated through the framework. Student perceptions of their joint-admissions experience were collected via semi-structured interviews, and the population consisted of the 214 students who were listed as joint-admissions students within the previous three academic years. The student sample was selected via email invitation and consisted of 20 students who were jointly-admitted and transferred to WKU-O, as well as four students who were jointly-admitted but did not follow through with their commitment to transfer to WKU-O. In addition, semi-structured interviews were conducted with two members of the advising staff from each institution, chosen because of their frequent contact with joint-admissions students. Finally, semi-structured interviews were also conducted with a member of senior leadership at both campuses, chosen because of their role in forging the *Joint-Admissions Agreement* in 2009. To protect the unanimity of the study participants and shield from potential participant bias, the study was blinded (Patton, 2012).

Furthermore, the case study included document analysis, referring specifically to a joint-admissions document signed between OCTC and WKU-O in 2009, which

has been available to the public since the inception of the agreement. The joint-admissions document revealed expectations and responsibilities on the part of both campuses. The document was analyzed using the components of Handel's (2011) framework to determine if the founding intent showed evidence of the goal of the creation of a transfer-affirming culture.

The final data source in the case study included a statistical analysis of GPA, persistence, and graduation rates of 185 students, comprising 81 jointly-admitted students and 104 non-jointly admitted students from the previous three academic years. Students were selected by their status as first-time undergraduate transfers from OCTC who transferred to WKU-O during the fall semesters of 2014, 2015, and 2016. The data were supplied by the Office of Institutional Research at Western Kentucky University in Bowling Green. Data triangulation confirmed the validity of the findings and ensured the data were complete, with the ultimate goal of fully understanding the joint-admissions experience to yield findings that determined the presence of a transfer-affirming culture through joint admissions at OCTC and WKU-O.

### **Definition of Terms**

**Academic Advisors:** Staff and faculty who are tasked with advising students on course enrollment and degree requirements. For transfer students, course selection is often based on what is transferable to a receiving institution (Kisker, 2007).

**Joint Admissions:** An advanced form of articulation agreement whereby two postsecondary institutions (usually a two-year and four-year institution) form an understanding whereby students at one institution are simultaneously enrolled at

another for the purposes of easing the transfer transition and encouraging baccalaureate degree completion (Mobelini, 2013).

**Jointly-Admitted Students:** Students who take advantage of joint-admissions relationships and simultaneously enroll at two institutions with the goal of starting at one institution and completing at another. Jointly-admitted students are often regarded as transfer students who have made a commitment to complete a degree at a particular transfer institution through joint admissions (Mobelini, 2013).

**OCTC:** Owensboro Community and Technical College, the community and technical college located in Owensboro, Kentucky, which forged a joint-admissions relationship with WKU-O in 2009.

**Persistence:** The ability of a student to follow an academic course of study to degree completion (Tinto, 1975).

**Swirling Transfer:** A transfer pattern whereby students transfer from one institution to another and then back again to the previous institution (De Los Santos & Sutton, 2012).

**Transfer Students:** Students who accumulate college credits at one institution and enroll at another institution with the intention of transferring previously earned credits to another institution (Aulck & West, 2017).

**WKU:** Western Kentucky University, the main campus, located in Bowling Green, Kentucky.

**WKU-O:** Western Kentucky University – Owensboro, a regional campus, located in Owensboro, Kentucky.

### **Assumptions, Delimitations, and Limitations**

The goal of the study was to gain an accurate understanding of the joint-admissions relationship between OCTC and WKU-O. Given that all student participants were jointly-admitted and had equal access to services, I am confident that participants provided their personal perception of a shared experience. Having nothing to gain or lose through participation, students had no reason to mislead or fabricate any portion of their responses. Each student in the population had equal opportunity to participate in the study.

In addition, by blinding the study, it was my intention to create a research environment whereby the advising staff and senior leadership at both institutions felt comfortable in providing an honest and authentic account of their perceptions of the joint-admissions relationship. The four advising staff members and senior leadership participants have worked with the joint-admissions project since it was conceived and I therefore deemed them legitimate resources. Senior leadership not only played a central role in establishing the joint-admissions relationship, given their role in administration at their respective institutions, but they are largely responsible for maintaining the *Joint-Admissions Agreement* and would need to be engaged in any amendments or changes to the agreement. Also, the study was blinded so all interview participants had no knowledge as to the purpose of the study.

Study limitations include the fact that for the statistical data, the student sample size consisted of 185 first-time undergraduate transfers that came from OCTC and transferred to WKU-O and were not randomly sampled. The final sample was composed of 81 jointly-admitted students and 104 non-jointly-admitted students,

and since persistence measurements are conducted by WKU's Office of Institutional Research from fall to fall semester, student performance measurements were collected from the fall semesters of 2014, 2015, and 2016. In addition, a time window depreciation must be acknowledged, in that students who enrolled in fall 2014 might have an advantage in baccalaureate attainment rates over students who enrolled in fall 2016 for the fact that they have had more time to complete. Another limitation was the availability of contact information of jointly-admitted students as provided by the WKU-O campus. Of the 214 jointly-admitted students of the previous three academic years, contact information in the form of email was available for only 155 students, which limited the potential number of participants.

In terms of delimitations, given the purpose and design of a case study model to examine a situation or phenomenon through multiple sources, which is bounded by time and place, there was no instrument within the model to offer student performance predictions through joint admissions. I sought to understand the joint-admissions relationship in a qualitative methodological approach and did not intend to pursue performance prediction models. Also, faculty advisors at OCTC were not included in the semi-structured interviews in the study, since they do not have constant advising contact with joint-admissions students. Most of the jointly-admitted students sought advising services through the transfer center at OCTC, where WKU-O advisors are housed.

Furthermore, given the abundance of transfer literature that exists, the literature review was limited exclusively to transfer literature on two-year to four-year transfer topics. None of the peer-reviewed literature in the study was devoted to

joint admissions as a result of the scarcity of joint-admissions literature, which emphasized the need for this study. Also, given that case studies often examine a unique situation from which broad policy may not necessarily be formulated, there are still findings and suggestions provided in this study which may be relevant to other institutions. However, I do not intend to make broad regional or national policy recommendations based on the results of the joint-admissions relationship between OCTC and WKU-O.

Finally, while WKU Bowling Green has other regional campuses in Glasgow, Fort Knox, and Elizabethtown, this case study focused exclusively on the joint-admissions relationship between OCTC and WKU-O. Each regional campus has a unique story that can potentially contribute to the transfer policy conversation but the present study focuses squarely on the jointly-admitted Owensboro students. The research framework may be replicated at other regional campuses in the future.

### **Findings**

Through the application of Handel's model on transfer-affirming cultures, followed by answering each of the posed research questions, I determined that a transfer-affirming culture does exist between OCTC and WKU-O. However, the joint-admissions program was not the only factor contributing to the presence of a transfer-affirming culture. While the *Joint-Admissions Agreement* may foster the initiation of a transfer-friendly culture and assist in the formation of relationships that make the agreement functional, the services provided to regular transfer students to WKU-O from OCTC do not differ extensively from the services given to joint-admissions students. This is supported in the results of student performance data,



whereby non-jointly-admitted and jointly-admitted transfer students showed no statistically significant differences in GPA, persistence, and degree completion rates.

The study also confirmed that advising staff contribute significantly to the presence of a transfer-affirming culture. Many students in the study reported the development of mentor relationships with staff at both institutions, reported as fostered through advising services, tutoring assistance, and other services. Advising staff and senior leadership also offered examples of ways in which their full support was offered for transfer success and noted the mission statements of each institutions having embedded the transfer mission prominently within them.

Though the joint-admissions program was designed to make WKU-O students feel like Hilltoppers, most of the jointly-admitted students who participated in the interview portion of the study admitted to not feeling like Hilltoppers. In addition, joint-admissions also led to the unintended results of increasing swirling transfer and/or co-enrollment. Jointly-admitted students do not have an exclusive, distinctive experience that would attract wide participation and stimulate program growth. The joint-admissions transfer identity is essentially no different from that of a non-jointly-admitted transfer student.

### **Discussion and Recommendations**

My findings affirmed much of what is present in the literature, such as the influence of faculty and staff relationships with students in influencing transfer decisions, as well as the role of executive support in the creation of successful transfer partnerships. In addition, the role of geography in transfer decisions and college choice is another comparable theme in the literature, as many of the students

in my study emphasized convenience and location in making their transfer decisions. Based on the findings of my study, I recommended a revision of the joint-admissions experience for students as well as more assertive recruitment in high schools within the region. I also recommended a replication of my study on other regional campuses with similar joint-admissions agreements to gather a more complete picture of the joint-admissions experience for all WKU regional campuses.

### **Summary of Chapters**

This study is divided into five chapters with each devoted to an essential piece of the research plan. In Chapter I, the joint-admissions relationship between WKU-O and OCTC is introduced and the purpose statement, research questions, and study components are articulated and summarized. In Chapter II, I provided a literature review of relevant community college transfer issues, which is divided into themes within the literature. In addition, I utilized Handel's transfer-affirming framework throughout the literature review to examine the effectiveness of transfer relationships. In Chapter III, I presented a more specific discussion of the applied research methodology and framework, the methods of data collection and types of data, including documents, interview questions and coding techniques, and the rationale for statistical tests performed on jointly-admitted and non-jointly-admitted student GPA, persistence, and degree attainment rates. In Chapter IV, the findings of the study were presented, including document analysis, responses from interviews, and an analysis of the GPA, persistence, and graduation rates. Finally, in Chapter V, I compare my findings to established points within the literature, offered recommendations for policy, and offered suggestions for further study.

## CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

### Introduction

While there is a wealth of literature devoted exclusively to issues within the transfer ambit, little research has addressed jointly-admitted students. Joint admissions, being a relatively new phenomenon, has not been at the center of the transfer literature discussion, yet many other related aspects of transfer-based research contribute significantly to understanding the culmination and relevance of joint admissions. Joint admissions, as an emerging strategy for baccalaureate attainment, should be included in the literature. The central purpose of joint admissions is to enhance transfer expectations to the point of generating a culture of transfer. Damen (1987) defined cultures as “learned and shared human patterns or models for living; day-to-day living patterns. These patterns and models pervade all aspects of human social interaction” (p. 367). Culture is inescapable, and if transfer is integrated into the campus culture, transfer as a primary function of the campus community becomes a salient reality. Handel’s (2011) transfer-affirming culture is an emerging theoretical framework, which includes five essential components that define the existence of a transfer-affirming culture:

- I. Transfer as a *shared responsibility* between a two-year and four-year institution
- II. Baccalaureate attainment is not only a possibility but is encouraged and expected
- III. The presence of academic support
- IV. Maximizing the social capital students obtain from transfer preparedness as a result of the cooperative services provided by the two-year and four-year institution

V. Transfer as a prominent feature of both the two-year and four-institutions' mission and strategic goal

The contributions present in the literature illustrate the significance of Handel's framework, which is rooted in McDonough's (1997) theories on high school culture and academic performance, Laanan's (2010) student capital theory, and Jain's (2011) critical race theory (as cited in Handel, 2011). The application of Handel's theoretical framework is ideal as an instrument for the assessment of the joint-admissions relationship between OCTC and WKU-O. The transfer relationship, spirit of cooperation, and steady communication between OCTC and WKU-O suggest the possibility of the existence of a transfer-affirming culture. Data collection and methods of analysis designed to test this theoretical framework will be fully explored in chapter three.

In this chapter, I review the literature on community college transfer. Among the most relevant and fitting within the construct of Handel's theoretical framework, include the role of community colleges as a viable pathway to a baccalaureate degree; persistence, retention and completion; student and faculty perceptions and experiences of transfer; swirling and reverse transfer; and examining relationships between two-year and four-year institutions, especially in the cases of concurrent enrollment and joint admissions. It should be noted that joint admissions is not presently a substantial portion of the available literature on community college transfer. Even among the most comprehensive and recent literature reviews on transfer, joint admissions is not included in the relevant transfer terms and patterns (Taylor & Jain, 2017), thus underlying the need for this study. An exploration of each of these critical issues is integral to understanding

what it means to cultivate and nurture an authentic transfer-affirming culture, which may be conducive to fostering student success and completion.

### **Community Colleges as Pathways to the Baccalaureate Degree**

Nearly half of postsecondary students attend a community college (Arguijo & Howard, 2010), and, according to Shapiro's (2012) analysis of data in the National Student Clearing House, 45% of students who earned bachelor's degrees in 2011-2012 enrolled in a community college at some point throughout their postsecondary education (as cited in Handel, 2013). The 2015-2016 National Student Clearinghouse Research Center reported that 49% of students who earned a bachelor's degree had previously enrolled in a two-year institution, which is up 4% since the 2011-2012 study (National Student Clearinghouse, 2017). Furthermore, the *Undergraduate Degree Earner's Report*, created by the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, revealed that in 2014-2015, of the over 1.8 million bachelor's degree earners in the nation, 349,211 had earned an associate degree prior to earning a bachelor's degree, which constituted 18.9% of the bachelor-degree earning population (National Student Clearinghouse, 2016). The study, which was based on Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) data and limited to degree-granting institutions, also revealed the number of first-time associate degree earners with no prior award at 780,414, whereas the number of first-time bachelor's degree earners with no prior award came to over 1.4 million. From these compelling data, it is clear the exploration of the transfer experience from two-year to four-year institution is essential to understanding a critical part of postsecondary education. It is especially relevant, given that, according to the National Student Clearinghouse data, nearly one-fifth of all bachelor's degree earners in the nation were

community college transfer students at some point throughout their academic journey (National Student Clearinghouse, 2016).

Handel's research in 2013 provided a scholarly assessment of the relationship between two-year and four-year institutions and their successful collaborative initiatives designed to advance former President Obama's goal for the United States to "attain the highest proportion of college graduates in the world by 2020" (as cited in Handel, p. 5). Handel argued that this bold objective will likely not be attained without the partnership of community colleges and four-year institutions, thus necessitating a smoother pathway for transfer students seeking a baccalaureate degree. Many studies within the literature identify the benefits, strengths, and opportunities present within these institutional relationships.

### **Articulation Agreements**

To cultivate strong transfer relationships, partnerships must be articulated between two-year and four-year institutions. Articulation agreements are defined as institutional policies that are "implemented to encourage, facilitate and monitor the student transfer process" (Hezel Associates, as cited in Senie, 2016, p. 3). Collaborative efforts must be established in order create a functional and successful transfer environment. Kisker (2007) conducted a case study considering the processes involved in establishing and maintaining partnerships between institutions to improve the transfer experience and increase baccalaureate attainment. The study placed a large southern California university and three regional community colleges under the research lens, and by collecting multiple sources including partnership documents, semi-structured interviews, documented communication between the two transfer institutions, and notes

collected from various committee meetings, these data were analyzed in order to identify central transfer themes. The 13 semi-structured interviews were conducted with two university administrators, with the remaining 11 interview participants consisting of faculty and administrators at three of the nine community colleges in the area. Kisker employed network embeddedness theory, which suggests a symbiotic bond whereby entities are engaged in a reciprocally supportive relationship. Through the application of the theoretical framework, Kisker identified a transfer-focused academic culture at these institutions where faculty and staff from the university as well as the community colleges were encouraged to interact and communicate with each other.

Themes Kisker identified from coding the semi-structured interviews include the nature of “previous relationships between institutions, the significance of presidential support for partnership practices, the need for adequate and sustained funding, and the importance of maintaining a university presence on community college campuses” (p. 5). Kisker also found that issues of governance between the community colleges and the university were an issue and uncovered that community college participants perceived that there should be more equity between the institutions, since many considered the university to be the prime institution with the ultimate authority. However, faculty and staff participants in Kisker’s study identified themselves as intimately engaged in and committed to transfer initiatives, which they perceived as contributing to the strengthening of the relationship between the university and the community colleges.

Fink and Jenkins (2017) echoed Kisker’s findings on the importance of cultivating transfer partnerships. They collected data from the fall 2007 group of first-year community college students in the National Student Clearinghouse (NSC), and the

researchers were able to identify characteristic features of shared, successful partnerships between two-year and four-year institutions. Fink and Jenkins analyzed NSC enrollment and degree attainment data and identified 177 transfer partnerships based on community college transfer destinations. Institutions selected for phone interviews were those rated highest among expected baccalaureate completion compared to actual baccalaureate completion, and they controlled for institutional characteristics, such as socioeconomic status and level of urbanization. Of these considered, 24 transfer partnerships were deemed the highest in terms of graduates and therefore selected to engage in semi-structured phone interviews with the Aspen Institute's College Excellence Program. Based on the calls and interest in participation, 14 site visits of six of the transfer partnerships were conducted by Fink and Jenkins, and they conducted focus groups with students, staff, faculty, and administration.

Based on the data collected from the focus groups, Fink and Jenkins (2017) identified three broad themes among the strong partnerships: "(a) make transfer a priority, (b) create clear programmatic pathways with aligned high-quality instruction, and (c) provide tailored transfer student advising" (p. 301). Just as Kisker's (2007) study revealed the importance of faculty and administration in leading the cultivation of strong transfer relationships, Fink and Jenkins found a similar situation in their study. In addition, Fink and Jenkins determined that

These transfer partnerships exhibited a strong commitment to transfer students; forged clear transfer pathways to best prepare students for success at the four-year college; and provided tailored transfer student advising and support from students' entry at a community college to bachelor's completion. (p. 306)



Kisker's work, and that of Fink and Jenkins, offer support to the idea that successful partnerships are defined by what Handel (2011) would identify as the shared responsibility of transfer.

### **Transfer Experiences**

Essential to the improvement of the transfer relationship between two-year and four-year institutions is gaining a better understanding of the transfer experience, developing innovative frameworks to improve our comprehension of the nature of the transition for students, and recognizing ways to reduce the complexities and frustrations embedded in transfer shock (Laanan, 2007; Townshend, 1995). For the community college student transferring to a four-year school, the purposes of the institutions are indistinguishable, as both are considered integral and essential to completing the baccalaureate degree. Noting the complementary features of differing conceptual frameworks, Laanan (2007) intersected and applied three theoretical approaches. First, Pace (1984) argued that the quality of experience and quality of effort are similar concepts, which require the researcher to examine transfer through the prism of both experience and effort. Second, Astin (1984) suggested that both the quality and quantity of student involvement on a college campus may determine student development outcomes. And finally, Oberg (1960) applied culture shock phenomenon to described transfer as a manifestation of a type of cultural shock. Laanan combined each of the theoretical frameworks and engaged in a quantitative survey-based study of transfer students from 64 regional community college campuses, destined to transfer to an unidentified southern university, referred to as Sunshine University. With a 30% response rate, 717 students completed the survey, designed with a Likert scale consisting of 304

questions, known as the *Laanan Transfer Students Questionnaire*. To evaluate the findings, Laanan used exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis to determine how many items in the scale had the strongest factor loadings, marking the items at .45 and higher as *strongly loaded*. For example, according to Laanan, those students who indicated they *sought academic counseling* loaded strongly with *experienced academic difficulty*, which suggests that students who experienced academic difficulty would be more likely to seek counseling. In addition, the students in Laanan's study had some difficulty adjusting academically to the challenges of the four-year school. Students also reported having varying levels of insecurity about the university, and further findings revealed that the self-reported mean GPA of the students while at the community college was 3.41, which declined to a mean GPA of 3.17 at the university.

Reducing students' apprehensions and alleviating feelings of anxiety about the four-year institution appear to be important to facilitating students' academic adjustment. Ways to reduce transfer students' feelings of anxiety can be facilitated by faculty, academic counselors, student affairs professionals, and students. (Laanan, p. 54)

Laanan argued that a cultural integration of some sort must take place for students to perform well at the transfer institution, as well as quality academic preparedness, suggesting that each component is considered essential for student success.

Furthermore, while social capital is not mentioned in Laanan's study, the implications for the value of social capital are inferred. Social capital is generally regarded as the "availability of the information at the time when it is most useful, and referrals that a person receives from one's network that present a person in a positive way

in the right places” (Aslam, Shahzad, Syed, & Ramish, 2013, p. 28). The key to understanding social capital in higher education is described in the literature as existing within a network that can be comprised of fellow students, faculty, and staff, through which students gain access to pertinent information (Fuller, 2014). Handel described maximizing social capital as essential to creating a transfer-affirming culture in his fourth component of the framework, which means that for students to be successful in a transfer experience, they must make maximum use of the information they possess about transfer. The kind of cultural integration as advocated by Laanan might also manifest itself through an increase in social capital, since other studies confirmed that strong student relationships with peers, faculty, and staff, which often led to the cultivation of trust necessary to validate the information provided, contributed to student success (Daza, 2016; Fuller, 2014). Levinson (2005) argued that community colleges are ideally suited to initiate the accumulation of social capital, which is linked to Handel’s conceptualization that a transfer-affirming experience from a two-year to a four-year institution should be an opportunity to maximize the knowledge students have gathered for college success. For those transfer students as discussed in Laanan’s study, the accumulation of social capital must start with the community college.

### **Factors Impacting Transfer Experiences**

Motivating factors for baccalaureate transfer must also be considered. Wang (2012) explored factors contributing to the transfer of community college students aspiring to baccalaureate attainment in a quantitative study, through which she considered the impact of a set of independent variables on the probability of transfer to junior and senior status, demographics, level of academic ability, and psychological characteristics.

The sample consisted of 1,142 students selected from the *National Education Longitudinal Study*, which was merged with data from the related Postsecondary Education Transcript Study. The students within the sample began their postsecondary experience at a community college between 1992 and 1993 and intended to earn a bachelor's degree, and some indicated the desire to pursue a graduate degree. In this quantitative study, the dependent variable was dichotomous, in that it measured whether or not a student transferred to a four-year institution, and Wang found that race, ethnicity, full-time enrollment, continuous enrollment, and socioeconomic status were significant predictors of upward transfer. According to Wang,

The findings from this study suggest that the upward transfer of baccalaureate aspirants who access postsecondary education through community colleges can be explained by a constellation of various personal, sociological, psychological, and environmental factors as well as student attendance patterns in postsecondary education. (p. 865)

While minority and low-income students in Wang's study were among the least likely to transfer to a four-year institution, the findings invite a number of questions about the students in the sample. Were there strong transfer missions at the community colleges they attended? Did faculty and staff, as well as campus leadership, encourage transfer? Would these critical components have made a difference? Wang's research design was not conducive to answering these sorts of relevant transfer-culture questions. However, in the recommendations, Wang asserted that

Community college faculty and staff should help cultivate in students who wish to transfer the belief that their choice of a community college education is a

legitimate and effective route to the baccalaureate degree, and that their successful transfer can be largely determined by their own efforts, self-initiation, and self-direction. (pp. 868-869)

The emphasis on the role of faculty and staff in influencing student transfer decisions suggests Wang's acknowledgement of Handel's (2011) second transfer-affirming component, which confirms baccalaureate attainment as expected and attainable.

While Wang's research yielded significant findings for minority transfer students in a relatively large national sample, Castro and Cortez (2017) conducted a small qualitative study, which was designed to understand the transfer experiences of Latinex students. Their study was aimed at Latinex students who began their postsecondary education at a community college, to understand how these experiences could influence the formation of a transfer-receptive culture at the transfer institution. Six transfer students attending a four-year institution were recruited through email invitation and participated in semi-structured interviews, which were coded for themes and evaluated within the context of the intersectionality theoretical framework. The study's goal was to reconstruct the lived experiences of the transfer students, and the rich, descriptive qualitative methodology was designed to give the students an opportunity to "turn the gaze inward" (p. 89). Each of the students felt a measure of isolation, being Latinex in a largely in a largely white institution, but each recognized the need to overcome the feeling of misplacement by forging social bonds and/or immersing themselves completely in their academic goals. Though Castro and Cortez focused their study on a single, underrepresented group, they asserted that "unwelcoming and/or unsupportive experiences negatively influence all students' ability to persist" (p. 88), which

underscores the role of the receiving institution in creating an atmosphere designed to embrace and encourage transfer students.

### **Cooperative Transfer Agreements**

Two-year and four-institution partnerships and articulation agreements are also significant in developing a culture of transfer and removing barriers to transfer is largely confined to the realm of policymakers (Boswell, 2004; Wellman, 2002). Campuses must be particularly sensitive to the needs of transfer students, especially engaging in efforts designed to reduce transfer shock. Fincher (2016) explored the benefit of transferring credits from an Associate of Applied Science degree, asserting that “Universities that accept the majority or all of the career and technical transfer student’s credits hold an advantage in enrolling quality students” (p. 532). Also recognizing a need for cooperative agreements between transfer and receiving institutions, Fincher advocated the identification of willing institutions that are interested in growing enrollment through partnerships, which are designed to provide students with a seamless opportunity to transfer credits and complete a bachelor’s degree.

Correspondingly, LaSota and Zumeta (2014) investigated the significance of upward transfer among students facing a variety of institutional factors, including state policy contexts of support for articulation between two-year and four-year institutions. LaSota and Zumeta collected data from the *Beginning Postsecondary Longitudinal Study* 2003-2009, and students comprising the population of the study were enrolled for at least three months in a community college as their primary institution, which included 500 community colleges representing 40 states. Of those students in the population, 2,760 planned to transfer in order to earn a bachelor’s degree and were therefore the selected

sample for the study. LaSota and Zumeta used multi-level logistic regression, factoring in the influence of the presence of state articulation and transfer policies on the likelihood of community college student transfer to a four-year institution, controlling for other variables such as student income level and whether or not they were first-generation college students. However, after controlling for state wealth, LaSota and Zumeta found that the existence of state articulation agreements and policies designed to improve transfer did not significantly affect transfer probability. According to their findings, “A student who planned to transfer at the time of community college entry had a 21% greater predicted probability of transfer beyond the 26% average for the entire sample“ (p. 164). The goal of baccalaureate attainment from the first year of postsecondary education and full-time enrollment were the two strongest indicators of transfer upward mobility, not the existence of a statewide articulation or transfer agreement. Other studies echo the significance of student expectations in baccalaureate attainment (Wang, 2009), but perhaps a flaw in LaSota and Zumeta’s study is their national, aggregate data set. An examination of the impact of regional or local transfer agreements, given the complexity and diversity of postsecondary institutions of all kinds, might provide a more accurate indication of the impact of articulation and transfer relationships. Student determination, while a viable consideration, is not a lone contributing factor in degree attainment (Tinto, 1993; Townshend, 1995), and the presence of transfer agreements and supportive postsecondary institutional relationships can offer much needed social and educational capital that are deemed necessary for student success (Handel, 2011).

Contributing to the conversation, Boswell upheld the notion that cooperative agreements are relevant to improving transfer experiences.

With nearly half of all students starting their postsecondary careers at a community college, creating seamless pathways that will allow these two-year college students to easily transition into a four-year college will be critical if states are to achieve their goals of increased baccalaureate attainment. (Boswell, p. 27)

While Boswell's work is not a peer-reviewed study, she explored joint-admission relationships as a way in which institutional policies are developed to promote transfer initiatives and help students toward baccalaureate attainment. One such example offered by Boswell is an initiative where select community colleges in New Jersey are actively encouraging students to apply to Rutgers in a joint-admissions process. Potential transfer students who maintain GPA requirements are assigned an advisor directly from Rutgers, and the advisor is paired with a local community college advisor to co-design an academic plan to ensure a flawless transfer experience. While no studies are yet available on the impact of the program and the performance of the students in the joint-admissions program at Rutgers, it would aid in our understanding of how close institutional relationships affect transfer.

Moreover, while joint-admissions research is absent, research on the impact of articulation agreements on transfer and bachelor's degree attainment is present. The existing research suggests support for cooperative transfer models have fluctuated over the years (Mosholder & Zirkle, 2007). Stern (2016) examined student characteristics and community college features that influenced the transfer experience and bachelor's degree attainment. Pulling data from the National Center for Education Statistics in the Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal study (1996-2001) and the Integrated



Postsecondary Educational Data System, Stern's sample included 1,424 students who began their postsecondary education at a community college in 1995-1996, as well as data collected from the 142 community colleges where these students attended. Stern's quantitative design centered on two dependent variables, including transfer from a community college to a four-year institution and bachelor's degree attainment, and given that the outcome variables were binary, a hierarchical generalized linear model was applied to analyze the data. The independent variable was the presence of an articulation agreement, and Stern's projected hypothesis was that students will have better transfer rates and a higher rate of bachelor's degree completion in states with articulation agreements. However, Stern found that the existence of articulation agreements did not necessarily improve student transfer patterns but determined that bachelor's degree attainment was higher in states with a statewide articulation agreement. While other factors not measured in the study could contribute to the bachelor's degree attainment rates, such as the fact that four-year institutions located in states with articulation agreements often accept more credits from a two-year school, Stern determined that establishing an articulation agreement itself is not enough for student success. There must be a spirit of cooperation among institutions and a prominence of transfer-related goals, and faculty are essential as "transfer champions" (p. 357), a sentiment which echoes the previous study by Wang (2012) that also emphasized the influence of faculty and staff in institutionalizing transfer culture. It should also be noted that Handel (2011) does not regard the presence of a formal articulation agreement between institutions as essential to the existence of a transfer-affirming culture, though it might serve as a vehicle for cooperation.

While institutional collaboration is often deemed to have a positive impact on the cultivation of a transfer-affirming culture, in some cases, collaboration between two-year and four-year institutions can lead students to sidestep associate degree attainment in direct pursuit of a bachelor's degree, thus negatively impacting completion rates for community colleges (Taylor, 2012). Cejda and Kaylor (2001) conducted a case study, incorporating the general interview guide approach, where they sought to understand why community college students transfer to a four-year institution prior to completion of an associate degree. The sample of 103 students responded to postcard invitations for interviews, and those invited to participate were traditional age students who had transferred from an unnamed Midwestern community college to an unnamed public state university. Cejda and Kaylor found that two-thirds of the study participants decided to transfer to the public state university when they determined that their ultimate goal was earning a bachelor's degree. Cejda and Kaylor did not mention the existence of any sort of articulation agreement between the two institutions nor any other measure of formal collaborative arrangement, which might indicate that students would have had an incentive to earn an associate degree prior to transfer. However, some students acknowledged the role played by faculty at the community college in influencing their decision to pursue a bachelor's degree, admitting that when faculty encouraged baccalaureate attainment, this influenced the student to transfer to the university. The study suggests the power of faculty and staff to influence student perceptions and encourage transfer, which is asserted in other studies (Stern, 2016; Wang, 2012).

In addition, while associate degree attainment improves completion rates and community colleges, the impact of associate degree attainment on baccalaureate

achievement remains inconclusive. According to Wang (2017), transfer students who earned an associate degree at a community college prior to transferring to a four-year institution showed no statistically significant variances in bachelor's degree completion, retention, or GPA. The sample consisted of 1,140 students selected from the Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study and the Postsecondary Education Transcript Study and included students who began their postsecondary education at a community college, transferred to a four-year institution, and were enrolled from fall 2003 to spring 2009. Using a quantitative quasi-experimental design, the key treatment used in Wang's study was whether or not students had earned an associate degree before transferring to a four-year institution, and the outcome measurements included whether or not students earned a bachelor's degree, if they were retained by spring 2009, GPA, and accumulated credits. Wang found that earning an associate degree may not be a critical factor in baccalaureate achievement, as students who transferred without having earned an associate degree were just as likely to earn a baccalaureate degree as those who did.

Furthermore, Wang argued that the aggregate null effect of earning a two-year degree may be a result of diverse articulation policies among the various states but also acknowledged that associate degree completers prior to transfer did earn fewer credits once they completed their four-year degree. Given the variations in articulation agreements throughout the nation, national samples such as the one used in Wang's study might not be ideal for this type of analysis. If a similar study were to be replicated on an individual state basis, which is acknowledged in the discussion section of Wang's study, a more accurate and refined understanding of the impact of associate degree attainment on bachelor's degree attainment might be uncovered.

## **Community College Transfers and Baccalaureate Attainment**

The available research on community college student performance and completion upon transfer to a four-year institution yields varying interpretations of the impact of community college attendance on baccalaureate attainment. Alfonso (2006) investigated the impact of community college attendance on baccalaureate attainment, where students were randomly selected to participate in a stratified survey. The sample was gathered from the National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988, consisting of a cohort of 8,887 eighth graders whose educational performance was documented for 12 years. Alfonso employed structural equation modeling and selected variables to predict baccalaureate attainment, which included whether or not students began their postsecondary education at a community college, as well as student degree attainment expectations. Alfonso found that students who began at a community college but planned to earn a bachelor's degree decreased their likelihood of earning a bachelor's degree by a rate of 21% to 31% compared to those who began at a four-year institution. Furthermore, Alfonso admitted that a national study of this nature may dilute state and regional variables, such as employment rates and possible industrial opportunities, which might have influenced a student's decision to abandon the pursuit of a bachelor's degree.

While Alfonso's findings did not provide an optimistic outlook for community college transfers, she asserted that

Community colleges and four-year institutions should work together in developing institutional and articulation practices, offered in this study as plausible explanations for the attainment gap, to improve the baccalaureate

attainment rates of the large number of students who enter community colleges with the expectation of achieving this degree. (p. 898)

Her study was not designed to prove that articulation agreements and any other form of transfer program might improve the baccalaureate attainment probability of community college transfers, and revising the study to include transfer agreements as a variable would refine the study. Regional studies between specific institutions could provide a more authentic glimpse of the efficacy of cultivating an inescapable culture of transfer, such as described in Handel's (2011) framework.

Other studies yielded findings that are not as discouraging for community college students transferring to a four-year institution. Transfer students from community colleges often have higher grade point averages than students who transfer from other institutions (De Los Santos & Sutton, 2012). According to Aulck and West (2017), two-year transfer students in their study did not change majors as frequently as the students who began their postsecondary education at a four-year institution, which might be due in part to the fact that freshman are often more uncertain of their potential career plans. Though community college transfers often had lower entrance exam scores, the students who transferred from a community college performed as well as the students who began at the four-year school. Aulck and West collected data from the University of Washington database of undergraduate students between 1998 and 2006, which included 70,000 students in the study. They performed a simple quantitative descriptive analysis of persistence rates and academic performance of community college transfers to the university and compared those same data to that of transfer students from another four-year institution and to that of first-year students enrolled at the University of Washington.

Aulck and West found that community colleges can satisfactorily prepare students for the academic component of the transfer experience, since the grades of the community college transfer students in the study were as good as those who had started their first year at the University of Washington. For this study, academic preparation was not necessarily a viable factor affecting attrition rates. What Aulck and West found challenges other postulations present in the transfer literature on community college transfer students, which include suggestions that community colleges often primarily function as a safety net designed for students who may not be able to perform academically at the university level (Kalogrides & Grodsky, 2011). Aulck and West found that academic readiness was not a problem for community college transfers in their study, but the study was a simple comparison of student performance data. If the researchers had supplemented the performance data with a survey of student perceptions of the transfer experience, it would have enriched the value of the findings. In addition, though the study was not designed to offer an analysis of the individual relationship between the regional community colleges and the University of Washington, qualitative data could have potentially provided rich details that might have offered a more authentic representation of the student's transfer experience.

### **Academic Performance of Community College Transfers**

Glass and Harrington (2010) engaged in a study comparing the academic performance of community college transfer students to students who began at a four-year institution. With the University of North Carolina selected as the site for their quantitative study, which was bounded to the graduating classes of 1998 and 1999, they randomly chose 100 community college transfer students and 100 students who started college at

the university, referred to as *native students*. Glass and Harrington compared primary independent variables such as GPA, retention, and graduation rates of the community college transfers to that of the native students, with transfer versus native status deemed the dependent variables. Their findings indicated that graduation rates were significantly higher for native students, and community college transfer students who graduated in 1998 had lower GPAs than the native students by an average of .19, which is not regarded as a significant difference. However, transfer students who graduated with a bachelor's degree in 1999 had a higher GPA than their native counterparts, at an average of .29, which is regarded as a significant difference. Glass and Harrington established that "students who transfer from North Carolina community colleges have an equal or better performance than do the native students at the end of their lower division work" (p. 424). The transfer students seemed to overcome any element of transfer shock in their final year of course work, thus suggesting that academic preparedness is not a barrier for baccalaureate completion among community college transfer students. Again, in Handel's transfer-affirming theoretical framework, academic support is essential, and, while Glass and Harrington do not specifically address this in their study, the availability of an academic support apparatus for the students in their study and the frequency of student use would have provided a more complete portrayal of the overall transfer experience for the students.

Also comparing native student performance to that of community college transfers, Ishtani and McKitrick (2010) conducted a study designed to consider how educational experiences between community college transfer students and native students compared in their upper division years at a four-year institution. Ishtani and McKitrick

used data from the National Survey of Student Engagement, whereby 535 students completed the survey as administered during their senior year at an unidentified four-year institution, described as a *Carnegie doctoral-intensive university*. The sample of students consisted specifically of 417 native students and 118 transfer students, and a simple statistical design was applied to evaluate the survey data, including comparisons of mean data between the two student groups. According to Ishanti and McKitrick, the mean comparisons of student responses in the survey revealed that community college transfer students were less likely to be engaged than the native students, both academically and socially. Based on their findings, Ishtani and McKitrick recommended that universities consider the implications of the transfer transition and to do what they can to create a transfer receptive culture, which may include the development of innovative ways to engage community college transfer students. Ishtani and McKitrick advised further that academic integration must take top priority, which is in accordance with the academic support component of Handel's (2011) transfer-affirming framework. Academic performance is an indispensable segment of transfer culture, and community college student transfer performance compared to that of native students continues to be at the center of many studies.

Falconetti's (2009) study also contributed to the academic performance conversation of community college transfer students. In the study, community college transfer students academically performed equally as well as the native students, and transfer students graduated with fewer cumulative hours than the native students. Falconetti compared the academic performance and persistence of community college transfers to native juniors at three universities, including the University of West Florida,



Florida Atlantic University, and the University of North Florida. The sample included 1,823 graduates and 644 dropouts, and descriptive discriminant analysis was used to evaluate differences between the transfer students and native students. While academic performance and degree attainment were comparable between the two groups, more community college transfers dropped out prior to graduation than did native students. Falconetti addressed the significance of articulation agreements in contributing to transfer student success and the extension of retention initiatives to specifically concentrate on transfer students, but no specific information was provided as to the details of the transfer relationships maintained by the two-year and four-year institutions included in the study.

Melguizo, Kienzl, and Alfonso's (2011) findings supported elements of Glass and Harrington's study, as well as that of Falconetti, in that each of the studies cited the relatively equal academic performance of community college transfers as compared to native students. Melguizo et al.'s quantitative study included data from the National Education Longitudinal Study, which documented the academic journey of eighth graders in 1988 through their transition into postsecondary education. The sample in this study consisted of 640 students who started their postsecondary education at a community college, as well as 2,520 students who started at a four-year institution. Each of the students selected had graduated high school on time and attained junior status at a four-year institution either through attending a four-year institution immediately following high school graduation or through transferring to the four-year institution from a community college. Using propensity score matching, the researchers found that 60% of the community college transfer students earned bachelor's degrees, compared to 73% baccalaureate completion for native students. Despite the findings that there were no

statistically significant differences in credential achievement for native versus transfer students, the researchers argued the need for placing most of the transfer preparedness responsibilities on community colleges and asserted that honing academic skills must be the primary objective of community colleges. Given the slight difference in the baccalaureate attainment rates between community college transfer students and native students, Melguizo et al.'s recommendations seem to contradict the study results, since the community college transfers performed about as well as the native students. Shifting more of the burden of transfer preparedness responsibilities to community colleges as suggested by the researchers is challenged in Handel's (2011) framework, whose definition of transfer-affirming culture emphasizes transfer as a shared responsibility between institutions.

However, academic preparedness, which was so heavily emphasized in Melguizo et al.'s study is a pronounced theme in community college transfer literature. D'Amico, Dika, Elling, Algozzine, and Ginn (2013) found that academic integration greatly improved the odds of persistence for community college transfer students. The study sample consisted of three cohorts of 968 transfer students at an unnamed Southeastern university whose academic performance was traced and evaluated from 2008 to 2010. Using regression models for outcome variables (in accordance with Tinto's (1993) model), including first semester GPA, second semester GPA, second semester enrollment, third semester enrollment, first semester hours earned ratio, and second semester hours earned ratio, D'Amico et al. found that community college transfer students with higher grades had higher persistence rates.

Similarly, academic preparedness was the greatest predictor of student success in Davidson's (2015) quantitative study, which was designed to identify the leading indicators of community college student transfer as well as associate degree attainment. Davidson focused on the students of the Kentucky Community and Technical College System (KCTCS) and the study sample consisted of students from fall 2008 who attended KCTCS as first-time, full-time, associate degree-seeking students. By using predictor variables and logistic regression, Davidson identified leading indicators that are likely to predict associate degree completion and transfer for students in Kentucky. In Davidson's study, the dependent variables were dichotomous, because the students chosen for the study either were pursuing an associate degree only or intended to earn a bachelor's degree. According to Davidson, "Leading indicators that were related to academic momentum had the strongest correlation to degree completion and transfer" (p. 1016). Davidson's findings lend support to the idea that academic preparation is essential to student success. Yet, like Alfonso, Glass and Harrington, Falconetti, and Aulck and West, the statistical designs applied to the respective studies did not provide an opportunity to explore why community college transfers perform satisfactorily or at least on par with native students at a four-year institution. Elements of the overall transfer experience that are not necessarily quantifiable are just as essential to our understanding of how transfer culture, or lack thereof, may influence student performance.

### **Factors Predicting Outcomes of Community College Transfers**

Porchea, Allen, Robbins, and Phelps (2010) broadened the community college transfer conversation through an exploration of how academic preparation, psycho-social, socio-demographic, situational, and institutional factors may predict student outcomes.

The study consisted of a convenience sample from 21 community colleges in 13 Midwestern states, which comprised 4,481 students. The performance of these students was tracked from fall 2003 to spring of 2008, and each of the students participated in the *Student Readiness Inventory* (SRI) validity study, which features a Likert scale. Each of the community colleges selected for the study had relatively large enrollments, had lower tuition on average, had fewer underrepresented groups, and had students who mainly depended on financial aid. Of the sample included in the Porchea et al. study, 67% of the students expected to earn a baccalaureate degree. Employing a hierarchical multinomial logit model, the researchers used predictor variables to determine their various effects on different response options. For example, students in the study who lived further away from the college tended to not perform as well as those who lived closer, dubbed by the researchers as the “location effect,” and singled this out as a significant predictor variable. In addition, 48% of the students in the sample were not retained, 8% of the students transferred to a four-year school after earning an associate degree, and 5% transferred to a four-year school without earning an associate degree. Such a high attrition rate, coupled with the fact that most of the students in the sample fully intended to earn a bachelor’s degree, forces any reader to question the nature of the transfer relationship between the community colleges and the local four-year institutions included in the study. In accordance with Handel’s (2011) transfer-affirming conceptual framework, one would not expect to see abysmal transfer rates if a shared culture of transfer existed between the community colleges and the four-year institutions.

Wang’s (2009) study was also designed to identify factors that predict the educational outcomes of community college transfer students. The data in Wang’s study

were collected from the National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988 and from 2,300 of the students enrolled at a community college during 1992 and 1993 shortly after high school graduation. Of the 2,300 students, 786 were selected as the desired sample since they began their postsecondary education at a community college and eventually transferred to a four-year institution. Wang identified pre-college characteristics as a conceptual framework, including socioeconomic status, high school curriculum, and psychological attributes. Wang also included certain features of the college experience in the study, such as number of hours enrolled, whether or not the student required remediation, level of involvement on the college campus, and academic performance. These college experiences along with the pre-college characteristics served as the independent variables. The two dependent variables were dichotomous, which included measurements such as bachelor's degree attainment by the year 2000 and persistence rates. Through logistic regression models, Wang predicted baccalaureate attainment among the 786 community college transfers in the sample and found that student expectations are powerful indicators of student success. Community college transfers who had decided they would pursue a baccalaureate degree as early as the 12th grade were more likely to earn a four-year degree, thus underscoring the significance of goals and expectations. The level of college involvement was another important predictor of degree attainment for the sample in Wang's study, and female community college transfers were more likely to earn a baccalaureate degree. However, through the litany of variables, the final and most significant predictor of bachelor's degree attainment in Wang's study was community college GPA. According to Wang, college involvement in transfer and baccalaureate attainment are positively related, and she concluded that there

should be an expansion of the “cooperation and collaboration among all institutions of higher education and formulating well-informed policies to assist students with successful baccalaureate completion” (pp. 585-586). Strengthening the relationship between two-year and four-year schools as a strategy for strengthening student transfer performance and bachelor’s degree attainment is reinforced in Handel’s (2011) transfer-affirming model.

In addition, Long and Kurleander’s (2009) study compared transfer student performance to that of native students to further understand the impact of the transfer experience. They gathered data from the Ohio Board of Regents, which included transcripts, applications, and entrance scores, and they compared the outcomes of community college transfers with those of native students within Ohio’s state postsecondary education system. The students selected from the database were first-year college students beginning in fall 1998, their ages ranged from age 17 to 20, and their performance was documented for 9 years until spring 2007. Long and Kurleander restricted the sample to those who had taken the ACT and indicated their intent to earn a four-year degree. As was the case in the Porchea et al. study, 60% of first-year community college students in Long and Kurleander’s study declared their intention to earn a bachelor’s degree. Long and Kurleander used propensity score matching, and the regression models controlled for differences deemed observable among the students in the data set in order to separate the effect of beginning at a community college.

Of the community college students who had indicated their intention to earn a four-year degree, only 26% obtained a bachelor’s degree within 9 years. While the majority of the community college transfer students in the study had initially deemed

obtaining a bachelor's degree as attainable and expected as described in Handel's (2011) framework, somewhere throughout their journey, the students abandoned the path to the baccalaureate degree. According to Long and Kurleander, "Greater focus is warranted on institutional policies and programs that support community college students and help them transfer to four-year institutions to reach their intended goal of obtaining baccalaureate degrees" (p. 47). While the variables in the study may have served as predictors of baccalaureate attainment, they do not explain why the majority of the transfer students did not achieve their goal of earning a bachelor's degree, nor was the study designed to offer any discussion of the transfer relationships among Ohio postsecondary institutions. Rich, qualitative studies of transfer relationships and experiences are conspicuously rare in the otherwise abundant community college transfer literature, but they could potentially offer a more complete explanation for both attrition and success.

### **Student and Faculty Perceptions of Transfer**

While many of the available studies on community college transfer students are mired in academic performance data not duly designed for capturing all aspects of the transfer experience, studies devoted to student and faculty perceptions of the transfer experience often provide that opportunity. Lopez and Jones (2016) designed a study to ascertain the perceptions of community college students who transferred to a four-year institution, with the overall purpose of determining the academic and social factors that influenced their success in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) programs. The sample consisted of 528 STEM students who had transferred from a community college between fall 2009 and spring 2011. They were contacted through

email to complete the Laanan Transfer Students' Questionnaire, and from these responses, Lopez and Jones employed a simple quantitative, non-experimental analytical design. Astin's (1984) development theory based on student involvement was applied as a conceptual framework, which holds that students who are involved in academic and social activities are more likely to achieve their academic goals. Lopez and Jones found that students placed enormous value on interaction with faculty, which was the greatest predictor of student success in their study. The survey results also revealed that the more frequently the students visited their future transfer institution, the likelier they were to academically adjust to the institution.

Additionally, some students in Lopez and Jones' study felt as if they were negatively perceived because they had transferred in to the institution, which manifested as a positive indicator of poor academic performance at the four-year school. Lopez and Jones stressed the value of curriculum alignment between institutions to better prepare students for transfer as a type of mutual ownership and collaborative partnership. They also recommended stronger advising relationships between two-year and four-year schools and emphasized the need for collaboration, thus lending support for the cultivation of a transfer-affirming environment to improve student success.

### **Student Transfer Experiences**

Student perceptions in the form of interviews and narrative discussion offer a personal encounter of the community college to four-year institution transfer experience. In a departure from the array of quantitative studies in the domain of community-college transfer literature, Gard, Patton, and Gosselin (2012) captured authentic student transfer experiences from a community college to a four-year school using a descriptive,



exploratory qualitative methodology. The sites chosen for the study included two community college campuses that often transferred students into a single state university located in the southwest in a predominantly Hispanic community. Data collection consisted of a focus group of community college transfer students at the university, containing a cohort of 14 students who were invited but not required to participate. The follow-up survey was completed by only 12 of the 14 students in the cohort, and the focus group and survey responses were coded by themes. The students were invited to share their experiences at the community college, including any challenges they may have encountered with transferring courses from the community college, advising issues, remedial education, and psychosocial factors. Gard et al. revealed that community college advisors were the main concern of the students, admitting that “students felt that the community college advisors knew nothing about the particular university degree program” (p. 838). Moreover, the students generally found that the counselors at the university were more helpful than those at the community college. According to the researchers, the students did not perceive transfer to be a shared responsibility between the institutions as the university seemed to shoulder most of the burden. It is regarded as essential that students perceive the community college as an active partner in the transfer experience and that community colleges avoid sending the student to the four-year institution each time they have a transfer question or concern (Ellis, 2013; Robinson, 2015). The inference is that students tend to have a more positive transfer experience when their educational journey is seamless and supported.

Student experiences of the transfer process was also the focus of a qualitative study conducted by Ellis (2013) who visited eight, four-year Texas campuses in spring

2009. Ellis collected data on transfer experiences from focus groups on each campus, each consisting of 6 to 12 students participants. The 68 students selected for the focus groups were volunteers who were identified by the university as being both academically successful and having transferred from a community college. After coding for themes, Ellis discovered that one of the main motivators for transfer to the four-year school was individual student initiative. Several students lamented their poor advising experiences on the community college campus, and they admitted that they felt as if they had to function without any transfer support apparatus. One of the students mentioned that every time a question was posed to an advisor at the community college, the reply was often, “Go talk to the university” (p. 78), which mirrored the student perceptions in Gard et al.’s (2012) study. Ellis found that the students repeatedly mentioned having to rely substantially on the university websites for advising and transfer information. Nonetheless, most of the students felt as if the community college adequately prepared them academically but added that the community college should increase efforts to encourage transfer and offer more support for aspiring transfer students, such as organize tours, encourage visits, and design initiatives to ease the transfer transition. The improvements suggested by the students as described in Ellis’s study directly reflect Handel’s (2011) transfer-affirming culture as a pathway to increase student success. While the students of Ellis’s study admitted their own tenacity and self-motivation as the key to their success, many other students may not possess that level of confidence and drive, thereby contributing to increased attrition.

In a similar study to that of Ellis, Flaga (2006) investigated the transfer transition process for 35 community college transfer students who were interviewed in January

2001 during the start of their second semester at Michigan State University. Of those 35 students who participated, 30 of the students returned a few months later to be interviewed a second time. While no information is provided as to how the participants were selected, Flaga's qualitative study made use of the consequential transitions framework, which is aptly suited for transfer studies because it encompasses the process by which an individual changes in response to a new social situation. After coding the student interviews, Flaga recognized five dimensions of transition through the transfer experience, which included learning resources, connecting, familiarity, negotiating, and integrating.

Flaga found that the student participants recommended an increase in prior contact with their transfer institution would have benefitted them, in addition to opportunities for campus visits and the chance to interact with and perhaps form a mentor-style relationship with an advisor. Furthermore, the students insisted that improved communication between the community college and the four-year school would have helped them. As stated by Flaga, "A culture needs to be established in which community college advisors feel comfortable calling university advisors for specific information when working with students" (p.10), and what these students further suggest is that a transfer transition could have been eased through increased efforts by the community college. The students perceived that there is no shared responsibility between the institutions, and similar student perceptions were gathered in the studies by Ellis and Gard et al. Since there is no information in Flaga's study as to how the students performed in the classroom, nor were any data on persistence rates provided, there is no way to gauge how the perceived transfer disconnect impacted student performance.

However, these additional data would have offered supplementary information to provide the most accurate accounting of the student transfer experience.

In addition, while most of the literature associated with community college transfer tends to derive data from transfers to public four-year institutions, Wolf-Wendell, Twombly, Morpew, and Spich (2010) examined the factors that influenced the successful transfer of female Hispanic community college students to Smith College in Northampton, Massachusetts. The study is unique in the literature, since it is uncommon for prestigious and predominantly white private colleges to have transfer agreements with community colleges located many states away and who also traditionally serve underrepresented groups. Wolf-Wendell et al. applied a dual-case study methodology designed to capture both Miami-Dade, Florida, and Santa Monica, California community colleges student transfer experiences to Smith College. Data collection consisted of three visits to each of the community college campuses whereby Wolf-Wendell et al. analyzed relevant transfer documents and also conducted semi-structured interviews with 15 individuals at each college, including faculty, staff, administration, and students. The researchers coded the interviews for themes and found that the relationship among the institutions may be described as fitting the mold of Handel's transfer-affirming culture.

Even though the four-year institution to which the students transferred was several states away, the students were encouraged to visualize themselves at Smith College, and once there, they described their experience as welcoming and engaging. According to Wolf-Wendell et al., one phrase that reoccurred in the interviews with students was the observation that the campus at Smith was a "supportive place" (p. 223) where visits are encouraged and arranged, replete with a summer pre-admission program

designed to ease the transfer transition. The findings yield a perception of transfer-saturation in the campus culture of both community colleges. Students who transferred seem to be completely socially embraced at Smith College, though no information is provided in the study on student academic performance upon transfer, nor are any data provided on the percentage of community college students who pursued transferring to Smith College. In addition, the study would be strengthened by providing contextual, historical information as to what inspired the creation of such an ambitious transfer initiative. However, what is clear from Wolf-Wendell et al.'s study is that all interview participants felt as though each institution involved in the transfer agreement thrived because of the transfer process. This may be interpreted as the recognition of the shared responsibility of transfer for the institutions in this study, since academic and emotional support mechanisms are perceived to be firmly in place and function as a proud part of the mission and vision of each of the institutions.

### **Faculty and Staff Transfer Perceptions**

While student voices must be heard in the transfer dialogue, the perspectives of each participant in the transfer process are also relevant, which may include faculty, staff, and leadership. Senie (2016) explored how faculty, staff, and administration perceived the transfer process from the vantage point of their respective positions. Senie applied a qualitative multi-site case study methodological approach, which was bounded by activity, location, and time, established from February 2012 to February 2014. The study was specifically designed to obtain perceptions of the *Transfer Mobility Policy* (TMP) in Connecticut by those who were responsible for its implementation, and the purposeful sample of interview participants included a former board employee, a TMP manager,

faculty, staff, and administrators, each of whom was from an unidentified suburban community college. Data collection sources included 11 semi-structured interviews, three focus groups, attendance at seven faculty committee meetings, and program document analysis. From the information derived from the interviews, focus groups, committee meeting notes, and documents, Senie coded for themes, and discovered the existence of a wide chasm between what was expected from the program as compared to the program's actual functionality.

Senie found that the community college representatives, who were interviewed and participated in focus groups, felt strongly that four-year institutions cling to the belief that a community college education is inferior, which undermined any hope of a viable transfer relationship. The participants also cited a lack of communication between community college and university administrators, identified the presence of a "love-hate relationship between university faculty and transfer students" (p. 278), and perceived a general failure on the part of the university to recognize and legitimize the voice of community college transfer students. One administrator complained that community college transfer students do not have the same services available to them as do the native students and that the underlying reason for this fact may be that the university's staff and faculty perceive transfer students as already aware of what to do as a college student. Senie, who applied Handel's (2011) transfer-affirming culture as the framework for analysis, identified the failure on the part of TMP to cultivate strong collaborative relationships between two-year and four-year institutions. According to Senie, counseling and advising center services need to be better coordinated among institutions and advised further that community colleges and four-year institutions must develop a transfer-

affirming culture in accordance with Handel's (2011) framework in order to increase the likelihood of student success.

Advisor perceptions of transfer relationships are also critical to understanding transfer culture. Webb, Dantzler, and Hardy (2014) adopted a grounded theory approach in order to explore the experience of advisors tasked with strengthening rural community college transfer relationships with the University of Alabama through the Alabama College Transfer Advising Corps. The University of Alabama received a grant designed to assist low-income community college students to transfer to a four-year institution and 11 advisors were hired to serve as transfer liaisons for the rural Alabama community colleges. The initiative was launched in response to Alabama's abysmal community college transfer rate of 3.7%, which is well below the national average of 22%. The advisors were hired to essentially construct a transfer culture for the remote community colleges, and Webb et al.'s research centered on the experience of the advisors. In addition, the researchers noted that there are no research frameworks for transfer advising which makes this vantage point of the transfer experience unique.

Webb et al. conducted four interviews with each of the 11 study participants, meeting at the community college where the advisors worked. After each of the interviews, observations were conducted for one hour on site at the respective community college. Webb et al. also analyzed related program documents and correspondence among the participants. The researchers engaged in five phases of data collection and analysis in accordance with the application of grounded theory methodology, beginning with concept analysis where data were collected, and analysis revealed 31 factors that played a critical role in the advising process for potential community college transfer

students. For Phase Two, the 31 factors were condensed into five basic categorical themes, and in Phase Three, the five themes were placed into their proper social, historical, and political contexts. In the process analysis, or Phase Four, the categorical themes were combined to form a singular, cohesive construct, thus leading to Phase Five where the theory was postulated as shaped from the data collection.

Webb applied influence theory as a theoretical framework, and the findings were organized separately into implications for two-year and four-year institutions. According to Webb et al., in order for a transfer initiative to achieve full potential, the four-year institution must fully embrace a policy of “communication, care, and concern” (p. 625), and for the two-year institutions, essential characteristics must include “personal relationships, support, environment, organization, and senior leadership” (p. 625). Based on the researchers’ analysis, the advisors were on the front-line of the transfer process and therefore tasked with the enormous responsibility to influence students to pursue a baccalaureate degree as well as foster a transfer culture. Webb et al. also noted that cultural factors were impediments to cultivating a transfer culture and described rural Alabama as resistant to change and, in some cases, hesitant to encourage transfer. In Handel’s (2011) transfer-affirming framework, he observed the following:

Given that students attending community colleges are often those least likely to possess the information that is necessary to make the transition to a four-year institution, the 411 responsibility falls to two- and four-year institutions to fill the gap; that is, to provide the essential cultural capital that they lack. (pp. 414-415)

The influence of advisors, leadership, and faculty in arming students with social capital as described in Handel’s model is an important component of a transfer-affirming culture.



### **Other Postsecondary Institutional Relationships**

As community colleges are viewed as a viable starting point for many aspiring bachelor's degree earners, developing strategies to strengthen two-year and four-year transfer relationships must become a priority. In an integrative research review, Mosholder and Zirkle (2007) presented historical trends in articulation agreements and cited that the first one was developed in 1896 at the University of Chicago. They added that other colleges and universities eventually developed more transfer relationships after World War II as service members were given more educational opportunities via the Montgomery G.I. Bill. This pattern of broadening educational pathways, according to Moss and Zirkle, continued in the 1960s and 1970s with the debut of the implementation of federally funded financial aid. Mosholder and Zirkle affirmed that "For both liberal arts and vocational students, open access to community college has prepared hundreds of thousands of students for four-year institutions who would not otherwise have had an opportunity" (p. 733), which lends support to the common refrain that community colleges are often the only way some students can obtain a baccalaureate degree.

Handel's insistence that a transfer-affirming culture include the identification of transfer initiatives as central to an institution's mission and vision is supported in Mosholder and Zirkle's work. They cited a 1994-1995 survey conducted by the Center for Study of Community Colleges, whose participants included a collection of faculty, staff, and students. The results of the survey indicated that transfer was identified as the primary mission of the community college, which reinforces the significance of the transfer mission and the value and significance of embracing a transfer culture. Again,

strengthening the collaborative efforts between two-year and four-year institutions will only advance the nation's postsecondary educational needs.

### **Transfer Centers and Joint Admissions**

Efforts to close the transfer gap are being implemented across the nation. Gose (2017) described initiatives designed to bring the four-year school to the two-year, such as in the case of Washington State University, which offers bachelor's degrees at Everett Community College in Monroe, Washington. While not a scholarly research project, Gose reported that the community college hosts an Everett University Center, where the transfer students attend classes toward their four-year degrees and have the choice of 27 bachelor's degree programs and seven different four-year institutions from which to choose, all of which are housed on the community college campus. Gose also noted the power of geographic location, since having the bachelor's programs on site prevents the students from making a 90-minute commute to a university campus. The type of cooperative transfer relationship, as described by Gose, is a reflection of the evolution of transfer initiatives to seek out ways to ease baccalaureate attainment for community college students.

A similar approach to what Gose described has been applied at Hazard Community and Technical College (HCTC) in Hazard, Kentucky. Mobelini (2013) reported that HCTC pioneered a program where four-year institutions have a physical presence on the HCTC campus in a concurrent use partnership model, dubbed the University Center of the Mountains (UCM). More than a transfer agreement, the center is designed to provide potential community college transfer students a variety of transfer options, and Mobelini insisted in her observations that it is the steady stream of

cooperation and communication between UCM and HCTC that enables the program to function. Like Gose, Mobelini's work was an inquiry into the program and not a peer-reviewed body of research, but she asserted that the UCM and HCTC relationship can serve as a model for subsequent transfer initiatives. She declared that "Transfer agreements, concurrent-use programs, and partnerships between community colleges and four-year institutions are just some of the approaches community colleges have taken to aid transfer" (p. 634). Transfer as a shared responsibility is captured in the belief that this collaboration is the key to making any transfer partnership work.

Adding to the conversation on collaborative efforts between two-year and four-year institutions, Arguijo and Howard (2010) discussed the 2009 joint-admissions agreement between Houston Community College (HCC) and the University of Houston (UH). Like Gose and Mobelini, their work is not peer-reviewed scholarly research, but rather an analysis of the joint-admissions relationship between the two institutions. Arguijo and Howard found that the HCC and UH joint-admissions program has grown from 17 students in 2009 to 1,562 applicants in 2010. In an effort to encourage transfer to the University of Houston, advisors from the university are present on the Houston Community College campus, and the community college students are encouraged to complete their associate degree prior to transfer. Texas A&M has also engaged in transfer initiatives, as Gose reported in another portion of his article. Localized transfer opportunities are being developed through Texas A&M to highlight the benefits of bringing the transfer opportunity directly to the student. Gose noted that Texas A&M has opened a series of regional campuses dubbed Texas A&M Centers, where program maps, which are essentially transfer-based academic plans, are available for students who plan

to transfer to earn a bachelor's degree. Advising initiatives with built-in transfer mechanisms are designed to significantly reduce transfer shock, and Gose reported that in the Texas system, "New community college students who express interest in a bachelor's degree are automatically enrolled in a program that involves academic advising by both the community college and a nearby university that students frequently transfer to" (p. 5). While Gose, Mobelini, or Arguijo and Howard did not offer data to show how joint admissions or transfer-center students performed, nor did they provide persistence or graduation rates, which are data that would provide an indication as to the effectiveness of the transfer models, the rationale behind the joint admissions and transfer-center enterprises fit the transfer-affirming framework as designed by Handel.

### **Reverse and Swirling Transfer**

Despite the potentially positive results from close transfer relationships, there are instances when transfer relationships can be further complicated by the phenomenon of reverse and swirling transfer, as students may return to the community college pursuing credits for a variety of reasons. If a student decides to transfer back to the community college to pursue an associate degree, there is often the question of whether or not the community college will accept the credits the student earned while at the four-year institution. Reverse transfer relationships are often complex, and Robinson's (2015) case study sought to explore Hawaii's new reverse transfer policy. Because of Hawaii's low graduation rates, the state sought to rectify this and implemented a reverse transfer policy in 2009. Robinson's case study employed a social constructivist educational perspective and thus acknowledged the existence of multiple realities based on the perception of the individuals who designed and implemented the program. The study was bounded by time,

since the program was implemented in 2009, as well as location, as the program was launched as a state-wide initiative in Hawaii. Robinson conducted interviews with five members of the program implementation committee who were identified for participation through purposeful sampling. Each of the participants were from either postsecondary institutions or state government in an effort to represent the diverse perspectives of those involved in the process. Robinson found that the greatest asset of the program is the resiliency and influence of the postsecondary institutional leaders and noted that “Participants felt that leadership wasn’t only demonstrated in the form of an individual or team, but also by a clear goal and plan that all of the stakeholders could buy into” (p. 550). Communication is as essential to the policy process according to the study participants, who emphasized the importance of the front-line staff who are described as enthusiastically working with students and bearing much of the responsibility for making the program function. Robinson noted that institutional cooperation and the positive perception of those who implemented the reverse transfer agreement offer yet another optimistic transfer model. The formation of successful transfer associations of any kind among institutions, whether it be reverse transfer, joint admissions, or the presence of transfer centers depend largely on leadership and communication, as in the case of the Hawaii reverse transfer model.

Taylor (2016) also pursued the study of reverse credit transfer and analyzed data collected from the Credit When Its Due (CWID) initiative, which is a multi-site program created to increase and improve transfer from a two-year to a four-year institution. Taylor asserted that as of June 2015, 16 states were involved in the program, with six more initiating plans for membership. In addition, Taylor also noted that all states except

Alaska have at least one reverse credit transfer partnership of some type, even if it is not affiliated with the CWID program. Taylor used the CWID data sets to draw conclusions about the performance of student performance and applied Townsend's (1995) definition of reverse transfer as a methodological framework (as cited in Taylor). Analysis of the descriptive statistics revealed that 50% of the community college transfers at a four-year institution had not completed a bachelor's within four years of transferring. Taylor added further that two-thirds of the community college transfer students in the data set had transferred with 45 credits or more. Taylor argued that reverse credit transfer would actually help these community college transfer students earn an associate degree, which might be perceived by the students as an educational benchmark that might inspire them to continue to pursue a bachelor's degree. Again, Handel's framework emphasized the need for students to see bachelor's degree attainment as both attainable and expected, and Taylor asserted that the associate degree would function as the first major step in the direction of baccalaureate attainment. Reverse transfer agreements may result in stronger partnerships between two-year and four-year institutions, and Taylor concluded by recommending a digital transfer exchange program to expedite the process.

While reverse transfer may aid in associate degree attainment as a prelude or approach to incentivize baccalaureate attainment, swirling transfer, which is the act of frequent student enrollment between institutions (De Los Santos & Sutton, 2012), is slightly more complex. Students who transfer from institution to institution are dependent on favorable transfer agreements that will not hinder their educational progress toward degree attainment. De Los Santos and Sutton (2012) conducted a qualitative study to understand the predicament faced by swirling students and the institutions that serve

them. They applied an historical framework and narrowed their focus to Maricopa community colleges and Arizona State University (ASU). They considered the challenges swirling students face and stressed the urgency of having transferable credits among institutions. According to De Los Santos and Sutton in 2005, the community colleges in Maricopa and ASU formed a transfer alliance, with the purpose of improving degree completion for the mutual benefit of all institutions in the region. Their analysis of the program implementation documentation revealed that the goal among the institutions is to create a “culture of transfer” (p. 969) and noted that dual enrollment programs at the University of Oregon and Northern Illinois University in part inspired the initiative.

Based on data from ASU’s registrar’s office presented by De Los Santos and Sutton, fall upper division transfers from the community colleges had a graduation rate of 75.9% in 2003, and upper division transfers in the study had higher GPAs, persistence rates, and graduation rates. De Los Santos and Sutton observed from these positive findings that

Effective collaborative articulation policies ultimately equate to a triple win: (a) students are able to validate their learning into a baccalaureate degree, (b) higher education accomplishes its mission of education/graduating students, and (c) the state reaps the rewards of an educated work force. (p. 971)

De Los Santos and Sutton emphasized the potential benefit of accommodating swirling students, viewing the frequent transfer patterns of the students not necessarily as a hindrance, but rather recognized as another pathway in pursuit of a baccalaureate degree. When institutions cooperate instead of competing, reverse and swirling transfer agreements increase the likelihood that students will earn credentials.

## Co-enrollment

In addition to reverse and swirling transfer agreements, students sometimes engage in co-enrollment where the student attends two institutions simultaneously (Taylor & Jain, 2017), which is a related concern in the reverse and swirling transfer dialogue and requires the same level of cooperation and collaboration among institutions. Wang and McCready (2013) investigated the extent to which co-enrollment impacts persistence and baccalaureate attainment among both beginning community college students and those beginning at a four-year institution. The data in the study were collected from the *Beginning Postsecondary Longitudinal Study*, and the sample consisted of 12,300 postsecondary students who began in 2003-2004, of which 8,000 of the sample started at a four-year institution, while 4,300 started at a two-year institution. By 2009, of the four-year institution beginners, 920 had co-enrolled, and of the two-year institution beginners, 470 had co-enrolled. In the statistical model, the dependent variable is identified as whether or not the student was co-enrolled by 2009 and by using propensity score matching and post-matching multivariate analysis, their findings revealed intriguing information about the success of co-enrolled students. According to Wang and McCready, “Within the beginning four-year college students group, the odds of attaining a baccalaureate degree within six years for a co-enrolled student were 1,539 times that for a beginning four-year college student who did not co-enroll” (pp. 396-397). They found that among the beginning community students, co-enrolled students were four times more likely to remain enrolled in postsecondary education and earn a bachelor’s degree.



Crisp's (2013) study revealed similar findings to that of Wang and McCready. Crisp measured the influence of co-enrollment on student success and employed propensity score matching techniques. Crisp collected data from the *Beginning Postsecondary Longitudinal Study* and the sample consisted of 4,920 traditional age students, with traditional being defined as 23 years of age and younger. Of the students in the sample, 80% of the co-enrolled students were coded as successful, and 29 % earned a bachelor's degree, compared to the 13% who earned a bachelor's degree and did not co-enroll. In addition, Crisp found that co-enrolled students had higher GPAs than non-co-enrolled students, which is similar to what was reported in Wang and McCready's study.

The positive correlation between co-enrollment, persistence and degree attainment are encouraging for those emphasizing the importance of transfer relationships and the cultivation of a transfer-affirming culture. However, limitations to both co-enrollment studies include the fact that we do not know what other variables might have contributed to the success of the students. Though both Wang and McCready and Crisp's studies do not posit the question as to why students are choosing to co-enroll, nor do they address the dubious non-presence of institutional commitment in the phenomenon of co-enrollment, the findings suggest the notion that transfer culture is part of the postsecondary reality for any co-enrolled students. The studies suggested that the students see any available postsecondary institution as a pathway to achieving their educational goals, and given this perception, it is in the best interests of all institutions to take ownership of transfer and embrace it as a shared responsibility.

Finally, while transfer studies abound from various angles of the issue, findings vary among design, data, and construct. Sylvia, Song, and Waters (2010) considered this

point and attempted to determine why and how there are such variances in results of community-college transfer student success. In this qualitative study, the researchers used an investigative framework whereby they analyzed transfer data from 33 states with legislative transfer policies who report to the Education Commission of the States (ECS). The purpose of the study by Sylvia et al. was to determine why some transfer relationships work and why others do not and what might be responsible for these inconsistencies. They found that swirling and reverse transfer is on the rise, which complicates transfer analysis given that data collection on reverse and swirling transfer students creates unique challenges for the researcher; primarily, they identified six factors that make taking measurements on transfer students difficult: structural, technological, economic, governmental, and social. Erratic transfer patterns, local economic factors, policy impact, and socioeconomic status can complicate our efforts as researchers to understand transfer students, and Sylvia et al. asserted that standardizing transfer data is a difficult if not impossible task, given the fact that articulation agreements, transfer agreements, and concurrent enrollment agreements are by no means uniform. Often enough, our only means of understanding transfer relationships is on a case-by-case basis, where a set of institutions are placed under the research lens. The transfer analysis difficulty is also present within the joint-admissions relationship at WKU-O and OCTC, since jointly-admitted students are simply counted among the pile of transfer students once they begin attending WKU-O as full-time students, thus making it challenging to analyze their performance apart from other transfer students, since it so firmly embedded within the existing transfer data.

## **Conclusion**

Based on the evaluated literature, several themes exist in the community-college transfer spectrum. Academic preparation is considered essential, as are student expectations of earning a bachelor's degree prior to transfer. Articulation agreements and the presence of a transfer dialogue among institutions are offered as recommendations by researchers to improve transfer student performance and baccalaureate attainment. However, peer-reviewed literature on the joint-admissions process, for as much promise as the unique form of transfer agreement holds, is non-existent. Many of the studies relied on statistical data of student performance, while others focused on student perceptions and experiences as well as that of advisors and leadership. However, combining multiple data sources may be necessary to construct a more complete reality of the transfer experience. The joint-admissions relationship between OCTC and WKU-O, where students are admitted in both institutions in pursuit of baccalaureate attainment, offers an opportunity to focus on community college transfer student performance and degree achievement but also to capture the personal experiences and perceptions of the students. In addition, the advisors and leadership at both institutions and their role in the transfer process is relevant to the study. Each of these components will lead to an improved understanding of the joint-admissions relationship as a transfer model and determine if the relationship between WKU-O and OCTC truly constitutes a "transfer-affirming" culture in accordance with Handel's framework. In the next chapter, I will provide a detailed description of the types of data which will be collected for the study as well as how they will be evaluated.

## **CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY**

### **Introduction**

Joint-admissions agreements provide a unique opportunity for two-year and four-year colleges to ease the transfer process, as well as promote baccalaureate completion. While there is an abundance of literature devoted to the examination of community college transfers to four-year institutions, little research has been done to explore the dimensions of joint-admissions relationships, including student performance and completion, student perceptions of the joint-admissions experience, and the perceptions of staff and leadership. Given the steady increase of students beginning their postsecondary education at a community college, joint admissions between a two-year and four-year institution may provide a quality transfer experience. However, the lack of studies performed on joint-admissions institutions indicates a strong need for data collection and analysis to further higher education's understanding of joint admissions.

In this chapter, I discuss the research design, including the established research questions. In addition, I present my research paradigm and design, as well as data collection and analysis procedures. Finally, I provide trustworthiness approach and ethical considerations.

### **Research Questions**

Handel's transfer-affirming culture (2011) is an emerging theoretical framework, which includes five major characteristics that define the existence of a transfer-affirming culture. Those five characteristics include the following: (1) the embracing of transfer as a shared responsibility between two-year and four-year institutions; (2) viewing baccalaureate attainment as not only a possibility but encouraged and expected between

institutions; (3) the existence of academic support, which is considered essential to make transfer and degree completion a reality; (4) the use of social capital (specifically, knowledge of transfer information) that students bring to college to the maximum advantage in order to attain a bachelor's degree; and finally (5) transfer as a main component of an institution's mission and strategic goal. The intrinsic case study methodology was applied in this study to thoroughly explore the joint-admissions relationship between WKU-O and OCTC and was also used to test Handel's (2011) transfer-affirming theoretical framework. From the applied conceptual framework, the following research questions were derived:

RQ1: Does/how does the joint-admissions relationship between Owensboro Community and Technical College and Western Kentucky University-Owensboro foster a transfer-affirming culture?

RQ2: Do/how do the advising staff and leadership at Owensboro Community and Technical College and Western Kentucky University-Owensboro encourage and contribute to a transfer-affirming culture?

RQ3: Do/how do the jointly-admitted students perceive the joint-admissions relationship between Owensboro Community and Technical College and Western Kentucky University-Owensboro as contributing to their success and baccalaureate completion?

### **Research Paradigm and Design**

Qualitative methodology is anchored in humanistic exploration and allows for a thorough exploration of topics of study by means of description, perception, and experiences (Patton, 2015; Yin 2014). As postulated by Njie and Asimiran (2014), "An

essential interest in qualitative research is the revelation of meaning buried in the nature of reality as understood and interpreted by people” (p. 35). In order to understand the student experience in joint admissions, qualitative methodology was the ideal approach for this study because it afforded an opportunity to engage the reality of the joint-admissions program through the perception of the participants as well as staff and leadership involved in the operation of the initiative. I embraced a constructivist orientation, through which the unique experiences of the individual can be richly diverse and varied, yet equally relevant, legitimate, and real (Patton, 2015). The broad spectrum of perceptions and experiences in joint admissions is what is captured in this study, from the perspective of students, advising staff, as well as senior leadership, so the qualitative methodology was the logical approach.

### **Case Study**

The purpose of case study as a methodology is “to dig out the characteristics of a particular entity and its key distinguishable attributes include focus on a single unit, in depth description of a phenomenon, anchored on real live scenarios and uses multiple data collection methods” (Njie & Asimiran, 2014, p. 36). The advantage of a case study model is in the ability to narrow a focus on a particular topic or subject of study and explore, as completely as possible, all forms of relevant data (Flyvbjerg, 2011). Unlike other methodological approaches, which are tied to a specific method of data collection, case studies are versatile in that they afford an opportunity to collect varied types of data to achieve optimal understanding of a topic or phenomenon. In the examination of the joint-admissions relationship, the dimensions present in the situation required multiple

sources of data to achieve saturation. Thus, a case study model was the ideal design for this type of research.

Yin (2003) postulated that a case study should be the methodology of choice when the researcher poses questions of how or why, when there is no possibility of manipulating those participating in the study, and the researcher has a goal of exploring the context of the situation, considered relevant to the study. In this study, I investigated if and how the joint-admissions relationship between OCTC and WKU-O fostered a transfer-affirming culture as measured in Handel's model, as well as the role of advising staff and leadership in the process and added these to the jointly-admitted student perceptions of the program. My goal was ultimately to understand all relevant vantage points within the joint-admissions relationship in full context, as professed in Yin's case study purpose description.

Moreover, in a case study, the researcher spends time on the site, which is the center of the subject of study, encounters the affected population, and is tasked with describing the events and meanings as accurately as possible (Stake, 2005). To accurately reflect the perceptions of the affected population, I collected interview data from students, advising staff, and senior leadership, and did so on site. For example, OCTC advising staff and leadership were interviewed on the OCTC main campus, whereas the WKU-O advising staff and leadership were interviewed at the WKU-O campus, and the students were given the option to choose either campus for their interview. As the case study researcher, it was my responsibility to provide an accurate accounting of the perceptions of the desired population in the authentic environment, which necessitated spending much time on site.

In addition, Hancock and Algozzine (2006) stated that

In case study research, making sense of information collected from multiple sources is a recursive process in which the researcher interacts with the information throughout the investigative process. In other words, unlike some forms of research in which the data are examined only at the end of the information collection period, case study research involves ongoing examination and interpretation of the data.” (p. 56)

Each piece of data included in this case study was considered valuable and relevant evidence to determine the existence of a transfer-affirming culture between OCTC and WKU-O. The goal of the analysis was to elucidate the most significant details of the findings that led to the most accurate assessment possible.

Furthermore, case study purposes as defined by Yin (2003) include exploratory, descriptive, and explanatory. Yin asserted that exploratory case studies are designed to initiate discovery and often lead to the creation of other studies, yet descriptive case studies often provide rich narrative description, while explanatory case studies explain what the data reveal often in terms of causal relationships. Given that no other case study has been initiated in an effort to further the understanding of the joint-admissions relationship between OCTC and WKU-O, the case study I designed may be described as explanatory in accordance with Yin’s description, since my purpose was to discover the features of the joint-admissions relationship from the most relevant data sources. I am also confident that my case study will likely lead to the creation of other joint-admissions research projects of a similar nature.



Stake (2005) also contributed to the descriptions of case study design classifications in his identification of three distinct case study types: intrinsic, instrumental, and multiple or collective case study. Intrinsic case study, as asserted by Stake (2005), is a form of case study whereby the researcher scrutinizes a single topic or phenomenon of interest to further our understanding. He defined instrumental case study as an approach designed to assist in our understanding of another issue or topic that related to the study, and finally, multiple or collective case studies are conducted to identify patterns that might be present in different situations. Stake (2005) declares that “The bulk of case study work, however, is done by people who have intrinsic interest in the case. Intrinsic case study designs draw these researchers toward understandings of what is important about that case within its own world” (p. 450). Hancock and Algozzine (2006) echoed Stake’s rationale in that “Researchers engage in intrinsic case study research when they want to know more about a particular individual, group, event, or organization” (p. 32). I embraced the intrinsic typology, since my goal was to develop a thorough and detailed understanding of the *Joint-Admissions Agreement* between OCTC and WKU-O by way of testing the joint-admissions transfer relationship through Handel’s (2011) transfer-affirming theoretical framework.

Additionally, the case study design as a methodology is sometimes misrepresented or steeped in misconceptions. Flyvbjerg (2011) addressed the most common misconceptions about case study, including the assertion that case studies are so specifically focused on an individual subject that one is unable to make generalizations based on the findings, the belief that case study merely affirms the perspective and inherent bias of the researcher, and that case studies are not ideal for theory construction.

Flyvbjerg postulated that case study is no more susceptible to bias than any other form of research, including quantitative—a point which Patton (2015) concurred. Flyvbjerg added that the knowledge collected from case studies, given their depth and complexity, and propensity for data saturation, are often of greater significance than other methodological approaches. Since case studies yield solid contextualized information, they are uniquely suited for understanding humans and human experiences, and therefore the most adequate design of the exploration of joint admissions.

### **Research Site and Boundaries**

Case studies are bounded by time and place, are grounded in multiple sources, and provide an opportunity for a deep understanding of a phenomenon (Hancock & Algozzine, 2006), which made it an ideal methodological approach for this study of joint admissions. As stated by Stake (2005),

Case study optimizes understanding by pursuing scholarly research questions. It gains credibility by thoroughly triangulating the descriptions and interpretations, not just in a single step but continuously throughout the period of study. For a qualitative research community, case study concentrates on experiential knowledge of the case and close attention to the influence of its social, political and other contexts. (pp. 443-444)

As numerous case studies are intrinsically oriented because of the thorough and probing nature of the design, the data collection options are innumerable. Kisker (2007) and Senie (2016) produced intrinsic case studies with the purpose of illustrating a particular facet of transfer partnership between two-year and four-year institutions, both of which were bounded by time and place, incorporating multiple sources of data.

Owensboro Community and Technical College (OCTC) and Western Kentucky University (WKU-O) committed to a *Joint-Admissions Agreement* in 2009. Based on this agreement, students enrolled at Owensboro Community and Technical College with the intention of pursuing a baccalaureate degree at Western Kentucky University are encouraged to apply for joint admissions, through which they are students at both campuses. Jointly-admitted students are advised to complete their associate degree at OCTC, having been advised by WKU-O and OCTC throughout their tenure at OCTC, and upon completion of an associate degree, cross the street to attend classes at WKU-O in pursuit of a bachelor's degree. The idea behind the process is to provide a seamless transfer experience, whereby students are already familiar with the transfer institution and feel a sense of belonging prior to their physical presence on the campus and/or enrollment in classes. Table 1 displays an account of the enrollments of all joint-admissions applicants from OCTC to WKU-O since the year the agreement was established.

Table 1

*OCTC Joint-Admissions Applicants to WKU-O from Fall 2009 to the Present*

Academic Year	Number of Students
2009-2010	20
2010-2011	136
2011-2012	233
2012-2013	141
2013-2014	116
2014-2015	172
2015-2016	169
2016-2017	109
Total	1096

Given the level of congruency between WKU-O and OCTC, there is a strong indication that Handel's (2011) transfer affirming culture might exist between these institutions. The purpose of this case study is to understand the joint-admissions relationship between Owensboro Community and Technical College and Western Kentucky University-Owensboro through the fostering of a transfer-affirming culture.

### **Boundaries**

- The OCTC and WKU-O campuses, the designated joint-admissions partners since 2009, were the designated sites.
  - While WKU possesses other regional campuses, this study was confined exclusively to the OCTC and WKU-O joint-admissions relationship.
- Multiple sources of data collected and analyzed for this case study include semi-structured interviews of jointly-admitted students, advising staff, and senior leadership of both OCTC and WKU-U. The second data source included an in-depth analysis of the *Joint-Admissions Agreement* from 2009. The final data source included statistical comparison data of jointly-admitted student retention rates, GPA, and degree attainment rates with that of non-jointly admitted transfer students.
- In order to preserve the anonymity of the participants the study was blinded, which protected identities of the sample as well as the authenticity and validity of the study.

- The unit of time in which student performance data was collected was limited to the previous three academic years, from 2014-2015, 2015-2016, and 2016-2017, as displayed in Table 2.

Table 2

*Enrollment Numbers for Jointly-Admitted Students at OCTC and WKU-O*

Academic Year	Student N
Fall 2016 - Spring 2017	63
Fall 2015 - Spring 2016	61
Fall 2014 - Spring 2015	90

### **Sampling**

Given the distinctive quality of the joint-admissions relationship between WKU-O and OCTC, the targeted population was specific and modest in size. Since the stated goals of qualitative case studies are to gather the perspective of unique experiences of a specified phenomenon, samples are usually not randomized (Njie & Asimiran, 2014; Patton, 2015). Stake (2005) confirmed that “Qualitative researchers employ theoretical or purposive, and not random, sampling methods. They seek out groups, settings, and individuals where (and for whom) the processes being studied are most likely to occur” (p. 378). The designated population for this study includes jointly-admitted students from the previous three academic years, 2016-2017, 2015-2016, and 2014-2015, as well as the current advising staff and leadership at both institutions. Patton (2015) described purposeful sampling strategies and their function as the most common selection approach in case study designs, and homogenous sampling is one such category whereby the researcher may choose participants based on common characteristics or features. More specifically, Patton noted that the purpose of homogenous sampling “is to describe some

particular subgroup in depth” (p. 283). Table 3 offers a description of homogenous sampling strategy based on Patton’s definition.

Table 3

*Purposeful Sampling*

Strategy	Explanation
Homogeneous Sampling	Select cases that are similar in order to study the characteristics of the group as a whole.

**Students**

While OCTC has numerous transfer students, for the purposes of this study, the jointly-admitted student participants were selected based on their status as being among the unique population of jointly-admitted students within the previous three academic years. Performance data of the population of jointly-admitted students as well as non-jointly-admitted students within the previous three academic years will be aggregate, which included GPA, persistence rates, and degree attainment. However, the sample from the population for interview purposes did not include all jointly-admitted students from the previous three academic years. Student contact information from the selected population was made available and the jointly-admitted students within the previous three academic years were emailed with an invitation to participate in an interview. The students who accepted the invitation and participated in the semi-structured interview were included in the final sample, consisting of 20 students.

In addition, of the 372 students who applied for the joint-admissions program through OCTC and WKU-O, 152 chose not to enroll at WKU-O. The contact information for the students who chose not to enroll at WKU-O was supplied to me through the Office of Institutional Research at WKU in Bowling Green. Each of these students was

extended an invitation via email to participate in the study, and four responded affirmatively and participated in the study. The final sample included in the semi-structured student interviews consisted of 20 jointly-admitted students who pursued their commitment to transfer to WKU-O, and four students who applied for joint admissions but did not pursue their commitment to transfer to WKU-O.

### **Advising Staff and Senior Leadership**

Advising staff, as well as senior leadership selected for the study, were also selected because of their close involvement in the joint-admissions initiative. While full-time faculty at OCTC must serve also as academic advisors, they do not necessarily encounter jointly-admitted students, nor are they always advising students who intend to transfer to any four-year institution. WKU-O's regional campuses rarely have full-time faculty advisors but have staff advisors whose function is primarily to guide transfer and jointly-admitted students through the process. Therefore, the population for this portion of the study consisted of staff advisors located in the OCTC transfer center and the staff advisors located at the WKU-O advising center, with the sample consisting of the two chief transfer advisors housed within OCTC's transfer center and the two chief advisors housed within WKU-O's advising center. Senior leadership from both institutions constituted two specific study participants that, because of positionality, were part of a unique and refined sample. Table 4 provides the sample composition of the groups that were selected for the study.

Table 4

*Purposeful Sampling Strategy: Homogenous*

Semi-structured Interview Participants	Sample <i>N</i>
Jointly-admitted Students Transferred to WKU-O	20
Jointly-admitted Students Not Transferred to WKU-O	4
Advising Staff	4
Senior Leadership	2

The perspectives and experiences of students, advising staff, and leadership as the prime stakeholders provided an opportunity for a more complete data set in my effort to explore the joint-admissions relationship between OCTC and WKU-O. By synthesizing these unique vantage points in the sample, a more accurate reflection of the joint-admissions experience was achieved. Stake (2005) noted that “The methods of qualitative case study are largely the methods of disciplining personal and particularized experience” (p. 460), and my goal was to gather the experiences and perceptions of the three groups who were most ideally connected to the joint-admissions relationship.

**Joint-Admissions Agreement**

In addition, the *Joint-Admissions Agreement* was also included in the sampling of data. The *Joint-Admissions Agreement* between WKU-O and OCTC was signed in 2009 by Dr. Scott Williams, then Vice President of Academic Affairs at OCTC, and Dr. Barbara Burch, then Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs at the WKU main campus in Bowling Green. The six-page document includes the following sections: introduction, purpose and goals, recruitment and admissions, tuition and fees, program articulation and advising, registration and student records, financial and aid scholarships, student grievances and conduct, marketing, student services, miscellaneous, and



conclusion. The document was selected because it articulated the specific terms of the *Joint-Admissions Agreement* and is regarded as the founding document of the joint-admissions program. Given that it established the parameters and understandings of the joint-admissions arrangement between OCTC and WKU-O, it is the sole primary source which provided the original plan of the initiative and was deemed an essential data source.

### **Student Performance Data**

Comparison data of student performance consisted of OCTC first-time undergraduate student transfers to WKU-O, which included jointly-admitted and non-jointly admitted students from previous fall semesters, including 2016, 2015, and 2014. Student performance data for both student groups was generated by the WKU Office of Institutional Research, and included persistence rates, GPA, and degree attainment rates. Since WKU measures persistence based on fall to fall enrollment, the most accurate measurement of student performance could only be achieved by analyzing student performance measures from fall to fall of 2016, 2015, and 2014. The provided sample included 193 students, of which eight had to be removed because of missing GPA data. The final sample consisted of 81 joint-admissions students and 104 non-jointly-admitted students, for a total of 185 students. The mean GPA, persistence rates, and degree attainment rates were calculated and presented in this study. The data provided a comparison of the performance of jointly-admitted to non-jointly-admitted students.

### **Data Collection**

The three primary types of data collected in this case study included transcripts from semi-structured interviews with jointly-admitted students, advising staff, and senior

leadership at both OCTC and WKU-O, as well as the document and statistical data on student performance from the previous three academic years. While not every case study must include interviews as a prime method of data collection, it is often the most frequently employed and logical resource to attain a desired level of understanding of a particular topic in qualitative study (Patton, 2015). Stake (1995) offered that the

Two principal uses of case study are to obtain the descriptions and interpretations of others. The case will not be seen the same by everyone. Qualitative researchers take pride in discovering and portraying the multiple views of the case. The interview is the main road to multiple realities. (p. 64)

Documents also provide substantive information about a topic of study, and often function as contextual sources upon which to found the study, as well as supplement information collected in interviews (Creswell, 2003). Finally, simple statistical data may also be used to support and triangulate ideas or concepts within a qualitative study (Yin, 2014). Interviews, documents, and statistical data served as the sources of data for this case study, as case studies involve the incorporation of multiple types of data (Patton, 2015).

### **Semi-structured Interviews**

Semi-structured interviews are often deemed ideal for case study research because of the inherent flexibility of the interview design (Hancock & Algozzine, 2006). In semi-structured interviews, the interviewees are invited to respond to prepared questions by the researcher, but follow-up questions and the overall direction of the interview can be geared toward that which the interviewer deems significant (Patton, 2015). Hancock and Algozzine (2006) noted that “Semi-structured interviews invite interviewees to express

themselves openly and freely and to define the world from their own perspectives, not solely from the perspective of the researcher” (p. 40). This interview platform provided a level of versatility whereby the authentic experiences of those being interviewed may be shared.

**Protocol Development.** There are three groups who were interviewed in this facet of the case study: jointly-admitted students, advising staff at both institutions, and senior leadership at both institutions. Questions for each group were articulated to reflect the interests embedded in the established research questions and were designed based on the vantage point of the three distinct groups in the sample. The interview protocol was developed in accordance with Handel’s (2011) transfer-affirming theoretical framework.

**Question Type.** For student participants, questions were aimed at discerning the student perceptions of their transfer experience as joint-admissions students. Each set of questions were specifically articulated to address issues unique to the selected group (Yin, 2014), and all items were directly related to discerning the existence of a transfer-affirming culture as defined by Handel (2011). A complete list of the interview protocols used for each group are provided in Appendices A, B, and C.

For advising staff participants at both institutions, questions were designed to draw out their experiences facilitating the joint-admissions process, such as the types of support they offer students, their perceptions of the joint-admissions partnership as a shared responsibility, and the extent to which baccalaureate attainment is encouraged. Senior leadership at both institutions were asked provide their perceptions of the joint-admissions relationship, their role as an institutional leader in that relationship, and their

view as to the joint-admissions relationship and how it fits within their institution's mission and vision.

Student interviews took place at the WKU-O campus, the OCTC campus, or over the phone, and the interview participants were given a copy of the interview questions to gently direct the agenda (Stake, 1995). Advising staff at WKU-O and OCTC were interviewed at their respective institutions, signifying the importance of location and context in intrinsic case study methodology (Stake, 1995). Senior leadership at both institutions were also interviewed on site. All interviews were recorded and transcribed via transcription software to achieve completeness and accuracy. All interview participants were invited to review the transcripts to ensure that the record was an accurate reflection of their account.

### **Document Collection**

Document analysis is a common feature of case study models (Kisker, 2007; Senie, 2016), and there are four primary categories of documents, including private and public records, documents collected from Internet sources, physical evidence, and instruments created by the researcher, such as meeting and/or observation notes (Hancock & Algozzine, 2006). For this study, a primary source document was included in the data collection process, the *Joint-Admissions Agreement* signed by OCTC and WKU-O in 2009, which is a public document requiring no special accommodations for access. According to Yin (2014), "For case study research, the most important use of documents is to corroborate and augment evidence from other sources" (p. 106), which is the intent of the researcher in this case study. "Gathering data by studying documents follows the same line of thinking as observing or interviewing. One needs to have one's mind

organized, yet be open for unexpected clues” (Stake, 1995, p. 68) and careful analysis of the *Joint-Admissions Agreement* provided foundational and historic information of the agreement.

### **Statistical Data**

Quantitative data is permissible in case study models and may be used to support other data components. Yin (2014) asserted that “Quantitative data may be critical in explaining or otherwise testing your case study’s key propositions” (p. 138). In an effort to assess the impact of the Joint-Admissions Program, I compared the performance data of jointly-admitted students to that of non-jointly-admitted students, who also transferred from OCTC to WKU-O but did not participate in joint admissions. The data were generated by WKU’s Office of Institutional Research, which accumulated transfer student performance data from WKU-O in the form of GPA, persistence, and degree attainment, which was separated by student group. A summary of student performance data is provided in Table 5.

Table 5

#### *Student Performance Data*

Student Group	Students <i>N</i>	Mean GPA	Persisted Fall to Fall	Transferred Associate Degree	Earned Baccalaureate Degree
Jointly-Admitted	81	3.25	62	56	50
Non-Jointly-Admitted	104	3.25	79	77	59

### **Data Analysis**

Analysis of the aforementioned data sources were guided by the selected theoretical orientation (Yin, 2014), which for this study was Handel’s (2011) theory of transfer-affirming culture. This case study was designed with the goal of understanding

the joint-admissions relationship between WKU-O and OCTC as a unique transfer design, with the application of Handel's theory of transfer-affirming culture as the applied framework, which served as the measurement instrument to determine the effectiveness of the joint-admissions relationship. Handel's model was applied to each of the data points in the case study.

The semi-structured interview transcripts were coded for themes and measured against Handel's five components of a transfer-affirming culture. The interview protocols were inspired by Handel's framework to structure the interview process in accordance with the five characteristics of a transfer-affirming culture. Thematic identification is often more effective than simple word counts (Berg, 2004) and offered an opportunity to more accurately test the theoretical framework. Interviews were recorded and manually transcribed, and the transcribed data were coded for categories. I employed a hand-coding method where each interview transcript was read several times, and I identified key words or passages of the transcripts. Next, I created categories to simplify data organization and labeled the categories, and from these categories, I identified central themes from the interview data.

Also, the *Joint-Admissions Agreement* primary source document was analyzed using Handel's five characteristics of a transfer-affirming culture. A case study designed to explore the joint-admissions relationship between the two institutions required a careful analysis of the specific terms of the *Joint-Admissions Agreement* as signed by officials representing both institutions. According to Hancock and Algozzine (2006):

When combined with information from interviews and observations, information gleaned from documents provides the case study researcher with important

information from multiple data sources that must be summarized and interpreted in order to address the research questions under investigation. (p. 52)

An identification of the general goals and intentions of the two institutions in forging the *Joint-Admissions Agreement* was the first objective, followed by an analysis of each of Handel's characteristics. The analysis instrument for the document was as follows:

- Does the agreement make reference to transfer as a shared responsibility between the two institutions? (First in Handel's framework).
- Does the agreement provide any indication that bachelor's degree attainment is both attainable and expected? (Second in Handel's framework).
- Does the agreement offer any reference to shared academic support on the part of either institution? (Third in Handel's framework).
- Does the agreement discuss a priority on the part of both institutions to maximize student social capital obtained through transfer knowledge? (Fourth in Handel's framework).
- Does the agreement reveal transfer to be central to the mission and vision of both institutions? (Fifth in Handel's framework).

Finally, the third data source consisted of statistical analysis of the performance of the sample of jointly-admitted and non-jointly-admitted transfer students from OCTC who attended WKU-O in the previous three academic years. The WKU Office of Institutional Research generated the report of both student groups, which included GPA, persistence rates, and degree attainment rates. The dataset as provided included the GPA of the last enrolled term of the student and was analyzed through an independent samples

*t*-test, which is the ideal method of analysis for comparing mean data (Field, 2013). The three remaining variables, which included persistence, associate and baccalaureate attainment, are categorical variables and required the application of a chi-squared test for proper analysis. Chi-squared tests are considered ideal for comparing categorical variables, which are analyzed through percentages (Field, 2013). Both the independent samples *t*-test comparing mean GPA between the student groups and the chi-squared tests comparing persistence and degree attainment rates for the student groups were conducted through IBM SPSS software. The student performance measurements offered an indication of the impact of the joint-admissions relationship and yielded a more comprehensive picture of the full transfer culture between OCTC and WKU-O.

### **Role of the Researcher and Trustworthiness**

To ensure trustworthiness and authenticity, I used multiple sources of data to achieve saturation, as well as prolonged engagement within the studied environment (Patton, 2015). The statistical datasets were generated by WKU's Office of Institutional Research and made available to me, and statistical data of this type are available for any researcher with Institutional Review Board approval. The names of the students, as well as other personal identification information, were omitted from the datasets before they were sent to me by the Office of Institutional Research. The *Joint-Admissions Agreement* document is publicly available, requiring no special approval for access and was provided to me by the Director of Regional Campuses at WKU, Bowling Green.

In addition, semi-structured interview data were collected, organized, and then analyzed through manually recording transcripts of audio recordings of each interview. Transcripts of all conducted interviews were maintained under a password-protected



cloud system, as well as student contact information for study participation, which maintained the security of the data to ensure the protection of the identities of the study participants. Two colleagues from the OCTC campus were consulted in the transcription of interviews and engaged in a peer review procedure, which is defined as “a process by which something proposed is evaluated by a group of experts in the appropriate field” (Merriam-Webster, 2018). After the peer-review of my interview transcript data and coding methods, I also had my statistical tests reviewed by two staff members of the WKU Office of Institutional Research. An audit trail of all research, which may be defined as a detailed chronological record of all research activities (Patton, 2015), was carefully maintained. The audit trail was intended to provide an accurate depiction of all research activities, including notes, transcripts, email exchanges, and data files in the form of Excel spreadsheets, SPSS data including reports and tests, as well as audio files of interviews.

In effort to maintain integrity throughout my research, I embraced reflexivity where I was aware of my inherent bias and sought to balance it with the perspectives of others (Patton, 2015). It was essential for me to embrace my role in the research, which was to capture the perspectives of those who participated in interviews and objectively and accurately interpret all data. I also possessed a measure of expertise in the field of study, given my familiarity with the joint-admissions program, which is derived from being immersed in the data for the study, but also through my experiences as faculty at OCTC.

## **Ethical Considerations**

In any model of study, it is necessary to openly discuss the researcher's relationship to the topic of study from his or her own perspectives and identify any existing bias (Hancock & Algozzine, 2006; Patton, 2015). As Creswell (2003) articulated, "Researchers recognize that their own backgrounds shape their interpretation, and they position themselves in the research to acknowledge how their interpretation flows from their personal, cultural, and historical experiences" (p. 8). In qualitative research, there is a recognition and acceptance that one's own experiences are a relevant prism from which to conduct a study. Though I acknowledged through my research that "There is no single interpretive truth" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p. 15), the purpose of a qualitative study is always to present the information as interpreted from the vantage point of the researcher. It is the goal of the researcher to convey the experiences of others (Creswell, 2003), while acknowledging the existing bias and perspective of the researcher.

First, I was a student at Owensboro Community College during 1999-2001 and transferred to a local private four-year institution. Having been an undergraduate transfer student, I am fully aware of the advantages of beginning a college experience at a two-year institution. My own experience with transitioning from a two-year to a four-year institution was without transfer shock and fully supported by the institutions involved. This was relevant for the study in that I was already cognizant of the transfer support mechanisms that have been in place at OCTC even prior to the existence of the WKU-O regional campus in its present location.

Second, I currently serve as full-time faculty at Owensboro Community and Technical College as an Associate Professor of History and the History Coordinator. In this capacity, I possess an awareness of the parameters of the joint-admissions relationship between OCTC and WKU-O. Faculty at OCTC also serve as advisors, so I frequently advise potential transfers to WKU-O, as well as jointly-admitted students. To provide a quality advising experience for potential transfer students, I have frequently pursued contact with advisors at WKU-O, which has resulted in the creation of a strong professional relationship with many of the staff and leadership at WKU-O. In addition, as coordinator of a general education discipline, I am required to monitor transfer relationships in all their manifestations and acknowledge potential implications for students. Therefore, my professional responsibilities require a daily presence within the context of the phenomenon I studied, which is the joint-admissions relationship between OCTC and WKU-O. As an advocate of community college enrollment as a pathway to baccalaureate attainment and having experienced the benefits of a positive transfer experience and optimistically contributing to the same for other students as faculty and advisor, I was interested in thoroughly exploring the dimensions of the joint-admissions initiative, since it is a specialized form of transfer relationship. In addition, given the potentially small number of interview participants, the case study was blinded to assure anonymity of participants.

Stake (2005) offered the reminder that “Qualitative researchers are guests in the private spaces of the world” (p. 459) and that we must respect all perceptions, experiences, and circumstances as researchers. For example, I allowed interviewees, which for this study included students, staff, and senior leadership, to read transcripts of

their interviews for clarity and accuracy. Given that the interview format was semi-structured, thus allowing for some flexibility in organization, I avoided the temptation to comment too frequently and allow the individual being interviewed the optimum amount of time to share his or her experiences and perspectives (Hancock & Algozzine, 2006). In addition, the time and schedule of those being interviewed was the top priority, not my own (Yin, 2014), which served as evidence that I was aware of the valuable information that was shared during the interview process and appreciative of the opportunity.

Moreover, in accordance with the Educational Leadership Doctoral Program requirements, I completed the Human Subjects Review Board training and did not begin collecting data until my research proposal was approved by the Western Kentucky University Institutional Review Board. As the researcher, I was committed to the highest ethical standards and adhered to all procedures and policies as articulated by the Human Subjects Review Board. Finally, the study was blinded in an effort to preserve the anonymity of the study participants.

### **Conclusions**

The *Joint-Admissions Agreement* between OCTC and WKU-O was conceived as a plan to ease the transition of transfer students from a two-year to a four-year institution. The idea behind the agreement was to encourage community college students to see a bachelor's degree as both desirable and fully attainable at an institution located conveniently just across the street from the community college campus. Being jointly-admitted, the students would benefit from intrusive advising services guiding them concurrently toward an associate and bachelor's degrees, with advising assistance from both campuses as needed. While the theoretical position of the initiative is one of

optimism and promise as a potential model transfer relationship, no studies have been conducted to explore or attempt to understand the joint-admissions relationship between OCTC and WKU-O.

After a review of community college transfer literature, which revealed a general absence of scholarly joint-admissions literature, there was a need for analysis of joint-admissions agreements in an effort to understand if they foster the development of a transfer culture, which is conducive to student success. WKU-O's proximity to the OCTC campus and the high level of interaction among the campus representatives may lead the outsider to believe they function as one entity. However, there has been no study conducted to understand the true functionality of the joint-admissions reality between the two institutions.

In this case study, the researcher conducted semi-structured interviews of jointly-admitted students, advising staff, and leadership at both institutions to gather the various perceptions of the joint-admissions relationship. The *Joint-Admissions Agreement* document, along with student performance data provided by the WKU Office of Institutional Research, provided a diverse data set which upon scrutiny may determine, at least to some degree, if a transfer-affirming culture exists between WKU-O and OCTC. Each component of Handel's (2011) transfer-affirming culture served as the gauge for the types of data collected in the study.

## CHAPTER IV: FINDINGS

### Introduction

The focus of this case study was the examination of the joint-admissions relationship between OCTC and WKU-O. The three data sets I synthesized for this case study include analysis of the *Joint-Admissions Agreement* from 2009, semi-structured interviews of senior leadership and advising staff at both OCTC and WKU-O, and student performance data, including jointly-admitted student retention rates, GPA, and baccalaureate attainment rates as compared to that of non-jointly admitted students. Each data set was measured through the prism of Handel's (2011) transfer-affirming theoretical framework, which includes the following five components:

- I. Transfer as a *shared responsibility* between a two-year and four-year institution.
- II. Baccalaureate attainment is not only a possibility but is encouraged and expected.
- III. The presence of academic support.
- IV. Maximizing the social capital students obtain from transfer preparedness as a result of the cooperative services provided by the two-year and four-year institution.
- V. Transfer as a prominent feature of both the two-year and four-institutions' mission and strategic goal.

In addition, the study was bounded by the previous three academic years, including 2014-2015, 2015-2016, and 2016-2017. The study was also bounded by location in that the joint-admissions relationship between OCTC and WKU-O were the only two joint-admissions partners examined in this study.

## **Findings**

The instrument for interpreting the findings of this study was Handel's transfer-affirming theoretical framework, which also served as the organizational structure for the findings. Next, summary responses to the research questions were articulated, as each of the research questions were inspired by Handel's framework. The research questions were as follows:

RQ1: Does/how does the joint-admissions relationship between Owensboro Community and Technical College and Western Kentucky University-Owensboro foster a transfer-affirming culture?

RQ2: Do/how do the advising staff and leadership at Owensboro Community and Technical College and Western Kentucky University-Owensboro encourage and contribute to a transfer-affirming culture?

RQ3: Do/how do the jointly-admitted students perceive the joint-admissions relationship between Owensboro Community and Technical College and Western Kentucky University-Owensboro as contributing to their success and baccalaureate completion?

Finally, I compared the established policy of the joint-admissions program to the actual practice of the joint-admissions program, which was based on the analysis of the collected data, followed by a summary to conclude the chapter.

### **Transfer as a Shared Responsibility**

According to Handel's framework, for a transfer-affirming culture to exist between institutions, a partnership must exist where both institutions work together on transfer-related initiatives. The *Joint-Admissions Agreement* between OCTC and

WKU-O, which was signed in 2009, included the word “partnership” six times and referred to the shared responsibility to serve the joint-admissions student in the introduction:

This agreement between Owensboro Community and Technical College and Western Kentucky University summarizes the cooperative efforts to promote the successful undergraduate education of students admitted to both institutions. We are entering in this agreement to better serve students and to create a partnership of mutual benefit to both institutions, (p. 1)

Senior leadership from both institutions offered slightly contrasting portrayals of what inspired the formation of the joint-admissions agreement. While both referenced the role of local civic leaders in the Owensboro area who were committed to developing an affordable bachelor’s degree pathway, the WKU-O Senior Leader divulged that the initial idea for joint admissions came from an individual in charge of enrollment management at the WKU Bowling Green campus.

Students on average were transferring 95 credits and we needed to reduce that.

There are so many first-generation college students in this area who do not have a clue. Joint-Admissions would be a communication opportunity to help these students understand what is needed to transfer.

Both alluded to the fact that WKU had a regional campus in Owensboro since 1980, which was 30 years prior to the construction of the campus that presently sits across the street from OCTC, yet both also added that new building’s visibility encourages transfer from OCTC and is uniquely suited for a joint-admissions relationship. The OCTC



Senior Leader stated, “We have tried to do joint admissions with others but they just didn’t work out. This partnership works.”

Moreover, according to the Joint-Admissions Agreement, recruitment for the program, marketing, academic advising, and the overall management of the program were specified as the responsibility of both institutions. The sharing of student data between institutions is also articulated and it is specified; “The institutions will work together to develop a secure, efficient process of information/data interchange” (*Joint-Admissions Agreement*, p.4). The partnership theme emerges again in the statement declaring that 100- and 200-level courses will not be offered at WKU-O and remain the exclusive domain of OCTC within the partnership, unless there is a special circumstance where a course of that ranking is a prerequisite for a WKU-O course and not offered at OCTC.

Both senior leaders in the study addressed the partnership between OCTC and WKU-O, as they regarded the amicable relationship between the two institutions as beneficial to the students. However, the OCTC Senior Leader reflected that this was not always the case:

Our relationship is getting better. Five years ago, it was a mess. Then WKU-O brought on recruiters and advisors and we have developed a close relationship. The presence of those people have (*sic*) changed the climate entirely. At first communication was a problem, but now, it isn’t. Information is now fresh and current.

In terms of function and purpose, the WKU-O Senior Leader declared, “I think of us as one institution,” while the OCTC Senior Leader responded similarly, “We

operate like a single institution.” However, the OCTC Senior Leader addressed the fact that the joint-admissions program could not be an exclusive transfer partnership because of the existence of other institutions of higher learning that serve the region. Additionally, both senior leaders stated that the joint-admissions relationship between OCTC and WKU-O is significantly better than any other joint-admissions relationship established through other WKU regional campuses, though they did not provide specific data from other WKU regional campuses with similar relationships to lend support to such a claim.

Moreover, the partnership as articulated by each of the advisors centers on a spirit of cooperation, and each advisor asserted that the OCTC and WKU-O relationship is the best transfer relationship anywhere. WKU-O Advisor 1 characterized the relationship as the “Well duh, I am going to transfer-model.” WKU-O Advisor 1 added:

Joint-admissions helped cultivate a transfer culture for all students, since the institutional relationship was strengthened. WKU-O is an upper-level campus so the competition is eliminated. There is no need to compete because both campuses are on the same team.

Students in the study also observed evidence of the partnership and commented on the close relationship between advisors at OCTC and WKU-O, noting specifically the level of cooperation. Student 20 offered, “I thought the two schools wouldn’t want to work together, but they did. I had a very satisfactory transfer experience. I even had out-of-state courses that transferred. They did absolutely everything they could to help me.” Student 7 also reported that, as a WKU-O student, she sought tutoring at the Teaching and Learning Center at the OCTC main campus, though tutoring services were available at WKU-O:

I just know the math tutors over there and I felt comfortable with them. I am sure the tutors at WKU-O were fine too, but it helps when you already know the people. I struggle with math, so it helps to have tutors who know you. They knew I was being tutored for a WKU-O course and they were glad to help.

In this case, the student was impressed that the tutoring services were open to her even though she was enrolled at WKU-O and no longer taking classes at OCTC. Student 11 also received tutoring at the OCTC Teaching and Learning Center for a WKU-O statistics course and asserted “The TLC [Teaching and Learning Center] will tutor WKU-O students. They don’t care which class it’s for. This really helps a lot. It makes it like they are one school working together.”

In addition, Student 12, a faculty member at OCTC, illustrated the close relationship between OCTC and WKU-O from his unique perspective:

There is a constant flow of communication between OCTC and WKU-O. I see this not just as a joint-admissions student, but as faculty at OCTC. They came to my department when they began designing a new bachelor’s program and said, “What do you want this [new degree program] to do for your students?” They really wanted us to contribute to the design of the degree.

More evidence of the cooperative relationship between institutions was identified through the fact that the OCTC Advisors 1 and 2 complimented WKU-O Advisors 1 and 2, just as WKU-O Advisor 2 specifically mentioned both OCTC Advisors 1 and 2 and complimented them effusively.

OCTC Advisor 1 shared a story involving an occasion where WKU-O Advisor 1, who lived in Bowling Green at the time, had an early meeting the following the day in

Owensboro. To make it easier, WKU-O Advisor 1 was invited to stay the night at the home of OCTC Advisor 1 and share dinner with the advisor's family. The students also observed this level of personal interaction between advising staff from both institutions. For example, Student 10 cited the friendliness between the OCTC and WKU-O faculty in the OCTC transfer center and asserted, "You could tell they were friends and they liked each other. That makes the students feel good. It has to." Senior leadership also possessed an awareness of the friendships that have developed among advising staff at OCTC and WKU-O. Students, leadership, and advising staff each recognized the personal nature of the partnership between institutions.

Another facet of the shared transfer responsibility is the presence of joint-advising and/or pre-transfer advising efforts, which was a common theme throughout the *Joint-Admissions Agreement* and interviews. The *Joint-Admissions Agreement* stressed joint-advising efforts as the most salient of services to jointly-admitted students and referenced training for advising staff at both institutions, as well as joint-staffing partnerships whereby WKU-O advisors would assist OCTC advisors in the service of students at the OCTC transfer center. Each of the advisors stressed the importance of pre-transfer advising as critical to student success and necessary to prevent the accumulation of excessive credits. WKU-O Advisor 1 addressed the mantra that it is the fault of OCTC that so many students transfer an average of over 90 credit hours:

We've locked into the idea that the students transfer 90+ credit hours. What you don't hear is that at WKU-O, we actually add to that by telling them to go back and take more classes. Just because these students have more credit hours doesn't necessarily mean that they are floundering students. They could be doing

everything they have been told to do. Students also switch majors a lot and some hours are students restarting themselves. By the time they get to WKU-O, the advising becomes more focused.

WKU-O Advisor 1, who was quick to defend OCTC in the charge of fault for excessive hours accumulated, noted that the advising product is a result of a process that engages both institutions, but in the form of a hand-off that is not necessarily the result of a lack of advising communication or cooperation between institutions.

In addition, the advisors communicated the overall aim of creating an atmosphere where students are encouraged to frequently contact their advisors. OCTC Advisor 2 and WKU-O Advisor 2 both mentioned that many advisors supply students with their personal cell phone numbers so that the students may text them with advising inquiries as needed. As described by the advisors, the value system is that of easing students into transfer as a joint-effort between institutions.

Furthermore, each advisor specifically addressed the assistance afforded by the ability to share student information between institutions and characterized it as a steady free flow of information between institutions. Each of the advisors also mentioned team advising, which is a type of pre-transfer advising defined by the presence of both an OCTC and WKU-O advisor working with a student in the transfer center at OCTC. WKU-O Advisor 2 divulged the fact that some WKU-O advisors were granted access to enroll OCTC students in OCTC classes. Team advising was also described as helping the students understand how to “make the OCTC credits work,” according to OCTC Advisor 2, who added that “OCTC students can skip the colonnade program at WKU-O if they are general education certified.” The coordinated efforts in the advising feature of the

transfer relationship resonate clearly throughout the *Joint-Admissions Agreement* and interview data.

Additionally, the continual visibility of WKU-O on the OCTC campus was yet another piece of evidence illuminating the shared responsibility of transfer. WKU-O Advisor 1 referred to “java and joint admissions,” given the fact that the OCTC transfer center welcomes students with coffee at the transfer advising sessions and added also that this presence in the transfer center makes the WKU-O advisors “the red part of OCTC.” Students at the OCTC transfer center are also given plenty of WKU-O merchandise, including shirts and cups, which WKU-O Advisor 2 referred to as “*swagging* them.” OCTC Advisor 2 stated, “WKU-O wouldn’t have a campus there without us! We are the freshman and sophomore year; they are the junior and senior year. They want our students.” WKU-O Advisor 2 described the relationship this way:

We partner with OCTC to do high school visits. We go together into the high schools. This is one of the best illustrations of the relationship. We also have monthly *Transfer Task Force* meetings and we share recruitment notes on what new strategies we are taking. Big Red comes to OCTC events, such as the campus 5K and many student events.

Contributing to the theme of WKU-O visibility on the OCTC campus, the WKU-O Senior Leader perceived the biggest obstacle to the growth of the joint-admissions program as the need for more transfer staff, which could increase WKU-O’s presence on the OCTC campus. Additionally, WKU-O Advisor 1 mentioned that faculty advisors at OCTC have many opportunities to stay up to speed on advising transfer information as there are workshops offered which are frequently conducted by WKU-O staff at the

OCTC campus and noted also that OCTC puts training into its staff. Student 9 offered support for this idea when she described all OCTC faculty she encountered as “pro-transfer” and stated, “Every faculty member I met at OCTC fully encouraged transfer,” specifically referring to WKU-O.

More evidence of the cooperative relationship resided in the presence of WKU-O in an instructional capacity on the OCTC campus and that of OCTC on the WKU-O campus. WKU-O Advisor 2 discussed the fact that WKU-O teaches a class at OCTC called COE 199, a cooperative education class that is essentially an internship course. Each advisor mentioned presentations by WKU-O staff at the large group sessions of OCTC’s mandatory college success course, as well as the fact that several full-time faculty at OCTC are adjunct faculty for WKU-O in a variety of disciplines. The OCTC Senior Leader also shared a future plan to offer a special section of college readiness courses at OCTC for joint-admissions student which will be taught by staff from WKU-O. WKU-O staff have also led campus tours of OCTC for high school groups, which was cited by WKU-O Advisor 2 and OCTC Advisor 1. The opportunities for interaction to foster a sense of shared ownership in the transfer process were evident particularly throughout the interview data.

### **Baccalaureate Attainment is Encouraged and Expected**

Handel described the second essential element of a transfer-affirming culture as an environment where baccalaureate attainment is both encouraged and expected. References to increasing bachelor’s degree attainment were present within the *Joint-Admissions Agreement*, with a commitment to “increase the completion of the bachelor’s degree by students in the greater Owensboro region,” which is designed to “eliminate

barriers for students in attaining their educational goals, [and] improving student success and degree attainment” (p.1-2). According to the agreement, the intention of joint admissions was to increase the number of bachelor’s degree holders in the area to improve the quality of life for the community through the cultivation of a better-educated workforce. The central purpose and goal of the agreement as expressed in the document are to make baccalaureate degree attainment an attainable goal for the jointly-admitted students.

What is also important in the cooperative efforts to increase baccalaureate attainment through joint admissions were the frequent references within the interview data to the place-bound nature of Owensboro students. In this context, *place-bound* is implied to mean that students choose to stay in Owensboro as a result of financial constraints, family responsibilities, or other obligations. Both senior leaders mentioned the place-bound condition of a vast majority of the students, and one cited that 91% of college graduates from OCTC and WKU-O stay in Owensboro. In support of this perception, each of the advisors also asserted that most of the Owensboro students who attend WKU-O do so because they desire to stay in Owensboro. WKU-O Advisor 2 declared, “Our students are place-bound. They will even change their major to keep from having to go to Bowling Green’s campus.”

Two of the students in the study also provided supporting evidence to the idea that many of the Owensboro students will go to great lengths to remain in the Owensboro area. Two of the jointly-admitted students who decided not to enroll at WKU-O did so because they decided to pursue a program which was not offered through the WKU-O campus and would have required travel to Bowling Green. Students 5 and 16 did not take



classes at WKU-O because they decided to enroll in the RN to BSN program through the University of Louisville School of Nursing, which has a regional campus located in Owensboro. Student 16 described the situation:

At first, I thought I wanted to do Social Work. They have good professors at WKU-O. Nothing discouraged me from transferring to WKU-O, I just decided to be a nurse and I wanted to do RN to BSN in town. WKU-O was my first choice, but they don't have a BSN program in town and I wanted a BSN at home. There's also no TEAS test or ACT requirement in the University of Louisville program.

Student 5 indicated a desire to stay in Owensboro as well and asserted:

I didn't want the dorm life. I didn't want any surprises. I found out you have to have a four-year nursing degree to work at the hospital now, so I kind of have to have a bachelor's because I want to be a nurse. I wish WKU-O had a four-year nursing degree or I would go there instead.

Though WKU-O Advisor 2 stated that students will change their majors to keep from going to Bowling Green, as in the case of Students 5 and 16, their goal of earning a bachelor's degree in nursing while remaining in Owensboro compelled them to change transfer institutions. Both students also shared the idea that they were not interested in WKU's Nursing Program because they were unable to travel to Bowling Green. No matter what, they were both going to remain in Owensboro, and they enrolled in the one program option available to them that was right in Owensboro, even though it was not through WKU-O. Both students expressed admiration for the joint-admissions program and the advisors at both OCTC and WKU-O. Student 5 acknowledged, "I felt comfortable with WKU-O. They made me feel welcome when we did the campus tour. I

really like [WKU-O Advisor 1]. But I went with the best program for me.” Student 16 asserted, “I had a great advisor at OCTC, and I felt like I knew what to expect in the transfer experience. They tell you everything at orientation and take you around WKU-O. If they had a BSN program, I would go there instead.”

Each advisor who participated in the study stated that many students in Owensboro would not even consider the pursuit a bachelor’s degree if it were not for WKU-O’s presence. OCTC Advisor 1 shared the idea that some of the joint-admissions students in the trade-related technical fields would not otherwise have pursued a bachelor’s degree and added that there is a connection to a four-year institution that they would never have thought relevant, nor perceived as beneficial. OCTC Advisor 2 noted that some of the technical faculty at OCTC are also jointly-admitted students and would not have entertained the idea of earning a bachelor’s degree without the presence of WKU-O and added “Joint admissions encouraged people to finish a four-year degree that wouldn’t have. There is a relationship and a hand-off. And we make it sound so easy, but it takes a long time for students to trust.”

Each advisor suggested that Owensboro students have jobs, responsibilities, and other concerns competing for their attention. “We are not going to replicate the Bowling Green environment here and they don’t want that. If you want to grill them a hamburger at a student cookout, you better hand it to them on the way to class because it is all they have time to do,” explained WKU-O Advisor 2. According to these advisors, the transfer students they serve are not thinking about activities on campus; they are focused on academic completion. The WKU-O Senior Leader mentioned the fact that while students might appreciate the ability to take advantage of certain student privileges, “They are

just not going to go to the football games. If they started at OCTC, they did this for a reason. The option is there to go to Bowling Green for events . . . it's just not widely utilized.”

Both leaders mentioned that many of the students at both institutions are adult students who simply aren't interested or do not have the time to engage in anything extracurricular. Adult students were also identified by the leaders as attracted to the small, less intimidating nature of the WKU-O campus. Many of the students are also first-generation college students and the WKU-O Senior Leader stated, “I try to imagine the conversations parents have with their children. It would be a very different experience if they did not go to college themselves. The students have to overcome a lot.”

A reference was also made to the refusal on the part of the Bowling Green campus to embrace joint admissions as evidenced by a lack of understanding of student needs in the Owensboro area as described by the WKU-O Senior Leader:

Recruiters in Bowling Green don't understand the partnership. They think joint admissions competes with WKU. They think all of the students should be going to Bowling Green. This tells me that they are not understanding our students. They have jobs, responsibilities. They cannot come to Bowling Green. They are not the type of student that Bowling Green can recruit.

Also, some students in the study professed a strong identification with the WKU-O campus and made a clear distinction between the Owensboro regional campus and the Bowling Green campus. Student 7 described the feeling of being associated with WKU-O:

We are still Hilltoppers, but I feel more loyal to Owensboro than Bowling Green. They took care of me here. These guys know me when I walk through the door. It's like a family here. Some of my classmates are walking at Diddle. I am not walking at Diddle. I went to school here, so I am graduating here. I am a Hilltopper, but I am a WKU-O Hilltopper.

Student 1's response paralleled that of Student 7 in that she also considered herself an "Owensboro Hilltopper," and that she too would participate in the Owensboro graduation ceremony, which takes place at the River Park Center. Student 3 noted that he didn't see a difference in the quality of education from WKU-O compared to WKU, and that he possessed "the same level of pride" in the bachelor's degree he was earning in Owensboro. Furthermore, all student participants in the study were asked if they felt like a Hilltopper once they became a jointly-admitted student. Fourteen students, or 58.3% reported that they did not feel like a Hilltopper, while eight, or 33.3%, said they did feel like a Hilltopper. The identification of Hilltopper status was important to some students in the study, while insignificant to others.

In addition, both WKU-O advisors were critical of the policymakers who emphasized and promoted the extracurricular benefits of the joint-admissions program and added that most students in the area are not interested in attending football games in Bowling Green. When asked to describe perks of the program, none of the advisors who participated in the study mentioned event attendance at the Bowling Green campus. WKU-O Advisor 1 asserted "It's not worth catering to the 2 students that might be interested in the social aspect of college. It's not going to draw them in."

Supporting this perception is the fact that while jointly admitted students do have the privilege of attending sporting events and student activities on the Bowling Green campus, only two students interviewed for the study, or 8%, indicated that they had attended either a sporting event or a student activity on the Bowling Green campus, while 22, or 92%, had not. Student 20 explained, “I went to a couple of football games with my girlfriend and it was cool. I couldn’t go very often because I work a lot but it was nice to go for those times.” Student 11, the other student who had attended events in Bowling Green, described her experience:

I went down there for two football games and a couple of homecoming concerts. I like having the option to do that. I have a cousin who goes down there so I had someone to meet up with. I like to just go to Diddle and walk. Just having the option is nice.

Though few students in the study took advantage of the main campus perks, what is perhaps most significant is that the two students who did experience those events were proud to report that they had, and in doing so, were developing into life-long Hilltoppers. However, the perception conveyed throughout the interviews is that joint-admissions student are committed mainly to academic pursuits and do not find the option of main campus events as a particularly practical feature of the joint-admissions experience, as baccalaureate attainment is the prime objective.

In order to gain a better understanding of bachelor’s degree attainment of jointly-admitted students, I applied a chi-squared test to compare bachelor’s attainment rates of jointly-admitted students with that of non-jointly-admitted transfer students. The chi-squared test on bachelor’s degree attainment resulted in no statistically significant

findings. Comparative baccalaureate attainment rates between the two student groups are presented in Table 6.

Table 6

*Bachelor's Degree Crosstabulation*

Status		Jointly-Admitted	Non-Jointly Admitted	Total
Graduated	Count	50	59	109
	% within Bachelor's Degree	45.90%	54.10%	100.00%
	% within Admission Status	61.70%	56.70%	58.90%
Not Graduated	Count	31	45	76
	% within Bachelor's Degree	40.80%	59.20%	100.00%
	% within Admission Status	38.30%	43.30%	41.10%
Total	Count	81	104	185
	% within Bachelor's Degree	43.80%	56.20%	100.00%
	% within Admission Status	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%

Of the 109 students in the sample who earned bachelor's degrees, 45.9% were jointly-admitted students and 54.1% were non-jointly-admitted. The 76 students who did not earn bachelor's degrees consisted of 40.8% jointly-admitted students and 59.20% non-jointly-admitted students. Based on the results of the baccalaureate completion data for the students in the sample, jointly-admitted students earned bachelor's degrees at a similar rate as that of non-jointly-admitted transfer students.

Subsequently, neither senior leader regarded the joint-admissions strategy as the solution to transfer problems. The OCTC Senior Leader observed, "Joint-admissions is a band-aid, but even the next best thing won't fix it all." The WKU-O Senior Leader

echoed that sentiment, by asserting, “Joint admissions doesn’t like magic make it all work . . . joint admissions is the vehicle we are using to get there.” In addition, the WKU-O Senior Leader suggested that career options must exist in the community in order to incentivize baccalaureate attainment:

If the students do not know what they can do with the bachelor’s degree, they may not see the need to earn it. They know manufacturing, retail, and waiting tables. Transfer is a much bigger challenge than just the partnership between OCTC and WKU-O—it’s with the community. This community needs to decide – do we want an educated workforce? It would help if employers would say “We need bachelor’s degree holders.”

Each of the advisors interviewed in the study expressed that joint-admissions students receive the same advising services and attention as regular OCTC transfer students to WKU-O. They each admitted that no distinction is made when it comes to pre-transfer advising and transfer assistance. WKU-O Advisor 1 explained:

There is little distinction between transfer and joint admissions in the way we serve students. I will give the regular transfer students and joint-admissions student the same advising services and assistance. Maybe the difference is that transfer students will eventually get their questions answered, but the joint-admissions student are sought out. Joint-admissions is an early transfer program, so these students tend to be more prepared. They are on top of their academic future. They are ambitious. They know there is a process, and that they know there is a process gives them an advantage. They know there is something they don’t know.

Each advisor admitted that the joint-admissions program doesn't attract enough students because it is not absolutely necessary for transfer to WKU-O and does not include enough attractive perks. "We have not pursued the identity that comes along with being a joint-admissions student," declared WKU-O Advisor 1, and WKU-O Advisor 2 also professed, "The program doesn't make the student feel special the way it should. They don't feel like Hilltoppers here."

With WKU-O Advisor 1 admitted that advising services are offered to jointly-admitted as well as non-jointly-admitted students, with the only difference perhaps being student tenacity and preparation. A chi-squared test was used to compare persistence rates towards baccalaureate attainment between the jointly-admitted and non-jointly-admitted students, from fall to fall semester at WKU-O from 2014, 2015, and 2016. The chi-squared test for persistence resulted in no statistically significant findings. Table 7 presents comparative percentages of persistence rates between the two groups.

From this data set, I determined that of the combined 141 students who did persist, 44% were jointly-admitted students, whereas 56% were non-jointly admitted. Of the combined 44 who did not persist, 43% were joint-admissions students whereas 56.8% were non-jointly-admitted. Of the 81 joint-admissions students included in the sample, 76.5% persisted, whereas 23.5% did not. Conversely, of the 104 non-jointly-admitted students, 76% persisted, whereas 24% did not. This means that there was relatively no difference in persistence rates of jointly-admitted compared to non-jointly-admitted students, the results of which offered support to the assertions of WKU-O advisors that the services received by joint-admissions students do not differ substantially with that of non-jointly-admitted transfers from OCTC.



Table 7

*Persistence Crosstabulation*

Status		Jointly-Admitted	Non-Jointly Admitted	Total
Did Persist	Count	62	79	141
	% within Persistence	44.00%	56.00%	100.00%
	% within Admission Status	76.50%	76.00%	76.20%
Did Not Persist	Count	19	25	44
	% within Persistence	43.20%	56.80%	100.00%
	% within Admission Status	23.50%	24.00%	23.80%
Total	Count	81	104	185
	% within Persistence	43.80%	56.20%	100.00%
	% within Admission Status	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%

Yet, many interview participants agreed that there is a steady flow of communication coming to joint-admissions students, with the implication that the communication efforts might be the primary advantage. OCTC Advisor 2 and WKU-O Advisor 1 both mentioned that joint-admissions students have the privilege of the catalogue rule over regular transfer students, in that the academic plans and program structures from that academic year apply to them from the moment they are jointly-admitted for as long as they are continuously enrolled. However, OCTC Advisor 2 asserted “I am not sure if students even know what the catalogue rule is and what it can mean to them.” OCTC Advisor 1 offered a single advantage for jointly-admitted students, and stated “I think that jointly-admitted students have more access. Our students have a terrible time transferring at [another regional institution]. Joint-admissions gives them a

smooth hand-off to WKU-O.” Though the advising staff throughout the interviews provided no other specific advantages to joint admissions, the advantages to the mere presence of the regional campus as a pathway to the baccalaureate from the student perspective include location, convenience, small class size, and cost.

Many of the students discussed the importance of staying in Owensboro for family, work, and other obligations. Of the 20 students in this study who were jointly-admitted and transferred to WKU-O, 9 stated that they would not have pursued nor earned a bachelor’s degree without the presence of WKU-O, or 45%, and 11 stated that they would have sought a bachelor’s degree at another institution, or 55%. One student in the study reported being enrolled in a master’s degree program at WKU-O. From this, it is clear that nearly half of the jointly-admitted students in the study would not be pursuing a bachelor’s degree if it were not for the presence of WKU-O, while the other half determined they would have been forced to seek other options in the area.

Student 4 imparted the importance of being able to earn a bachelor’s degree close to home:

I have two young daughters. I want my children to earn degrees. I can’t expect them to earn degrees if I don’t have one, so I am working on it. Work pays 70% of my tuition, so this is a deal for me. I am not sure how I would be doing this without WKU-O here.

Student 18 explained a similar goal of achieving a bachelor’s degree while living in Owensboro:

All the jobs I was looking for required a bachelor’s degree, so I had to earn one, and I needed to be working while taking classes. I would not have gone to

Bowling Green. There was just no way. Without WKU-O and the help of [WKU-O Advisor], I would not be here.

Student 2 had an extraordinary transfer experience, which she shared to explain why she needed to stay in Owensboro:

I am not like most of the students around here. I lived in Bowling Green when I went to Gatton Academy. I knew what to expect and I had it all planned. But when I got pregnant with my daughter, I had to leave Gatton and finish high school online at Owensboro High School. After that, I decided to start college at OCTC, but I transferred some college credits from Gatton to the community college. When they found out I had been to Gatton, [OCTC advisor 1] told me about the joint-admissions program. This was it for me. This was the way I could stay in Owensboro with my family and still earn a degree from Western.

Student 17 also described the joint-admissions experience, “Joint admissions is good for someone who couldn’t leave town. The program is the perfect opportunity for them to reach their goals. It is good to stay home and still be a Hilltopper.” Student 21 recently earned a bachelor’s degree, is now pursuing a master’s degree, and described her situation as follows:

At first my goal was just an associate’s. I never thought I would have earned a bachelor’s degree. Now here I am working on a master’s degree, working in higher education. I would never have believed I could do this. Without the WKU location in Owensboro, I would not have been able to come this far.

However, Students 15 and 23 communicated a feeling of disengagement with the WKU-O campus, though they admitted it did not hinder their progress. Student 23 stated

“I just didn’t feel like a Hilltopper until I finally started taking classes at WKU-O. But even when I did that, my classes were all online. I never really met any other students. I guess you could say I didn’t have a normal college experience.” Student 15 echoed the sentiments, “I feel like WKU-O is the red-headed stepchild of WKU. I don’t feel like a Hilltopper. But I wasn’t going for the campus life either. I just knew I wasn’t going to [local private colleges] and I wanted a bachelor’s degree.”

The existence of WKU-O helped many of the students in the study who are from diverse backgrounds and unique circumstances. Joint-admissions was seen by them as a convenient path to their dreams of baccalaureate attainment. However, it is also worth acknowledging that their transfer success was not exclusively the result of their status as joint-admissions students, meaning that they could have earned a bachelor’s degree at WKU-O without being in the joint-admissions program.

Furthermore, in the *Joint-Admissions Agreement*, both institutions are described in the document as “premier providers of postsecondary education in the Commonwealth of Kentucky,” (p. 1) and committed to serving the Owensboro community by providing an affordable option for bachelor’s degree attainment. The affordability of the bachelor’s degree through joint admissions was another common thread throughout the interviews. “Through joint admissions, you get a bachelor’s degree at a public education rate, the application fee is waived, and students stand a better chance of not taking too many classes and prematurely using up all of their financial aid,” stated the WKU-O Senior Leader. Both senior leaders shared the idea that the partnership between OCTC and WKU-O is attractive because it offers an affordable pathway to the bachelor’s degree, describing it as a high quality educational experience.

Each of the jointly-admitted students who participated in the study mentioned the fact that earning a bachelor's degree at WKU-O costs significantly less than the other options in the Owensboro area, with eight of the students specifically mentioning the high cost associated with attending the two private colleges existing in the Owensboro area. Student 19 asserted "I looked at the University of Kentucky's online program, but it costs way too much. I thought it might be great to go to UK, but it's crazy to spend that money when WKU-O is right here and is so much cheaper." Student 7 offered a similar sentiment and declared "I never even considered [local private college] or [local private college]. I just wasn't interested in going into that kind of debt."

Cost was also an incentive for Student 10 who stated, "I am what you guys call a 'non-traditional' student. I've had my career . . . I'm retired. I got a bachelor's degree because I was bored. If it was expensive I wouldn't have done it." Student 9 concurred, "Cost was the primary factor. I want to be an elementary school teacher and I do not have the money to attend [local private college] or pay for housing in Bowling Green or some other far-away campus." Student 6 communicated a personal connection to WKU and shared that her father earned a degree from WKU, which she said inspired her to earn a degree there as well. However, she could not afford to live in Bowling Green and experience the residential campus lifestyle. "I still get to be a Hilltopper, but I am doing it here to save money," she described.

While cost was a benevolent factor in the case of a majority of the student interview participants, two of the students in the study cited cost as a factor which prevented them from pursuing a bachelor's degree. Two of the jointly-admitted students who participated in the study and did not follow through with their joint-admissions

commitment to WKU-O abandoned their pursuit of a bachelor's degree because of financial constraints. Student 14 earned an Associate in Applied Science at OCTC in the field of Electrical Engineering and is employed at a local manufacturing facility. Paid well for his skilled trade, Student 14 decided not to move forward with classes at WKU-O because of a need to divert all attention to earning a family income. Student 14 described the situation:

My wife is about to have a baby and I need to work all of the overtime I can get. I can't spend time taking classes when I could be working instead. I might go back later and get a bachelor's. I know [OCTC Faculty Advisor] really wanted me to get a bachelor's. I just can't right now. We need the money, and I really have to work.

The cost of a bachelor's degree was also the deterrent for Student 22, who was from another state and earned credits from four different institutions before transferring to OCTC. While at the OCTC transfer center, Student 22 learned about the joint-admissions program at WKU-O and applied. After recently earning an associate degree, Student 22 explained that the goal of pursuing a bachelor's degree in Human Resources Management was impossible because of the complete exhaustion of all financial aid options. Student 22 explained:

I have credits from all over the place. Transfer is a joke. It's all about money. I have taken math five times because one school tells me I need this, but when I transferred to OCTC they told me I needed college algebra. Transfer is all about money. They want me to take these classes and I don't understand why math at one school can't be the same for another. I am \$60,000 in student load debt, and I

just have an associate degree. I am a single mom and it's like they are punishing me for trying to get away from an abusive husband. They don't want to make it easy. Now I don't have a way to pay for a bachelor's degree. How I am going to pay the student debt I have without the degree I need? I make \$12 an hour and you can't pay off debt like that on \$12 an hour.

Student 22 also explained that she had reached her undergraduate loan limit and was currently exploring avenues for funding, including minority student assistance funds within the community and faith-based funding options. She referred to postsecondary institutions evaluating transfer credits and refusing to accept them all as having a "money-making agenda." However, just as the other three students in this study who did not pursue their joint-admissions commitment, Student 22 complimented the advising staff at both OCTC and WKU-O, both of whom she met in the OCTC transfer center. Student 22's frustrations were solely directed at the cost associated with transfer as well as the fact that many of the courses she had taken at institutions out of state were not accepted by either OCTC or WKU-O. Student 22 made clear the desire and intention to pursue a bachelor's degree at WKU-O at some point and emphasized the aim to explore funding options to make it possible.

### **Academic Support**

Handel cited the presence of academic support as the third characteristic of a transfer-affirming culture. However, absent from the joint-admissions document is a precise reference to the offering of any type of academic support apparatus for jointly-admitted students. The spirit of cooperation is the underlying theme of the agreement, and there are references to advising services and other student privileges, but not

academic services such as tutoring. “Fee-based student services will be available to jointly admitted students who have paid the requisite fees. Services students may access at both institutions include, but are not limited to: student organizations, library services, and health insurance” (Joint-Admissions Agreement, p. 5). Nothing specifically relating to academic assistance is expressed, though plenty of references to academic advising services exist throughout the document.

However, academic preparedness of students was another category that emerged in the interviews. OCTC Advisor 1 identified three barriers to student success including ignorance, finances, and fear of failure. According to the advisors, academic preparation is the primary concern of most of the students they encounter. WKU-O Advisor 1 noted, “Many of the programs have high GPA requirements, and 70% are prepared and 30% are not. This is maybe where joint admissions could have given them a better understanding of what to expect.” Each advisor described the Owensboro student as less social and more academically motivated and explained that if students seek any services, they are usually academic.

Smaller class sizes for the jointly-admitted students attending courses at WKU-O was cited by students in the study as a feature conducive to academic success. Student 1 described being enrolled in IVS (Interactive Video Services) courses where the professor teaches class from Bowling Green while students in Owensboro attend remotely from a classroom at the WKU-O campus. “The IVS classes are small, so we have a chance to talk before and after class. We get the same instruction as the students in Bowling Green. I don’t get to know the professors like I did at OCTC, but I like the small class size,” as



described by Student 1. She felt as if the small classes helped her focus and engage with the material, as did other students in the study.

Students also offered stories of moments when advising and support staff at WKU-O coordinated and/or offered academic services. Student 17 shared the following:

[WKU-O advisor] got me a tutor for biology. She contacted him and gave him my contact information. She knew I worked, so she arranged the meeting. I couldn't meet when WKU-O was open, so we had to meet in the evenings. So, she arranged for us to meet at the Daviess County Public Library. She was amazing.

Student 10 also explained a situation where an instructional technology staff member at WKU-O assisted him with downloading required software for a course:

[Instructional technology staff member] helped me install Access for one of my online courses. He was so patient and kind. He worked with me for two hours one afternoon and then six hours the next day . . . that's a total of eight hours on the job. He did whatever it took.

The underlying theme from students in the study was that faculty and staff at both institutions were willing to offer any type of academic support. WKU-O Advisor 2 summed up the situation in these terms: "If we lose a student, it is not academic, it will be because of family or money," with the implication that when students do not persist in the joint-admissions program, it is not due to lack of academic preparation.

In addition, both senior leaders argued that OCTC is better equipped to help underprepared students, though they did not explain reasons for this perception and expressed that the completion of an associate degree is a stepping-stone for students. Another aspect of the transfer relationship that was clear in the *Joint-Admissions*

*Agreement* is that students are advised to complete their associate degree as the most secure pathway to transfer and ultimately baccalaureate attainment. This understanding is designed to increase degree completion at OCTC, but to also encourage academic success for students at OCTC while they prepare for transfer to WKU-O. WKU-O Senior Leader shared the following:

The story I hear over and over again is I wasn't sure if I could make it or not. I started at the community college and I realized I can do this. So, they go to a four-year institution, which they never would have considered going to Bowling Green, Lexington, and Louisville initially, but they have the confidence to prepare academically and they know they can be successful.

With such an emphasis on associate degree completion as evidence of the capability of academic success, I used a chi-squared test to compare the percentages of associate degree attainment between jointly-admitted and non-jointly-admitted students. The test results yielded no statistically significant difference in associate degree attainment between the two student groups. The crosstabulation data comparing the percentages of Associate degree completion are presented in Table 8.

Of the 133 students from this sample who earned an associate degree, 42.1% were jointly-admitted, whereas 57.9% were non-jointly admitted. Of the 52 students who did not earn an associate degree, 48.1% were jointly-admitted students, whereas 51.9% were non-jointly-admitted students. In addition, 69.1% of the jointly-admitted students earned associate degrees while 30.9 percent did not, and 74% of the non-jointly-admitted students earned associate degrees while 26% did not. Student associate degree completion rates were similar between the student groups, which once again offered

evidence of the comparable performance of jointly-admitted and non-jointly-admitted OCTC transfers to WKU-O.

Table 8

*Associate Degree Crosstabulation*

Status		Jointly-Admitted	Non-Jointly Admitted	Total
Earned Degree	Count	56	77	133
	% within Associate Degree Earned	42.10%	57.90%	100.00%
	% within Admission Status	69.10%	74.00%	71.90%
Did Not Earn Degree	Count	25	27	52
	% within Associate Degree Earned e	48.10%	51.90%	100.00%
	% within Admission Status	30.90%	26.00%	28.10%
Total	Count	81	104	185
	% within Associate Degree Earned	43.80%	56.20%	100.00%
	% within Admission Status	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%

Furthermore, both senior leaders mentioned students in technical fields earning Associate of Applied Science degrees as prime examples of a particular student population who perhaps never thought they could earn a four-year degree. They each described it in terms of students discovering their full academic abilities. “There are a number of bachelor’s programs that will allow students of technical programs to earn a bachelor’s degree . . . joint admissions helps those students realize their potential,” as described by the OCTC Senior Leader.

Many of the students in the study were proud of their academic performance both at OCTC and WKU-O and communicated that they had cultivated confidence throughout

their educational experiences. Student 21 admitted that if it were not for her academic success in the pursuit of her associate degree, she would not have entertained the idea of earning a bachelor's. The joint-admissions program created a pathway for students that was never visible before. In addition, many students who participated in the interview portion of the study boasted that they had high GPAs without being prompted to share the information.

In order to assess the academic success of jointly-admitted students as compared to non-jointly-admitted students, I compared mean GPA of the two student groups. An independent samples *t*-test, which is the most simple and robust test to compare mean data, was used to compare the GPA of jointly admitted to non-jointly-admitted students. The results of the *t*-test indicated no significant difference in GPA between the jointly-admitted and non-jointly-admitted students. Descriptive statistics for GPA between the two groups are displayed in Table 9.

Table 9

*Descriptive Statistics for GPA*

Status	<i>N</i>	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Jointly-Admitted	81	3.25	0.64	0.07
Non-Jointly Admitted	104	3.25	0.62	0.06

Jointly-admitted and non-jointly-admitted students in this data set had mean GPAs which were nearly identical, which is underscored by the lack of statistical significance in the *t*-test application. Once again, this study revealed a lack of distinction in performance of jointly-admitted versus non-jointly-admitted OCTC transfer students to WKU-O. In terms of academic performance, the two groups performed nearly identically.

Academic support was a service that few students expressed a need for yet indicated was readily available.

### **Maximization of Social Capital through Transfer Knowledge**

The fourth characteristic of Handel's transfer-affirming culture is the maximization of social capital through the accumulation of transfer knowledge, which should be obtained through both the two-year and four-year institutions. Handel succinctly defined social capital in this context to be the essential knowledge necessary for success in transfer. While the *Joint-Admissions Agreement* included a goal to increase transfer support services for the jointly-admitted students, details regarding the specific types of services are not provided. There is no articulated plan offered in the document to equip students with the knowledge they require to transfer successfully. Under a header titled "Miscellaneous," the assurance is made that "Faculty and staff will be encouraged to develop cooperative efforts related to the delivery of courses and support services" (*Joint-Admissions Agreement*, p. 5), without specificity as to what type of services would be made available.

One common thread that emerged from interviewing advising staff from each institution is the idea that Owensboro students have unique needs. Each advisor acknowledged that many of the OCTC students, especially the adult students, are intimidated by WKU-O and therefore require extensive transfer knowledge to ease their anxiety. They each addressed the idea that while faculty and staff at both institutions may be clueless to this fact, the awareness of this fear is essential to understanding the apprehension Owensboro students may have about transfer. WKU-O Advisor 1 described a common situation:

When we schedule pre-transfer advising sessions with students, I tell them that they can see me at WKU-O tomorrow or wait 3 weeks and I will be at OCTC and we can meet then. Many times, the students will just wait because they prefer to meet at OCTC. It's like the fear of going to a job interview or some other place you've never been.

OCTC Advisor 2 confirmed this sentiment by asserting, "You would be amazed at how many students are afraid to go over there," referring to the WKU-O campus. OCTC Advisor 1 noted, "Many are nervous to even cross the street. To many students, it is a scary experience."

Some advisors also discussed the general lack of transfer knowledge among students. OCTC Advisor 2 stated, "Students do not understand the transfer lingo . . . they don't get why things aren't course for course." OCTC Advisor 1 also offered, "Students think sometimes when you say four-year degree, they think four more years on top of the two they spent at OCTC." Three of the advisors mentioned that many of the students they serve are first-generation college students, and they have little knowledge of what is involved in the college experience to say nothing of the ambit of transferring from one institution to the other.

In addition, OCTC Advisor 2 recognized that WKU-O staff have an extensive knowledge of the OCTC campus and program requirements and noted that because of this, "Students don't get lost in that big university system." The OCTC advisors emphasized the intimate knowledge WKU-O staff have of OCTC programs and courses, which was deemed a beneficial resource for transfer students. OCTC Advisor 1 shared, "WKU-O is extremely student friendly. Their staff are cross-trained. No one at WKU-O

says ‘That’s not my job.’” OCTC Advisor 1 added to this observation by sharing the following:

WKU-O knows more about OCTC than Bowling Green. Our students aren’t thrown off a cliff when they transfer to WKU-O. Knowing someone over there increases their comfort level for transfer. They know that they have someone to go through it with them. Students may not have all of the knowledge, but they know they have a network which is there to help them.

Moreover, each of the advisors expressed the need for student contact and frequency of advising to guide and mentor students through the process, the degree of which, according to the advisors, depends on the needs of the student. WKU-O Advisor 1 shared, “Students on top of it we see twice a semester and we get a chance to talk about things. But I would prefer to see all of my students twice a semester.” They each acknowledged that some students are more engaged in the advising process than others.

Students also acknowledged the constant pursuit of transfer information and advising services. Student 7 added, “At WKU-O, I have to meet with an advisor every semester and I didn’t have to do that at OCTC. It keeps students on track. It’s a mistake to not force them to meet with their advisors. Sometimes my friends call me for advising advice, and I tell them to call their advisors and set up an appointment.” From Student 7, I determined that in some instances, students are consulting anyone they consider knowledgeable about transfer information—even other students.

Students in the study were also quick to name specific people who served as their main resource for transfer information at one or both campuses. For example, Student 2 regarded OCTC Advisor 2 as the *go-to* person for advising, as did four other students in

the study. Five of the students used the word *seamless* to describe their transfer experiences, largely because they knew what to expect. Student 7 acknowledged possessing the information necessary to successfully transfer and felt prepared because of the assistance offered by faculty and staff at both institutions, echoing the sentiments of Student 12 other students in the study. Information sharing in some instances also led to the formation of mentoring relationships, such as expressed by Student 9: “[WKU-O advisor] remembered things about me that really surprised me. Like she remembered where I work and stuff like that. I felt like she was really interested in what was important to me.”

Furthermore, four of the students described the value of the joint-admissions student orientation, which to them served as a great opportunity to get to know many of the advisors and other staff members on campus and gain an awareness of critical transfer information. Student 6 explained, “They had a great orientation where we met [WKU-O Advisor 1 and WKU-O Advisor 2]. And then we toured the building. It was a great way to learn how things worked. I feel like that’s when [WKU Advisor 2] became my mentor.” Student 13 also described the orientation:

They talked about how to get on the website. Every person that worked in the building introduced themselves and let us know who you need to contact for what. There seemed to be a lot of people there. Maybe 30. There were people of all ages there. They had shirts and cups and trinkets. It was really nice. They really wanted us to be comfortable.

However, some students felt isolated in their pursuit of critical transfer information. Student 6 shared her frustrations:



I have learned that it's all up to me. I can't get all of my questions answered in one place. And there's no way to wait until the last minute. With less drive, I would not be able to complete my program. I feel like a lot of the time I am doing the program research myself. It's like I am advising myself.

Having a unique experience with issues that come along with major changes, as she described switching from the elementary education program to social work, Student 6 felt burdened with doing her own research on the WKU-O website to understand the program requirements for her new major. Yet, she did accumulate the information necessary to pursue her goals, which speaks to her tenacity and drive that has been observed previously in other joint-admissions students. This was also evident in Student 24, who explained that she had a question about a biology course she was taking at WKU-O and shared, "The extension campus was good but they didn't have the right information. I had to call the Bowling Green campus and get the biology professor on the phone. Then it got resolved." In this case as for Student 6, both knew where to go to get their questions answered and did not allow obstacles or issues to serve as barriers to success. They served as prime examples of maximization use of accumulated transfer knowledge.

In addition, students seemed to be most anxious about financial aid services and information related to transfer, since WKU-O does not have a permanent financial aid advisor, an issue that was also raised by OCTC Advisor 2 and WKU-O Advisor 1. Instead of maintaining a financial aid officer at WKU-O, a financial aid advisor from the Bowling Campus visits twice a month, which the advisors at OCTC and WKU-O expressed as an issue for some of the jointly-admitted students, and transfer students in

general, who have had pressing financial aid concerns. Student 18 shared his frustrations over the absence of financial aid services:

The advisors at WKU-O know a lot about classes that transfer and advising, but not a lot about financial aid, and that hurt me. I was working a lot last semester, and I had to drop a class that I fell behind in. I told [WKU-O advisor] I needed to drop, but she said you can drop at any time. So, I wait a few weeks until our next advising appointment to drop it, and then I got a \$2500 bill for the course. I have to pay the money back before I can get financial aid again. I mean, she should have known about that. Now I have to wait to take classes until I can pay it. That probably wouldn't have happened at WKU in Bowling Green.

Student 18's perception that financial aid mistakes never happen at the Bowling Green campus is misguided, yet he is convinced that extending financial aid services at WKU-O might improve the delivery of accurate information to the joint-admissions student.

Furthermore, the most pressing concern as expressed by the advisors was the lack of awareness of the joint-admissions program among potential transfer students at OCTC. Each advisor expressed concern that not enough students know about the unique transfer opportunity and that the visibility of the program is limited. OCTC Advisor 2 asserted "We could do a better job telling the students what joint admissions can do for them. Some feel like they cannot be successful. We need to show them that they can be successful in a four-year school. Then joint admissions would really take off." OCTC Advisor 2 mentioned that oftentimes, students are only told about the joint-admissions opportunity when it seems they are interested in transferring to WKU-O. OCTC Advisor

2 also reminisced about a promotional billboard used to market joint admissions a few years ago:

I remember a few years ago there was a billboard just off of the on-ramp on the bypass you take to get to the campuses on New Hartford Road. It had a picture of cookies and milk, with a plus sign between them. The caption read ‘OCTC and WKU-O just go together.’ We need to do more of that. What happened to that?

Both senior leaders also acknowledged the lack of awareness of the joint-admissions program. The WKU-O Senior Leader stated:

They don’t know what they don’t know. Associate of Arts and Associate of Science graduates . . . how many stop with the associate? How valuable is an associate degree? Why would you stop? We have to do a better job of reaching these students. How do we get them? What are they doing?

The WKU-O Senior Leader perceived an inherent logic in pursuing the joint-admissions program to the advantage of the student and found it perplexing that they wouldn’t pursue the opportunity if they knew it existed.

In addition, the student interview participants were asked to explain how they learned about the joint-admissions program. Eight students, or 33%, reported learning about the joint-admissions program while seeking services in the OCTC transfer center. Six students, or 25%, learned about the joint-admissions program from emails sent to their OCTC student email account sent from the OCTC transfer center staff. Four students, or 16.7%, reported learning about the joint-admissions program from OCTC faculty while either in class or through advising sessions. Four students, or 16.7%, reported learning about the joint-admissions program from WKU-O advising staff

presentations at the OCTC college success course large group meetings. Finally, two students, or 8%, learned about the joint-admissions program from flyers posted on the OCTC main campus. Student 1 offered the following:

I learned about joint admissions from [OCTC faculty member]. He teaches over at WKU-O sometimes and he talks about joint admissions in class. I have had a lot of classes with him, and he is my advisor. Three other girls in my classes also did joint admissions because of [OCTC faculty member]. We have sort of formed our own little study group because we all take the same classes together.

Student 1 reported learning about joint admissions from an OCTC faculty member, bypassed the OCTC transfer center completely, and went straight to WKU-O upon the advice of the OCTC faculty member. Student 8 also shared the fact that her OCTC advisor had an extensive knowledge of WKU-O transfer issues:

I moved here from Nebraska and OCTC is highly regarded by the family I have here. I told [OCTC faculty advisor] at our first advising meeting that I wanted to get a bachelor's degree in social work. He pulled up the WKU-O social work academic plan and wrote out all of the courses I would need. That really gave me confidence. He even told me who to go see at WKU-O when the time came to transfer so I did.

Other students did not have such a close relationship with OCTC faculty but still reported receiving transfer support and information from WKU-O. Student 7 shared the following experience:

I never met with an OCTC advisor ever. I never knew him. I emailed him. But [WKU-O Advisor 1 and WKU-O Advisor 2] were the ones that told me which classes I needed to take at OCTC for middle grades education at WKU-O . . . I switched majors three times, and they helped me decide what to do. They helped me get to where I am.

Student 7 also complimented the support mechanisms in place through joint admissions, noting that “Anytime I needed help, I had it,” thus indicating that the student received the information she needed to be successful. However, the WKU-O Senior Leader also raised issues surrounding misadvising at OCTC as a barrier to the joint-admissions success and charged, “I don’t think some of the faculty at the community college realize that more credit hours aren’t good for a transfer student . . . but WKU-O can’t go before faculty and say ‘You aren’t advising the students right.’” Both leaders identified the large number of credits students transferred in from OCTC as a potential obstacle to student success and the critical role played by faculty in influencing student decisions to pursue a bachelor’s degree. Yet, it is important to note that in the case of Student 7, she admitted having changed her major three times. It is possible that since she complained of never having met an advisor, she received advising services at OCTC in the admission center of the campus where students must go who are waiting to be assigned a new advisor after a major change. Students may also enroll themselves in classes they do not need, fail to attend advising sessions, and ignore the advice from their advisors; in those cases, it is not that the students are not getting the information they require for transfer success, it is that they are simply not making use of it.

## **Transfer as Prominent in the Mission of Both Institutions**

The fifth and final component of Handel’s transfer-affirming culture was the prominent presence of transfer in the mission of both the two-year and four-year institution. Within the Joint-Admissions Agreement, transfer was identified as an essential part of each institution’s mission and vision. The concluding statement of the agreement declared:

This agreement will allow for the deeper alignment of policies and procedures, providing seamless transitions for students consistent with the missions of both institutions. Collaboration between the institutions shall be based in a climate of trust and goodwill, with the goal of furthering innovation, best practices, and the general welfare of our students and communities we serve (p. 5).

Seamless transfer was emphasized here as central to the operation of joint admissions and was specifically correlated to cooperation and policy alignment between the institutions. The spirit of collaboration and assurances of consistency and uniformity of a joint-admissions policy between the institutions were articulated as existing primarily for the benefit of the student.

However, one of the divergent attributes of the OCTC and WKU-O relationship, which emerged from the interviews with the senior leaders, is the contrast of the three-prong mission of OCTC with that of WKU-O’s “existing for transfer” as described by the WKU-O Senior Leader. “There are three legs to the OCTC mission—career technical education, customized training, and transfer,” as described by the OCTC Senior Leader. Both senior leaders embraced the fact that OCTC does not exist solely for transfer, yet WKU-O’s exclusive purpose is to provide a local pathway to the baccalaureate. The

OCTC Senior Leader was quick to explain that OCTC has a strong relationship with regional technical training initiatives that are considered just as important as transfer initiatives. The WKU-O Senior Leader offered that as a regional campus, WKU-O's purpose is to offer local students a path toward baccalaureate completion. Transfer is not only central to the mission—it is the primary objective. WKU-O's location across the street from OCTC is compelling enough as physical evidence of a transfer-centered mission, and this observation was made by both senior leaders, as well as several students in the study.

In addition, while WKU-O advisors complimented the OCTC efforts to encourage transfer, both of the OCTC advisors declared that OCTC does not do enough to encourage transfer. OCTC Advisor 1 stated:

There may be a mindset or culture in the area that technical students do not want to seek a bachelor's degree. We need to educate them on what a bachelor's degree will do for them in advancing their careers. High-level management requires this. But some students think "I can't transfer, I am in a technical program." We have to stop this thinking.

WKU-O Advisor 2 shared that KCTCS as a whole does not value or emphasize transfer like it should and charged that OCTC values transfer more so than other sister institutions in the system. However, WKU-O Advisor 2 also noted that OCTC is better than WKU-O when it comes to communicating with business leaders about the training and education needs of the community and suggested that doing so might assist in the growth of joint admissions. OCTC Advisor 1 also addressed the needs of the community as a growth opportunity and stated, "Part of our mission is to enhance our community,

and our partnership with WKU-O makes it possible to do that. This is what is best for the students, so we should be developing based on what the community needs.” Transfer is certainly part of the mission at OCTC, but at WKU-O, transfer is the mission.

### **Research Questions**

After applying each of the components of Handel’s framework to the datasets synthesized for this case study, which included the *Joint-Admissions Agreement*, semi-structured interviews, and statistical data, I used my test of the theoretical framework to determine responses to each of the established research questions.

RQ1: Does/how does the joint-admissions relationship between Owensboro Community and Technical College and Western Kentucky University-Owensboro foster a transfer-affirming culture?

According to the findings in this study through the application of Handel’s theoretical framework, I determined there is indeed a transfer-affirming culture between OCTC and WKU-O. However, the transfer-affirming culture is not necessarily dependent on the joint-admissions program exclusively, as the joint-admissions program was but one factor that contributed to the cultivation of the transfer-affirming culture. The spirit of cooperation was fostered by the development of joint admissions, but the joint-admissions program alone was not as relevant to the overall OCTC and WKU-O relationship. This study confirmed that non-jointly-admitted students receive services and support similar to the jointly-admitted students, which may account for the similar findings in the student statistical data, where the performance of non-jointly-admitted and jointly-admitted students were compared. The frequent, strategic placement of WKU-O advisors at the OCTC transfer center may have been initiated for the purposes of serving



joint-admissions students, but the presence benefits all potential OCTC transfers to WKU-O.

As presented throughout this chapter, the application of each of the components of Handel's framework to the OCTC and WKU-O joint-admissions relationship offered evidence to support the existence of the transfer-affirming culture. This was achieved through the confirmation that transfer is a shared responsibility between the institutions, as the bond between institutions was found to be strong and often described as a partnership. Students, advising staff, and senior leadership described the institutions as functioning as one for the benefit of the student. Baccalaureate attainment is encouraged and expected at both institutions through the establishment of the joint-admissions program, which revealed both institution's commitment to increasing the number of bachelor's degree earners in the Owensboro area. Academic support also manifested itself in the relationship, as students reported receiving what they require to be successful in their course work, and statistical evidence suggested comparable academic performance of joint-admissions transfers with that of non-joint-admissions transfers. In terms of maximizing social capital, which students obtained from transfer preparedness, students exhibited either a decent measure of confidence in their transfer knowledge or knew exactly where to go to get their answers. And finally, transfer is embedded in the mission of both institutions, though featured most prominently in WKU-O. OCTC was found to embrace transfer as one significant component of the institutional mission, but for WKU-O, transfer was the *raison d'être*.

RQ2: Do/how do the advising staff and leadership at Owensboro Community and Technical College and Western Kentucky University-Owensboro encourage and contribute to a transfer-affirming culture?

The advising staff at both institutions encourage and contribute to a transfer-affirming culture through the forging of relationships, which often contribute to student success. The most frequently cited attribute of the joint-admissions relationship between OCTC and WKU-O in this study was the quality and impact of the personal relationships among the staff that serve the students but also the staff interaction with the students. The senior leaders at both campuses offered numerous examples of the close friendships that have emerged between the two institutions as evidence of the impact and benefit these relationships have on students. In addition, the frequent presence of WKU-O staff in the OCTC transfer center, as well as various other events and occasions, increased the visibility of the OCTC and WKU-O relationship for potential transfer students.

The advising staff interviewed for the study also discussed their friendships with each other, and the value of these relationships was not lost on the senior leaders of the study, who offered their awareness of the amicable personal relationships between the staff at the two campuses. The quality of advising personnel, the willingness to work together, the positive atmosphere, and the awareness of the senior leaders of these effective personal and professional relationships indicated their strong contributions to the transfer-affirming culture.

In addition, senior leadership at both institutions were present and played an active role in the monthly *Transfer Taskforce* meetings, identified in the interviews as an opportunity for discussion of transfer strategizing, such as program development,

retention strategies, and planning and coordinating recruitment events. Their role as executives and representatives for their institution's mission and vision was deemed vital to the transfer-affirming culture, though the advising staff and faculty who interact daily with students must ultimately embrace the culture.

Finally, both advising staff and senior leadership possessed a firm grasp of what Owensboro area students require for transfer success and baccalaureate completion. They expressed a solid understanding that most of the students want to be educated in Owensboro and then stay in Owensboro upon graduation. Several students in the study confirmed this perception. Knowing what students need, possessing an awareness of what motivates them, and knowing what is important to them are all essential to developing services and options that encourage baccalaureate completion, and the advising staff and leadership seemed to be keenly aware of each.

RQ3: Do/how do the jointly-admitted students perceive the joint-admissions relationship between Owensboro Community and Technical College and Western Kentucky University-Owensboro as contributing to their success and baccalaureate completion?

Most of the students who participated in the study perceived the joint-admissions relationship between OCTC and WKU-O as contributing to their success and baccalaureate completion. While some students in the study expressed the need to overcome fear and intimidation, every student interviewed in the study communicated his or her ability to do so. Five of the students in the study admitted being intimidated by WKU-O, while Student 21 described her reaction to transfer as "Scared to death." However, in these cases, the students also followed up by

admitting that their fear and apprehension dissipated quickly through the assistance offered by the WKU-O staff and commented on the warm and welcoming nature of the campus.

Nineteen of the students, or 79% of the total number of student interview participants, expressed their appreciation and admiration for faculty and staff at both OCTC and WKU-O. They highly regarded the individuals who helped them and recognized a sincerity and authenticity in their efforts to help students achieve their goals; many were able to name specific people who helped them along the way. Students 1, 8, and 9 provided detailed narrative accounts of the lengths to which OCTC faculty went to assist them in their transfer efforts and the seamless hand-off they experienced to WKU-O. Student 9 added that her advisor at WKU-O remembered where she worked, which impressed the student, and she regarded this personal interest as a major factor in her success. From encouraging and coordinating tutoring, to joint-admissions orientation, to the intrusive advising services—students in the joint-admissions program described themselves as being truly served by both institutions.

Moreover, students in the study perceived a spirit of cooperation between OCTC and WKU-O and regarded it as a source of encouragement. Student 12, an OCTC faculty member, commented on the steady flow of communication between OCTC and WKU-O in terms of advising and student support. Just as stated by the senior leader from WKU-O, through the strong relationships between OCTC and WKU-O, students are given the confidence and courage to go beyond what they thought was possible. Most of the students in my study agreed.

## **Policy versus Implementation**

While the advising staff and senior leadership heralded the benefits of the joint-admissions program, the program has not grown to full potential. As reported, in the previous three academic years, 372 students applied for joint admissions at OCTC and WKU-O, yet 152 chose not to enroll at any WKU campus. Given this relatively small number of applicants, and even smaller number of students who actually pursued transfer at any WKU campus, the data reveal that few students take advantage of the joint-admissions relationship. Even though both senior leaders and all advising staff at both institutions described the OCTC and WKU-O joint-admissions relationship as the best among all WKU regional campuses, the numbers reveal a meager participation rate.

In addition, as reported in Chapter 4, 33% of the students in the study learned about the joint-admissions opportunity through the OCTC transfer center, 25% through emails from OCTC advising staff, 16.7% from OCTC faculty, 16.7% from WKU-O advising staff presentations at OCTC, 8% from flyers on the OCTC campus. The plurality of students in this study discovered joint admissions from visiting the transfer center at OCTC or through receiving informational emails from the transfer center at OCTC. This suggests the active presence of WKU-O at the OCTC transfer center and the efforts of OCTC advising staff there to inform students, either in person at the transfer center or via email. However, based on the findings of this study, recruitment for the joint-admissions program appears to be predominantly through the efforts of the OCTC transfer center. While it is relevant that OCTC does engage other transfer partners and cannot exclusively link to WKU-O, the joint-admissions recruitment efforts as coordinated with WKU-O are not as copious as the agreement suggested.

Furthermore, while OCTC's transfer relationship to WKU-O is not exclusive, it is special, as WKU-O possesses a geographic, relational, and financial advantage to other Owensboro area transfer options. OCTC and WKU-O have a unique relationship where the university sits across the street facing the community college and was strategically placed there for the exclusive purpose of attracting potential baccalaureate completers. Therefore, the transfer relationship is far more intimate than may exist between other institutions.

Moreover, the stated goal of the *Joint-Admissions Agreement* is to improve the number of bachelor's degree earners in the Owensboro area. However, according to the findings in this study, WKU-O has lost students because of limited program offerings. As mentioned, two of the jointly-admitted students who chose not to enroll at WKU-O despite their commitment did so because they wanted to earn a bachelor's degree in nursing, which is not available through WKU-O and would have required attending courses in Bowling Green. Diametrical to this scenario was the information provided by WKU-O Advisor 2 who offered that students will sometimes change their majors to prevent any travel to Bowling Green, thus inviting the possibility that students are earning bachelor's degrees in programs for which they may not have a passion or a sincere interest. However, the common denominator for both situations is that there is a segment of the Owensboro population that will not or cannot travel to Bowling Green to earn a bachelor's degree.

Also, the findings of this study suggest that the extracurricular benefits of being a jointly-admitted student as reported by the advising staff, students, and senior leadership were not as alluring to students as the framers of the *Joint-Admissions Agreement* may

have intended. As explained by OCTC Advisor 2, students at WKU-O rarely have time to attend events on the WKU-O campus, so travel to Bowling Green for an event is deemed an impossibility for many. Of the students interviewed for my study, only two ventured to Bowling Green for athletic events or other activities, or 8%, whereas the majority of the students, 22, or 92%, did not. Based on the data in my study, the jointly-admitted students did not find this feature of the program to be particularly appealing, as recognized by the WKU-O Senior Leader who referred to the privileges as *rarely used*. Again, since many of the Owensboro area students are place-bound, there would be little interest in WKU main campus event attendance, and while this study was not intended to comprehensively research regional campus transfer students' attendance at main campus events, the students in my study were mostly disinterested in this particular facet of the program.

Additionally, students interviewed for the study struggled with embracing an identity as a Hilltopper. WKU-O Advisor 2 insisted that students at WKU-O “don’t feel like Hilltoppers,” yet as cited in Chapter 4, 33.3%, or eight students, claimed to feel like Hilltoppers, but qualified their responses as not in the same vein of a traditional, residential-campus student. Fourteen students, or 58.3%, reported that they did not feel like a Hilltopper in any way, and most of those did not express any sense of relevance to Hilltopper status. While the most pejorative reference to WKU-O was as a *redheaded stepchild of WKU* by Student 15, the majority of the students who did not see themselves as Hilltoppers regarded their bachelor’s degree as a practical need and perceived the WKU-O baccalaureate route as an inexpensive, convenient pathway. For the ones who did ascribe value to being a Hilltopper, the pervasive idea throughout the discussion was that while they regarded themselves as Hilltoppers, they stayed in Owensboro to save

money, and that was most important. These findings suggest that if the joint-admissions program was supposed to make students feel a profound emotional connection to the campus and proudly embrace Hilltopper status to the point of nurturing institutional integration as might happen on the Bowling Green campus, that is not what is taking place according to the majority of students in this study.

Correspondingly, two of the students in the study indicated their perception that there may be a difference in the quality of services offered by WKU-O as compared to the main campus in Bowling Green. Both Students 18 and 24 shared detailed stories about problems they had encountered at WKU-O and concluded their accounts by offering the idea that key to the resolution of the problem was found in Bowling Green, or the perception that in Bowling Green, these types of mistakes would not happen. While the purpose of this study was not to compare student impressions of WKU-O versus WKU, it is relevant to note that some of the students in the study perceived a difference in quality of services of one campus compared to another.

What is also relevant is that the initial plan of joint-admissions program to create a type of two-plus-two approach to the transfer model where students are ideally supposed to take their first two years of college at OCTC and then transfer to WKU-O for their final two years to complete a bachelor's degree does not always occur. In many instances, the joint-admissions relationship fosters swirling transfer, in that even though a student might begin taking classes at WKU-O, he or she may be sent back to OCTC to take prerequisite courses of the 100- and 200-level. This may be necessary in some cases where students, particularly in education programs, might need to be sent back to the community college to complete additional program requirements, even if they have



already earned an associate degree. WKU-O Advisor 1 referred to this as “the walk of shame back to the community college,” as some students have expressed frustration over having to go back to earn prerequisite credit. However, De Los Santos and Sutton (2012) found that swirling students can be successful if the institutions involved are cooperating instead of competing and doing so in an attempt to find the best route to the baccalaureate degree for the student. In the case of OCTC and WKU-O, there is not only the accommodation of swirling transfer, but the encouragement of swirling transfer; according to the findings in this study, this had no negative impact on the success of the students. While students might be discouraged at having to go back to complete courses at OCTC, there is still evidence in this study that the positive relationships between the two institutions are a hallmark of the student perceptions.

While the joint-admissions program is conducive to swirling transfer, it also leads to co-enrollment, since 100- and 200-level courses are not offered at WKU-O, as per the terms of the *Joint-Admissions Agreement*. Students might be simultaneously enrolled in one or more classes at each institution, again with the goal of satisfying program requirements or prerequisites. Crisp (2013) found that co-enrolled students had higher GPAs than those who were not co-enrolled, suggesting that the co-enrolled students were advised to do so, engaged the process of achieving their educational goals, and followed through. Co-enrolled students, as is suggested by Crisp, are being directed to the swiftest path to a bachelor’s degree. Wang and McCready (2013) also found that co-enrolled students earned bachelor’s degrees at a faster pace than those who were not co-enrolled. Both Crisp and Wang and McCready found that persistence rates and baccalaureate attainment rates were higher among co-enrolled students. Four of the students in my

study had been co-enrolled at some point in time throughout their joint-admissions experience, which they conveyed as contributing to a greater feeling that OCTC and WKU-O function as one unit. Co-enrollment may be an unintended result of the initial *Joint-Admissions Agreement*, but there is no evidence to suggest it hinders baccalaureate completion.

Overall, based on the results of my study, what is perhaps the most relevant point of divergence of policy, as compared to implementation, is the discovery that the joint-admissions program does not provide incentives substantial enough to garner wide participation. As cited by WKU-O Advisor 1, there is no distinction made between jointly-admitted and non-jointly-admitted students when it comes to advising services and admitted, “We have not pursued the identity that comes along with being a joint-admissions student.” Based on the findings in my study, both groups of students seem to get the same measure of care and attention, which is also reflected in the statistical data presented. There were no statistically significant differences in GPA, persistence, associate degree, or baccalaureate attainment rates between the jointly-admitted and non-jointly-admitted students. What is suggested here is that because the same services are rendered, jointly-admitted and non-jointly-admitted students often perform similarly. If policymakers intended to create an exclusive, distinctive experience for the jointly-admitted students, the findings of this study did not confirm the existence of such an experience.

Conversely, the joint-admissions experience has measured up to established policy intentions in the coordination of advising efforts. According to the advisors in this study, pre-transfer advising and team advising takes place often in the OCTC transfer

center. Cooperative advising efforts have evolved over time which students reported utilizing frequently, which also strengthens the nature of the partnership. In sum, the joint-admissions relationship has residual benefits for non-jointly-admitted students, in that the presence of WKU-O, advising services, and other opportunities for interaction inadvertently help non-jointly-admitted students, and therefore contribute to a transfer-affirming culture.

### **Summary**

The data in this case study were selected to achieve saturation to gain an understanding of the *Joint-Admissions Agreement* between OCTC and WKU-O. The WKU Institutional Review Board approved all components of the study. The Office of Institutional Research generated statistical data of student performance and provided student contact information for the purposes of coordinating interviews.

All data were analyzed through the application of Handel's transfer-affirming framework, including the *Joint-Admissions Agreement*, semi-structured interviews, and statistical data. The findings of the study confirmed the existence of a transfer-affirming culture through the influence of the joint-admissions relationship, while also affirming the essential role of advising staff and leadership as both encouraging and contributing to the transfer-affirming culture. Finally, student perceptions also confirmed that the joint-admissions program contributed to their success and baccalaureate completion. Chapter 5 offers a discussion of the findings presented, including recommendations for practice and recommendations for future research.

## **CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION**

### **Introduction**

The *Joint-Admissions Agreement* between OCTC and WKU-O was the focus of this case study, with the purpose being to explore the characteristics of the relationship between the two institutions to determine the existence of a transfer-affirming culture. In Chapter 4, I concluded that after a careful analysis of data through the application of Handel's framework, a transfer-affirming culture does exist between OCTC and WKU-O. I also confirmed the prominent role of advising staff and leadership in encouraging the joint-admissions transfer relationship and affirmed the positive student perceptions that the joint-admissions partnership contributes to baccalaureate attainment. However, I also determined that the transfer-affirming culture is not necessarily dependent on the existence of the joint-admissions program. In Chapter 5, I have included a discussion on the study's findings as related to the literature discussed in Chapter 2 with Handel's transfer-affirming culture as the organizational approach, recommendations for practice, recommendations for further research, and a summary.

### **Discussion of Findings**

#### **Transfer as a Shared Responsibility**

The indication that transfer is ideally a shared responsibility between institutions is an underlying, connecting theme of the *Joint-Admissions Agreement* and throughout the document, there was a clear recognition that maintenance and development of the program is to be the responsibility of both institutions. Kisker's (2007) study also emphasized the importance of executive support for transfer agreements and noted the

value of equal partnerships in transfer agreements, where an equal partnership is regarded as necessary for a functional transfer relationship. The agreement also included a statement confirming the provisions for data interchange between the institutions, including student enrollment information. Advising is regarded in the document, and by the advising staff and senior leadership, as a particularly relevant shared responsibility, with an inference to pre-transfer and joint-advising as essential to the advancement of the program. As indicated by Fink and Jenkins (2017), the value of coordinated advising efforts is one of the fundamentals necessary for a successful partnership. Flaga (2006) recommended that to foster student success, an environment must exist where community college advisors can feel comfortable calling the university advising staff and asking them transfer questions on behalf of the students. Many students in the study reported OCTC faculty and staff advisors working efficiently with staff at WKU-O to provide students with the information necessary required to achieve their goals.

Furthermore, senior leadership, staff, and students revealed a prominent recognition that there is a strong cooperative relationship between OCTC and WKU-O. There is a partnership in existence that each of the interview participants were able to both identify and discuss at length. Each person interviewed for this study identified OCTC and WKU-O as working together for transfer, rather than engaging in competition, which is embodied in the statement from WKU-O Advisor 1 who noted, “Both campuses are on the same team.” While it is true that some students expressed moments of frustration, such as was the case with isolated financial aid issues and difficulties surrounding major changes, none of the students in the study reported being told by anyone at either institution “Go ask OCTC” or “Go ask WKU-O.” This is significant in

that some of the community college transfer literature suggests that it is not uncommon for community college advisors to send students to the university to get their transfer questions answered (Gard, 2012; Ellis, 2013; Robinson, 2015). However, the situation was different for the students in my study, as the majority of the students who participated in the interviews regarded the advising staff at both institutions as eager to do what was necessary to help in the transfer transition.

Handel emphasized the importance of cooperation between institutions as an essential characteristic of a transfer-affirming culture and offered this observation of community college and university relationships:

Both types of institutions are inextricably linked because students attending a community college must transfer to a four-year institution to earn the baccalaureate degree. Thus, the ways in which community colleges and four-year institutions work with one another has profound consequences for student success and for education policymakers trying to accommodate an increasingly large number of students who want to attend college. (p. 413)

The spirit of cooperation is copious enough to where both senior leaders in the study offered references to OCTC and WKU-O as functioning as one entity, which served as a prime example of Handel's description of shared responsibility. Additionally, WKU-O advisors also lead campus tours of OCTC for high school groups, which is significant in that the high school students are already being conditioned to visualize OCTC and WKU-O as a functioning unit. A scenario where four-year college ambassadors are comfortable and close enough to lead campus tours of a neighboring two-year college is rare in the literature and served as a striking example of the

cooperative relationship between OCTC and WKU-O. Yet, my study did not reveal any efforts for high school recruitment for the joint-admissions program. However, the value of the university presence on the community college campus in cultivating a positive environment for transfer was reinforced in the literature (Arguijo & Howard, 2010; Gose, 2017; Kisker, 2007; Mobelini, 2013).

Moreover, students often referred to their OCTC and WKU-O advisors as mentors and friends, often very comfortably called them by their first names, and admitted to having personal contact information to expedite communication. Webb (2014), whose study centered on advising staff, argued that if a transfer relationship is to be successful, the university must fully embrace a policy of “communication, care and concern” (p. 625), while the focus for the community college should be “personal relationships, support, environment, organization, and senior leadership” (p. 625). Webb’s observations coincide with the results of this study, as the advising staff at OCTC and WKU-O acknowledged an amicable relationship between the two schools and cited occasions where personal relationships benefited the institutions. The fact that senior leadership offered full support of the transfer relationship is also a relevant parallel, as both senior leaders who participated in this study were among the founders of the *Joint-Admissions Agreement* between OCTC and WKU-O.

In addition, the shared responsibility for a positive transfer experience extended also to the cooperative efforts to advise students in accordance with the 100- and 200-level offerings at OCTC and upper level courses at WKU-O. In Senie’s (2016) study, she discovered that the university faculty often regarded the community college education as inferior, which stands in stark contrast to the transfer situation between OCTC and WKU-

O. In my study, students were encouraged by WKU-O advising staff to take the classes at the community college instead of WKU-O to save the students tuition dollars. This advising strategy is also in accordance with the details of the *Joint-Admissions Agreement*, which restricted WKU-O from offering 100- and 200-level courses in order to prevent any enrollment competition with OCTC. Through this arrangement as presented in the data, the two institutions work together to provide a balanced role in educating the student. The responsibility for the success of the student is in reality *shared* between OCTC and WKU-O. Handel summarized the importance of cooperation as ultimately the most beneficial for students in transfer relationships:

When we understand that two and four-year institutions are important contributors to the transfer capital necessary for student success, as well as for creating cultures that see transfer as expected and attainable, the potentialities of community college students are better realized. Second, establishing a transfer-affirming climate obligates two- and four-year institutions to see transfer as a shared responsibility such that student failure at any point along the transfer pathway should alert higher education leaders about possible barriers emanating from one or both of their institutions. Finally, the transfer-affirming culture provides a framework for researchers to investigate the optimal structures that may advance student achievement and, in doing so, may identify programs, services and policies that support this essential academic pathway. (pp. 416-417)

However, the joint-admissions program adds to the positive transfer environment—it is not the central focus of the transfer relationship. The presence of a transfer-affirming culture is not exclusively the result of the joint-admissions program.



Rather, what is evident from this study is that the transfer affirming culture may have emanated from joint admissions, but is maintained and strengthened by personal interaction, communication, and cooperation between institutions.

### **Baccalaureate Attainment is Encouraged and Expected**

Mosholder and Zirkle (2007) affirmed that “For both liberal arts and vocational students, open access to community college has prepared hundreds of thousands of students for four-year institutions who would not otherwise have had an opportunity” (p. 733). For Student 21 in my study, not only did her successful pursuit of an associate degree give her the confidence to earn a bachelor’s, she decided to continue on to a master’s program. In her case, the path began at the community college and gradually evolved into the pursuit of a graduate degree, which was something she had never anticipated. The affordability of the tuition at WKU-O as compared to the tuition of the other local private four-year options makes the goal of earning a bachelor’s degree more attainable and made more so by linking the first two years of baccalaureate work to the community college. In essence, the transfer relationship between OCTC and WKU-O makes it the most inexpensive in-town option for baccalaureate degree attainment and cost is deemed a variable in degree completion (Fink & Jenkins, 2016).

In addition to tuition dollars, the geographic location of WKU-O is another cost-related advantage that potentially contributes to baccalaureate attainment. Porchea et al.’s (2010) study referenced the *location effect*, whereby students who lived closer to the college performed better than those who did not, thus geographic location turned out to be a significant predictor variable of student success. Many of the students in my study were place-bound, meaning that they reported that their personal circumstances,

including income limitations, family responsibilities, and employment, did not allow for them to travel outside of Owensboro to pursue their education. These situations are perhaps different facets of the location effect in that the students were seeking education, yet their pursuit was ultimately limited to the Owensboro area. However, both in my study and Porchea et al.'s study, the location of the institution was relevant to student goal achievement. Fink and Jenkins (2016) supported this concept with the assertion "How successful community college students are in transferring may be related to the proximity of the four-year institutions" (p. 11).

While location is a key element in understanding the culture of baccalaureate attainability, associate degree attainment is regarded as a milestone achievement for many transfer students and deemed the first step towards the ultimate goal of earning a bachelor's degree. As noted by the WKU-O Senior Leader, the community college is the gateway to the baccalaureate degree, as the students realize that given their success in earning an associate degree, many of the students begin to visualize a bachelor's degree as within their reach. My findings were the opposite of those in Cejda and Kaylor's (2001) study, where many of the community college transfer students in their study who decided to earn a bachelor's degree abandoned their pursuit of an associate degree. According to the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, which relied on IPEDS data, in 2014-2015 there were 1,845,497 bachelor's degree earners, and of those recipients, 349,211 had earned an associate degree prior to the bachelor's, or 18.9%. This number has grown steadily up from 17.8% in 2011-2012. As reported in Chapter 4, of the students in the established statistical sample, 69.1% of the jointly-admitted students earned associate degrees while 30.9% did not, and 74% of the non-jointly-admitted

students earned associate degrees while 26% did not. The students in my study earned associate degrees at a much higher rate than the national average as reported in the National Student Clearinghouse study, though data sets are stark in contrast because the students in my study were confined to the OCTC and WKU-O campuses, comparing jointly-admitted and non-jointly-admitted students. Yet, the value of earning the associate degree to many of the students is not quantifiable—rather, as suggested by the WKU-O Senior Leader and Student 21, it may encourage the students that they have what it takes to pursue the bachelor’s degree that awaits them across the street.

In addition, baccalaureate attainment for technical faculty at OCTC is perhaps one of the most unique results of the joint-admissions relationship between OCTC and WKU-O. As reported by OCTC Advisor 2, two of the full-time faculty within the skilled-trade department of the technical division at OCTC are taking classes at WKU-O and on track to earn a baccalaureate degree. Student 12, one of these full-time faculty earning a bachelor’s degree at WKU-O, did so through the joint-admissions program. Noting the ease and transferability of courses, Student 12 considered the program to be the only viable pathway for a bachelor’s degree, having already earned an associate degree and accumulated years of experience in skilled industrial labor. Fincher et al. (2016) stressed the importance of accepting as many college credits as possible from transfer students, particularly those with associate degrees, since the overall goal of completion is far easier to attain and benefits both the student and the institution. Additionally, Fink and Jenkins (2016) reported that 29% of community college students earned an occupational certificate or associate degree before transferring to a four-year school. Between OCTC and WKU-O, more evidence to support a strong credit-transfer relationship exists in the

fact that some baccalaureate programs at WKU-O are designed to attract Associate of Applied Science graduates, who are not often courted for transfer, such as Systems Management and Organizational Leadership.

### **Academic Support**

Handel's framework deemed academic support to be the type of aid that is designed to assist students in successfully completing their coursework and my study revealed that such support exists between OCTC and WKU-O. As was found in Aulck and West's (2017) study, where lack of academic preparation was not a factor contributing to community college transfer attrition rates, none of the students who participated in my study reported inadequate academic preparation for classes at WKU-O. OCTC and WKU-O advisors, students, and senior leadership described academic preparation and support as a strong component of the transfer relationship.

Most of the students in my study reported being academically prepared for transfer, which is similar to other studies that have produced findings of high performing transfer students (De Los Santos & Sutton, 2012). As the OCTC Senior Leader indicated, joint admissions often helps students "realize their full potential" and inspires them to reach for more as the students feel academically prepared for transfer. However, my study's findings stood contrary to the findings in Laanan's (2007) study, where community college transfer students felt underprepared and saw their GPA drop as they transitioned from community college to university.

### **Maximization of Social Capital through Transfer Knowledge**

Social capital was the most elusive component of Handel's transfer framework, and in certain ways was the least applicable to the joint-admissions relationship between OCTC and WKU-O, given the specific definition offered by Handel. It is also relevant to

note that Handel, in the creation of his framework, was ideally focused on student transfer from a two-year institution to a four-year main campus institution where it may be argued that social capital would be more relevant. Within the applied theoretical framework of a transfer-affirming culture, Handel defined social capital as:

The accumulation of knowledge and skills that are essential and unique to the transfer process. For example, transfer students are faced with an extremely challenging task of preparing themselves academically for a four-year institution. Unlike freshmen students, who are required to complete a largely standardized series of courses and admission tests (e.g., SAT®), transfer students must prepare for several possible four-year institutions, all of which may require different requirements for the same major. Moreover, these students also must gain access to and become conversant with course and program articulation agreements, sometimes for multiple institutions, to determine how much credit a four-year institution will grant to them for the courses they complete at a community college. (p. 415)

Joint-admissions students, which were the focus of this study, were for the most part not engaged in *transfer-shopping* or multiple institution *transfer-research* as described in Handel's framework, as the agreement affirmed a commitment from an OCTC student to WKU-O for a majority of students interviewed. However, for those that do, the burden of transfer institution research would be a daunting task for many OCTC students, thus encouraging the exploration of the conveniently located and inexpensively priced WKU-O experience. No doubt the information necessary for success would be different for the students in my study had they transferred to WKU in Bowling Green.

Succinctly put, the social capital as defined by Handel is the transfer knowledge students gather through their experiences and the necessary information arrived in many forms for the students in my study.

In addition, Levinson (2005) noted that community colleges are suitable places for students to accumulate social capital as related to transfer, yet many of the students in my study emphasized the joint role played by OCTC and WKU-O in providing essential transfer information. Handel emphasized these types of coordinated efforts as central to student success:

Given that students attending community colleges are often those least likely to possess the information that is necessary to make the transition to a four-year institution, the responsibility falls to two- and four-year institutions to fill the gap; that is, to provide the essential cultural capital that they lack. Yet the transfer process may require more than just generalized college knowledge. If two- and four-year institutions represent distinct and sometimes oppositional academic cultures, as I argue here, then students must possess specific kinds of knowledge and insight to traverse the two- to four-year institutional chasm. (pp. 414-415)

Handel argued that the burden of administering information should not be on one college. As presented through my study, OCTC and WKU-O do not possess what Handel calls *oppositional cultures* and instead frequently coordinate efforts to serve students. The diametric opposition that often exists between institutions is eliminated in the form of the type of two-plus-two partnership, which has been cultivated through preserving 100- and 200-level courses as the exclusive domain of the community college. Given that WKU-O's mission as a regional campus, located across the street from OCTC, is existing for

transfer, there is no social stigma associated with transfer among the students as indicated in other studies (Lopez & Jones, 2016), as the students of WKU-O are transfer students. The students in my study either reported having a network of people to consult to get their questions answered, or they knew which resources to access in order to get the answers for themselves (Aslam et. al., 2013; Fuller, 2013).

### **Transfer as Prominent in the Mission of Both Institutions**

According to Handel, for a transfer-affirming culture to exist, transfer must be at the center of the mission of both the two-year and four-year institution. Transfer must be an inescapable part of the college culture. A carefully articulated mission statement, as embraced by all institutions, theoretically serves as the motivating purpose of the institution. Handel argued, “At issue, then, is not that well-prepared students excel at community colleges—indeed, their success supports the viability of the community college transfer mission” (p. 410). From this, Handel referenced the value of an institutional mission placing a priority on transfer.

However, faculty and staff must be willing to embrace a transfer mission. Missions can be articulated, but it is ultimately up to the college faculty and staff to carry out the mission (Handel, 2011). Just as in Wang’s (2012) and Cejda and Kaylor’s (2001) study, faculty and staff possess great influence over the formation of a transfer culture, and the students in my study communicated the value of the role played by staff and faculty in creating a positive transfer experience. My findings parallel that of a study conducted by Lopez and Jones (2016), where students regarded interaction with faculty as essential to their success and the study concluded that faculty and staff interaction

served as the greatest predictor of student success. For the students in my study, they benefited from the faculty and staff who embraced the transfer mission.

### **Recommendations for Practice**

The decade-old *Joint-Admissions Agreement* must be reviewed and revised for the transfer relationship to achieve full potential. Given the findings that the jointly-admitted students between OCTC and WKU-O do not have much advantage over that non-jointly-admitted transfer students, in order for the program to expand and thrive, there must be the cultivation of a palpable joint-admissions identity. If the intent is to grow the program to encourage transfer, the program must offer benefits exceeding those that are already provided to non-jointly-admitted transfer students. The hardest work of all, as articulated in the literature, which is building trust and cooperation between institutions, has already been established between OCTC and WKU-O. Enhancing the joint-admissions experience between two institutions with an amicable relationship should not be an overwhelming task.

One of the changes that might improve the joint-admissions experience is the formation of a joint-admissions cohort college success course, to be taught at the OCTC campus by WKU-O staff. This was one of the primary recommendations from OCTC Senior Leader 1 as deemed necessary in improving the joint-admissions experience and providing jointly-admitted students with the opportunity to forge a relationship with WKU-O as early as possible. The formation of the joint-admissions college success course could be the start of a major shift in the joint-admissions experience.

In addition, jointly-admitted students might be organized into joint-admissions cohorts within required general education courses or organized into a type of learning



community at the community college, established to develop a *joint-admissions status* and subsequent advantage (Fink & Inkelas, 2015). Since some of the students in the study recognized and valued that they engaged and interacted with fellow students in the IVS courses at WKU-O, getting an early start in forging a relationship with other jointly-admitted students might improve their experience by developing friendships and peer mentoring relationships (Colvin & Ashman, 2010).

Moreover, advisors, whether they be faculty or staff at OCTC working in coordination with WKU-O advising staff, might develop a notification system that the student is jointly-admitted, and therefore the advising strategies can be tailored to fit transfer needs as early as possible. While many students who participated in the interview portion of the study expressed frequently visiting the OCTC transfer center for advising, these students are also assigned faculty advisors at OCTC with whom they might not interact. A notification system would raise an awareness of joint-admissions status and require OCTC faculty to improve their transfer knowledge to better serve the students. This strategy may be supplemented by the assigning of joint advisors from the WKU-O campus to jointly-admitted students, intended to work with OCTC faculty and staff to offer intrusive pre-transfer advising. Boswell (2004) described a similar practice with the Rutgers joint-admissions program, whereby local community colleges offered pre-transfer advising through which each joint-admissions student at the community college is assigned an advisor from Rutgers. According to Boswell, the advisor from Rutgers assists the community college advisor to provide an optimal pre-transfer advising experience for the student. While at OCTC, jointly-admitted students have advising services available from WKU-O, but they are not necessarily always assigned a specific

advisor from WKU-O. If implemented at OCTC, this service could be restricted to joint-admissions student only to help cultivate a more palpable joint-admissions experience and attract more students to the program.

Additionally, since most of the students who participated in the semi-structured interviews in this study were place-bound, meaning that they were unable to leave Owensboro to pursue a baccalaureate degree and intended to stay in the Owensboro area upon graduation, the bachelor's degree offerings might need to be expanded to fit the needs of the community. As the WKU-O Senior Leader described, the students are familiar with careers in the medical field and education, but there are other career paths of which the students may be unaware. There are also baccalaureate programs that could be developed to accommodate and sustain local economic growth. OCTC and WKU-O might coordinate efforts with leaders in local business and industry and engage in program development that might draw students to new and relevant baccalaureate degree plans. If the policy objective is to grow the program and increase baccalaureate attainment in a way that will further develop the community, as is stated in the agreement, then the programs offered at WKU-O should be expanded to include those most sought-after in the Owensboro area.

The cultivation of a more robust joint-admissions program might stimulate baccalaureate attainment specifically for a substantial segment of the student population who intends to remain in the Owensboro area. If the joint-admissions program goal is to increase the number of bachelor's degree holders in the Owensboro area, then the designing of programs inspired by the needs of the Owensboro area seems to be the most logical approach. Technical students might be a particularly ripe segment of the student

population to target for joint admissions, especially if the growth of baccalaureate programs at WKU-O are tied to community growth needs in local industry. The targeting of technical students might be the key to expanding enrollment in the joint-admissions program as well as the value of the program.

Furthermore, recruitment strategies need to be improved. Many of the students who participated in interviews in my study were recruited for joint admissions at the OCTC transfer center. However, assertive recruitment strategies at regional high schools might be a more effective approach. Advisors in my study discussed coordinating recruitment efforts with OCTC; however, targeting high schools in a shared effort to recruit for the joint-admissions program might result in improved enrollment. Marketing the joint-admissions program as a convenient, inexpensive, high-quality educational opportunity would likely attract students and garner the attention of parents who may be concerned about the rising cost of higher education.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

As WKU has other regional campuses, my study might be replicated to assess the joint-admissions experience on those campuses. Each of the joint-admissions initiatives might also be placed under the test of Handel's transfer-affirming culture. With the steady collection of joint-admissions data, WKU would have an opportunity to understand how best to serve the communities where the regional campuses reside.

Moreover, the concept of joint admissions as a pathway to increase baccalaureate attainment has not been extensively studied within the literature. What might help policymakers better understand the effectiveness of joint admissions would be a longitudinal study conducted between joint-admissions partners where the performance

measures of joint-admissions and non-joint-admissions student would be compared. A random sample of both student groups followed throughout their post-secondary pathway from two-year to four-year institution might provide deeper insights into the impact of the joint-admissions program. Student performance measures, such as the ones used for this study, which included GPA, persistence, and degree attainment rates, would offer a clearer picture of the joint-admissions experience versus that of a regular transfer student.

Finally, a comprehensive study of baccalaureate attainment in the Owensboro area might also be conducted to determine if the creation of the joint-admissions program did in fact lead to an increase in the number of bachelor's degrees in the Owensboro area. The study could be designed to determine bachelor's degree attainment rates in the Owensboro area and include reports of where the credential was earned. The study could be bounded by time, with the boundary placed from 2009, when the *Joint-Admissions Agreement* between OCTC and WKU-O was signed, to the present. This would provide an indication of whether or not the mission of increasing baccalaureate attainment for the Owensboro area has been successful.

### **Conclusion**

Joint-admissions, as a transfer pathway, shows great promise. As suggested in the study, joint admissions has the potential to simplify the transfer experience for students. The case of OCTC and WKU-O is a unique situation, where the community college happens to be situated close to a small, four-year regional campus. This study determined that the *Joint-Admissions Agreement* between OCTC and WKU-O does not singularly constitute the existence of a transfer-affirming culture, although it was a factor; the

relationship forged through the faculty and staff at both institutions is perhaps the most influential factor in the formation of a transfer-affirming culture.

Furthermore, while joint admissions may be a valuable transfer mechanism, it is not the exclusive remedy to all transfer issues. Joint-admissions might be most accurately defined as a journey rather than a destination, as it serves as a vehicle for establishing a cooperative relationship that can be replicated by other institutions. The joint-admissions program, in order to work the way it is designed, will only serve students attending institutions who are willing to cooperate rather than compete.

Finally, this study has also reinforced the profound importance of the presence of the WKU regional campus in Owensboro. The findings in this case study have confirmed one of the universal maxims of history—geography is destiny. For many students, leaving the Owensboro area is not possible, entertained, or even desirable. Therefore, the regional campus experience is *just enough* university for them and serves as the only means by which a bachelor's degree, or higher, can be attained. Regional campuses, in conjunction with local community colleges, have the opportunity to refine the joint-admissions program and develop it into an ideal and effective educational experience for students.

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## APPENDIX A

### Interview Protocol for Joint-Admissions Students

1. Are you aware of the joint-admissions program between OCTC and WKU-O? If so, how did you come to know about the joint admissions opportunity? What is your impression of the joint-admissions program?
2. Describe the application process at both OCTC and WKU-O. Did anyone assist you, and if so, who assisted you and in what way? Tell me about your experience.
3. At what point did you decide to earn a bachelor's degree? What influenced your decision to earn a bachelor's degree? What was/is your major?
4. What made you decide to earn a bachelor's degree through WKU-O? If WKU-O wasn't directly across the street from OCTC, would you still have pursued a bachelor's degree there? Why or why not?
5. Think back to when you first decided to transfer to WKU-O. What information was provided to you about the transfer process? Who gave you this information? Did you feel like you knew what to expect in the transfer process? Explain what the transfer experience was like.
6. Even though you were still attending classes at OCTC yet committed to transfer to WKU-O, did you feel like a WKU-O student? Why or why not? Describe what it felt like to be a jointly-admitted student.
7. Describe the transfer process. Tell me about a time when you were assisted in the transfer process. Tell me about a time when you felt as if you didn't get the assistance you needed.
8. Think about your class work as a joint admissions student. Did you feel as if you

were given help on homework/assignments at OCTC? Did you feel as if you were given help on homework/assignments at WKU-O? Who helped you and where you were helped? Tell me about your experiences.

9. Describe your advising experience at OCTC and WKU-O. What advising assistance did you receive at OCTC? What advising assistance did you receive at WKU-O? Who helped you, and where did the advising take place?
10. What is your overall opinion of your transfer experience from OCTC to WKU-O? Were there any advantages or disadvantages to the joint admissions process? Explain.



## APPENDIX B

### Interview Protocol for Advising Staff at OCTC and WKU-O

1. Describe the nature of the relationship between OCTC and WKU-O. Tell me about your perception of the relationship between the two institutions. Is there a story that you could provide that illustrates the relationship?
2. What are the benefits of the joint-admissions program between and OCTC and WKU-O? Can you think of a specific student(s) who benefited from joint admissions? If so, please tell me about the situation.
3. How does joint admissions fit into the mission and vision of OCTC? How does joint admissions fit into the mission and vision of WKU-O?
4. How does OCTC prepare students for the transfer experience? Can you give me a specific example?
5. How does WKU-O prepare students for the transfer experience? Can you give me a specific example?
6. What advising services are available to jointly-admitted students? Who typically advises jointly-admitted students? How frequently do students take advantage of advising services, and can you tell me about a notable advising encounter with a jointly-admitted student and what made it notable?
7. Based on your interaction with students, can you tell me how academically prepared the students are for the transfer experience? Can you give me an example to illustrate?

8. Based on your interaction with students, how knowledgeable are they about what is involved with the transfer experience? Can you give me an example to illustrate?
9. Do jointly-admitted students have an advantage over regular transfer students? If so, how? Can you provide me with a specific case where a student's jointly-admitted status gave them an advantage over a regular transfer student?
10. What is your overall perception of the joint admissions experience for students? What, if anything, would you change about the joint-admissions program?

## APPENDIX C

### Interview Protocol for Senior Leadership at OCTC and WKU-O

1. Describe the nature of the relationship between OCTC and WKU-O. Tell me about your perception of the relationship between the two institutions. Is there a story that you could provide that illustrates the relationship?
2. What motivated the *Joint-Admissions Agreement* between OCTC and WKU-O? Was it modeled after any other institutions? Tell me about how and why it was initiated.
3. What are the benefits of the joint-admissions program between and OCTC and WKU-O? Can you think of a specific story which illustrates the benefit of the joint-admissions program?
4. How does joint admissions fit into the mission and vision of OCTC? How does joint admissions fit into the mission and vision of WKU-O?
5. How does OCTC prepare students for the transfer experience? How does WKU-O prepare students for the transfer experience? Explain in each instance.
6. Based on your interaction with students, how academically prepared are the students for the transfer experience? Can you provide a specific case to illustrate?
7. Based on your interaction with students, how knowledgeable are they about what is involved with the transfer experience? Can you provide a specific case to illustrate?
8. Do jointly-admitted students have an advantage over regular transfer students? If so, how?

9. What is your perception of the joint admissions experience for students?
10. Do you think that joint admissions is the answer to all of our transfer problems in postsecondary education? Why or why not? Please explain.
11. What would growing the joint-admissions program mean for both institutions?
12. If you could rework or revise the joint-admissions agreement, how would you do so? Why or why not?

## APPENDIX D

### IRB Approval Letter



INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD  
OFFICE OF RESEARCH INTEGRITY

DATE: December 6, 2017

TO: ANGELA HIGDON, EdD  
FROM: Western Kentucky University (WKU) IRB

PROJECT TITLE: [1163928-1] JOINT-ADMISSIONS EXPLORED: DETERMINING THE EXISTENCE OF A TRANSFER-AFFIRMING CULTURE BETWEEN OWENSBORO COMMUNITY AND TECHNICAL COLLEGE AND WESTERN KENTUCKY UNIVERSITY-OWENSBORO

REFERENCE #: IRB 18-207  
SUBMISSION TYPE: New Project

ACTION: APPROVED  
APPROVAL DATE: December 6, 2017  
EXPIRATION DATE: May 12, 2018  
REVIEW TYPE: Expedited Review

Thank you for your submission of New Project materials for this project. The Western Kentucky University (WKU) IRB has APPROVED your submission. This approval is based on an appropriate risk/benefit ratio and a project design wherein the risks have been minimized. All research must be conducted in accordance with this approved submission.

This submission has received Expedited Review based on the applicable federal regulation.

Please remember that informed consent is a process beginning with a description of the project and insurance of participant understanding followed by a *signed* consent form. Informed consent must continue throughout the project via a dialogue between the researcher and research participant. Federal regulations require each participant receive a copy of the consent document.

Please note that any revision to previously approved materials must be approved by this office prior to initiation. Please use the appropriate revision forms for this procedure.

All UNANTICIPATED PROBLEMS involving risks to subjects or others and SERIOUS and UNEXPECTED adverse events must be reported promptly to this office. Please use the appropriate reporting forms for this procedure. All FDA and sponsor reporting requirements should also be followed.

All NON-COMPLIANCE issues or COMPLAINTS regarding this project must be reported promptly to this office.

This project has been determined to be a Minimal Risk project. Based on the risks, this project requires continuing review by this committee on an annual basis. Please use the appropriate forms for this procedure. Your documentation for continuing review must be received with sufficient time for review and continued approval before the expiration date of May 12, 2018.

Please note that all research records must be retained for a minimum of three years after the completion of the project.