"To Make This Leap": Understanding Relationships That Support Community College Students' Transfer Journeys

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Abstract

For too many community college students, transferring to a four-year institution for a bachelor's degree (i.e., vertical transfer) remains an unrealized aspiration. Prior research suggests that forms of capital can assist students in realizing their goals. Therefore, we sought to explore how relationships both within and outside of their institutions serve as sources of capital to support students' vertical transfer journeys. Utilizing a qualitative research design, we applied Putnam's (2000) two forms of social capital (bridging and bonding) and eight social support-related constructs from Moser's (2013) expanded transfer student capital framework to data from focus groups and interviews with 33 pre- and post-transfer students. We found that participants actively constructed a patchwork of supportive relationships with both institutional agents and individuals external to the institution, which they utilized to search for, gather, and employ transfer capital. Our findings highlight that relationships outside of institutions are as crucial as relationships within the institution as sources of capital for vertical transfer students, suggesting a need to incorporate extra-institutional relationships into transfer capital frameworks and institutional initiatives to support transfer students. We also recommend institutions invest in programs designed to build students' social and transfer capital.

Keywords: community college, transfer capital, social capital, vertical transfer, social support, institutional agents

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Each year, thousands of U.S. students choose to begin their postsecondary education at a community college with the aspiration to transfer to a four-year institution to earn a bachelor's degree. Nationally, 31% of community college students transfer to a four-year institution; however, just 15% of those students complete a baccalaureate degree within six years (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2021). For too many students, a bachelor's degree remains aspirational. Degree completion has been, and will continue to be, under the microscope (Bahr et al., 2013).

The transfer student experience does not stop at the borders of campus. Students' relationships both within and outside of formal institutional boundaries also shape their transfer journeys. Yet, extra-institutional relationships are too often neglected within the literature. To fully address barriers to transfer student success, educators need a more comprehensive understanding of the social support and capital that students bring with them to campus as well as the capital available to them within their institutions.

Bahr and colleagues (2013) highlight the potential of employing theories of capital to better understand the full spectrum of social connections that support transfer students and center institutions' (often neglected) responsibility for recognizing and affirming these relationships. Social capital "refers to connections among individuals—social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them" (Putnam, 2000, p. 19). As Putnam (2000) astutely notes, "social capital has many features that help people turn aspirations into realities" (p. 288). It is for this reason we seek to expand understanding of the role of socially supportive relationships, representing forms of social as well as transfer student capital, for community college students who transfer to a four-year institution (i.e., vertical transfer students). Specifically, our research question is: How do relationships both within and outside of their institutions serve as sources of capital to support students' vertical transfer journeys?

Literature Review

In this literature review, we focus on socially supportive relationships with faculty, staff, peers, and family in two ways. First, we briefly examine the current scholarship on socially supportive relationships and the college student experience broadly. We then examine in greater detail what is known about socially supportive relationships, both internal and external to the institution, in the transfer student journey. Our conception of the transfer journey is aligned with the Loss/Momentum Framework, which identifies five phases of the vertical transfer student experience (Achieving the Dream, 2016; Rassen et al., 2013). We examine students' experiences at four of these

phases: entry (enrollment at community college through completion of initial coursework), progress (entry into major program and completion of majority of coursework for associate's degree or other credential), completion (community college credential is awarded), and transition (to a four-year institution to complete a bachelor's degree); we do not examine students' experiences at the first phase, connection (interest and application to community college).

The Importance of Socially Supportive Relationships in College

A large body of research has confirmed the importance of positive relationships with faculty and staff on undergraduate students' journeys to enrollment and through degree completion (Cole & Griffin, 2013; Guzzardo et al., 2021). These relationships have been explored through the lens of mentoring (Crisp et al., 2017), institutional agents (Chen & Starobin, 2019; Museus & Neville, 2012), and cultural navigators (Strayhorn, 2015). Through these relationships, faculty and staff guide, coach, and mentor students; they also share valuable information about how the institution operates and how to navigate the bureaucracies and unique culture of an institution.

Much of the scholarship that explores peer relationships as a source of social support for college students builds on Tinto's (1993) influential (yet justly critiqued) work on student departure and social integration. Social support is important for helping students feel like they belong and ultimately persist to graduation (Anistranski & Brown, 2023). Further, Tierney and Venegas (2006) found "peers have the potential to create fictive kin networks, and in this role, peers become a social support that helps enable a culture of success" (p. 1687).

There is considerable variability among college students and the support they receive from their families as they pursue their bachelor's degrees (Harper et al., 2012). Family emotional support has been associated with positive academic outcomes, particularly for low-income students (Roksa & Kinsley, 2019). Moreover, Strom and Savage (2014) demonstrated continuous support from family significantly impacts students' commitment to their education and graduation.

The Importance of Socially Supportive Relationships in the Transfer Journey

Relationships with institutional, or transfer, agents at the community college and receiving institution serve as resources to help facilitate the transfer process (Bensimon & Dowd, 2009; Nuñez & Yoshimi, 2017; Sanchez & Morgan, 2022; Solis & Durán, 2022; Urias et al., 2017). Institutional agents provide support in various forms including psychosocial support, mentorship, and access to critical resources and information. As Ellis (2013) noted, "Successful transfer students find champions on every community college and university campus. . . . The students return to these champions to celebrate success and ask for assistance" (p. 83). Indeed, Moser (2013) found students

with a faculty or staff mentor at the community college were better able to cope with challenges at the receiving institution.

Peers also play a key role in the vertical transfer journey. Transfer students rely on peer relationships for advice, information, and support in navigating the receiving institution (Bahr et al., 2013; Flaga, 2006; Lukszo & Hayes, 2020). Rodriguez and Kerrigan (2019) found that transfer students seek out connections to build coalitions and specifically recognize the knowledge native students hold about campus resources. Peer relationships are particularly important for minoritized transfer students (Lukszo & Hayes, 2020; Sanchez & Morgan, 2022; Urias et al., 2017), and transfer students want receiving institutions to actively facilitate development of peer relationships (Ellis, 2013).

Although the student experience is often conceptualized around two separate spheres—academic and social—a growing body of evidence suggests the intersection of these spheres is more relevant to transfer students' lived experiences (Bahr et al., 2013). Transfer students' interactions with other students are often centered around the academic aspects of the student experience (Ellis, 2013; Lester et al., 2013; Rodriguez & Kerrigan, 2019; Solis & Durán, 2022). Examples include activities connected to their major or career path, honors program, or activities hosted by their academic department.

Relatedly, transfer students may see significant overlap between their on- and off-campus lives. Schudde et al. (2021) highlighted transfer students' use of "microsystems" to gather information from outside the institution about transfer, including family and friends who had personal experience with the transfer process. Other research confirms the importance of family support during the vertical transfer journey and while adjusting to the receiving institution (Flaga, 2006; Solis & Durán, 2022; Wang, 2020). Altogether, evidence regarding social support and the transfer student experience highlights the importance of relationships that span boundaries both within and outside of the institution.

Socially supportive relationships are critical because they provide social capital (Putnam, 2000), which ultimately builds momentum toward goal completion (which we address in the next section). However, inequities exist in social capital accumulation (Chen & Starobin, 2019); this has particular implications for students as they navigate the complexities of transfer. Chen and Starobin (2019) found that among community college students, higher levels of family social capital were positively associated with accessing college social capital through institutional agents. However, students whose parents had lower education levels had lower levels of family capital, demonstrating that forms of capital are interrelated and can amplify, or diminish, each other to reproduce privilege and inequity.

Conceptual Framework

To guide our understanding of the socially supportive relationships that shape students' vertical transfer journeys, we drew upon the frameworks of social capital and transfer student capital. Concepts of capital have been used by researchers to explore the types of experiences and relationships that higher education institutions systematically privilege, but less attention has been given to transfer students' socially supportive relationships, particularly those outside of institutions, and the capital they provide.

Social Capital

Higher education researchers have adopted social capital to explore the impacts of social ties and connections on the student experience (e.g., Chen & Starobin, 2019; Tierney & Venegas, 2006). These connections "have particular implications for higher education, where students often are actively building the social and professional networks that will shape their lives and careers" (Bahr et al., 2013, p. 492). Putnam (2000) distinguished between two types of social capital: bonding and bridging. Bonding social capital is inward looking, formed from homogenous in-group relationships and connections, and it most often provides emotional support. Bridging social capital is outward looking, formed from loose social connections and across social groups, and it most often provides instrumental support. However, Putnam noted these types of capital are not opposing but rather lie along a continuum.

Transfer Student Capital

Transfer student capital refers to the ways in which vertical transfer students acquire and use experiences, knowledge, and skills to assist in their transfer journeys (Laanan et al., 2010; Moser, 2013; Rosenberg, 2016). The Laanan-Transfer Students' Questionnaire (L-TSQ) measures transfer student adjustment and transfer capital. The forms of acquired capital, and the L-TSQ, are framed around three concepts: (a) social demographic factors, (b) community college experiences, and (c) receiving-institution experiences (Laanan, 2004; Laanan et al., 2010; Moser, 2013). Scholars have examined the relationship between transfer capital and the ease of transition to the receiving institution, finding a positive correlation for improved student outcomes (e.g., Laanan et al., 2010; Rosenberg, 2016; Starobin et al., 2016). For example, Rosenberg (2016) concluded that accumulation of transfer capital had a significant effect on a student's intent to transfer and even mitigated demographic characteristics that were negatively associated with intent to transfer. Lukszo and Hayes (2020) concluded that transfer capital accumulation helped to shape student expectations about transfer and subsequent planning and decision making.

Moser (2012, 2013) advocated expanding the L-TSQ to include nine new constructs for a deeper understanding of transfer capital, with a particular focus on the socialization of transfer students at the receiving institution. In testing her revised L-TSQ,

Moser (2013) found "transfer student capital plays an important role in community college student success at the university" (p. 53), with success measured by university grade point average (GPA), student coping ability, and student satisfaction with the university. Relationships with faculty members at the community college and at the university were particularly important in predicting students' ability to cope with problems encountered after their transition to the university. Recent scholarship using Moser's expansion of the framework explores how students accumulate transfer capital. Jabbar et al. (2022) found that institutional practices (e.g., quality advising) combined with individual characteristics (e.g., socioeconomic status, family support, and social capital) shape student understandings of the transfer process. Lukszo and Hayes (2020) found that peers, family, and high schools were the top sources of transfer capital, and students used transfer capital to navigate the nuts and bolts of transfer, build self-efficacy, and regulate expectations of the receiving institution.

While Moser's (2013) expanded transfer capital framework recognizes socially supportive relationships with institutional agents (e.g., faculty, advisors) and with classmates and friends at the receiving institution, it neglects forms of social support and capital external to institutions. Therefore, the conceptual framework for this study integrates Putnam's (2000) forms of social capital (bonding and bridging) with eight of the transfer capital constructs that focus on social support from Moser's (2013) expanded transfer capital framework (faculty mentoring at the community college, formal collaboration with faculty at the community college, faculty validation at the community college, staff validation at the community college, academic advising experiences, experiences with faculty at the university, adjustment process: social, social support at the university). Table 1 defines each of these eight forms of transfer capital as operationalized for our analyses, which we detail in the next section. Furthermore, we have chosen to use a qualitative approach to discover how socially supportive relationships, both within and outside the institution, serve as sources of support for transfer students.

Methods

From 2019–2022, one large, public, four-year university and three public community colleges located in Ohio collaborated on a series of institutional efforts to expand resources and make structural changes to address transfer student success, supported by funding from Ascendium Education Group. The project's objectives included: (a) conducting research to explore the journeys and experiences of vertical transfer students, of which the present study is one part; (b) creating a series of more than 50 2 + 2 transfer pathways to enable students to complete their first two years of coursework toward a bachelor's degree at one of the three community colleges and then seamlessly transfer to the university to complete the final two years, without credit loss; (c) hiring dedicated transfer advisors at the university and each community college to provide integrated outreach and guidance to students along each stage of their transfer journeys; (d) establishing surrounding supports for vertical transfer students such as

Table 1. Codes and Codebook Definitions

Code	# of Coded Excerpts	Codebook Definition
Transfer capital:		
Faculty mentoring at the community college (Moser, 2012, 2013)	6	Relevant L-TSQ items from Moser (2012, p. 88): Community college faculty members "Cared about whether or not you succeeded at the institution," "Provided you with valuable information related to how to succeed academically," "Had regular contact with you."
Formal collaboration with faculty at the community college (Moser, 2013)	0	From Moser (2013, p. 59): "I had the opportunity to collaborate with at least one faculty/staff member on activities outside of class at my previous institution."
Faculty validation at the community college (Moser, 2012, 2013)	6	Relevant L-TSQ items from Moser (2012, p. 88): "My course instructors allowed the expression of differing viewpoints in their courses," "My course instructors valued the contribution that I (or other students) made to their course," "My course instructors respected my opinion even if it differed from their own," "My course instructors showed an active interest in my education goals and pursuits," "My course instructors personally cared about me," "My course instructors genuinely cared about whether or not the students in their classes succeeded at the institution."
Staff validation at the community college (Moser, 2012, 2013)	3	Relevant L-TSQ items from Moser (2012, p. 88): "The staff members personally cared about me," "The staff members respected my opinion even if it differed from their own," "The staff members genuinely cared about whether or not the students they served succeeded at the institution," "The staff members valued the contribution that I (or other students) made to the institution," "The staff members showed an active interest in my education goals and pursuits," "I had a staff member that I could trust to support me when I needed help navigating the various aspects of my transfer preparation."
Academic advising experiences (Moser, 2012, 2013)	132	Relevant L-TSQ items from Moser (2012, p. 88): "I discussed my plans for transferring to a four-year college or university with an academic advisor/counselor," "I consulted with academic advisors/counselors regarding transfer," "I met with academic advisors/counselors on a regular basis," "Academic advisors/counselors identified courses needed to meet the general education/major requirements of a four-year college or university I was interested in attending," "I talked with an academic advisor/counselor about courses to take, requirements, education plans," "Information received from academic advisors/counselors was helpful in the transfer process."

Table 1. Codes and Codebook Definitions (*continued*)

Code	# of Coded Excerpts	Codebook Definition
Transfer capital (cont'd):		
Experiences with faculty at the university (Moser, 2012, 2013)	29	Relevant L-TSQ items from Moser (2012, p. 89): "Visited informally and briefly with an instructor before or after class," "Discussed my career plans and ambitions with a faculty member," "Asked my instructor for comments and criticisms about my work," "Asked my instructor for information related to a course I was taking (grades, make-up work, assignments, etc.)," "Visited faculty and sought their advice on class projects such as writing assignments and research papers," "Felt comfortable approaching faculty outside of class."
Adjustment process: social (Moser, 2012, 2013)	29	Relevant L-TSQ items from Moser (2012, p. 90): "It is easy to make friends at [transfer university]," "Adjusting to the social environment at [transfer university] has been easy," "I am meeting as many people and making as many friends as I would like at [transfer university]." We're looking for statements from participants that reflect these sentiments. The slight difference between this code and the next one (Social support at the university) is that this code is more time-limited to the period immediately following transfer (although there is no clear moment when the adjustment process ends), whereas Social support at the university is more continuous into the present day, beyond the initial adjustment period. This code only applies to post-transfer participants.
Social support at the university (Moser, 2012, 2013)	22	Relevant L-TSQ items from Moser (2012, p. 90): "I have a lot of friends at [transfer university]," "I am invited to social gatherings outside of class," "I feel a sense of belonging within the university," "I have a lot in common with the other students in my classes," "It is difficult making friends at [transfer university]," "I have a close friend or classmate whom I can turn to if I need support," "I often eat lunch with other classmates," "I am involved in on-campus events and activities." We're looking for statements from participants that reflect these sentiments. In coding our data, we found a lot of overlap between this code and Adjustment process: social, so we reported them together in the paper. This code only applies to post-transfer participants.
Social capital:		
Bonding capital (Putnam, 2000)	44	Bonding social capital is inward looking and formed from homogenous in-group relationships and connections. Examples of bonding social capital in higher education include fraternities and sororities as well as student organizations formed around cultural, ethnic, political, and religious social identities. Personal relationships both within (e.g., with peers, although sometimes with institutional agents who may share identities or experiences with the participant) and outside of the institution (e.g., with family members, friends, coworkers) can provide bonding capital that supports the participant along their transfer journey.

Table 1. Codes and Codebook Definitions (*continued*)

Code	# of Coded Excerpts	Codebook Definition
Social capital (cont'd):		
Bridging capital (Putnam, 2000)	26	Bridging social capital is outward looking and formed around looser social connections and across social groups. Examples of bridging social capital in higher education include networking events often coordinated by career services units and alumni groups, community-based learning, as well as opportunities for students to meet guest lecturers and internship providers. The social ties provided by bridging social capital are weaker but nonetheless valuable as they open doors by connecting people across social groups. Personal relationships both within (e.g., peers, institutional agents) and outside of the institution (e.g., with family members, friends, coworkers) can provide bridging capital if they facilitate social or institutional connections for the participant that facilitate their transfer journey.
Open code:		
Social support outside the institution	29	We created this code because neither of the two transfer capital codes related to social experiences (Adjustment process: social or Social support at the university) capture these relationships. Coded excerpts were drawn from our personal relationships open code, to capture relationships outside the institution that also served as social support for transfer students. This code also captures socially supportive relationships in the pretransfer stages as well, unlike Social support at the university and Adjustment process: social, which both focus on the post-transfer phase.

orientation modules focused on transfer, online resources, and dedicated university scholarships; and (e) documenting and disseminating project successes and challenges to inform similar efforts by institutions within Ohio and across the United States.

Research Sites

Participant recruitment took place at the four partner institutions collaborating on the grant project. The university enrolls a substantial percentage of transfer students (vertical and lateral) each year, representing over 20% of total first-time enrollments. The three community colleges had varying institutional profiles, including location (one urban, one rural, and one suburban), enrollment (ranging from approximately 9,000 to 45,000), and university transfer rates (ranging from approximately 10% to 30%).

Data Collection

We chose to recruit participants at various stages of their vertical transfer journeys, including pretransfer students (i.e., those still attending community college) and post-transfer students (i.e., those who had successfully completed the vertical transfer process). Our reasoning was that while post-transfer students would be able to speak to the full experience of vertical transfer, they might also experience hindsight bias or not recall earlier experiences along their journeys as clearly as pretransfer students.

To recruit post-transfer students, we emailed all currently enrolled students at the university who transferred from any Ohio community college inviting them to participate in a focus group. We held three focus groups in spring 2020 and two in fall 2020, for a total of 24 post-transfer participants. In spring 2021, we worked with institutional contacts at the three partner community colleges to invite students interested in transferring to the university to participate in a focus group. We held two focus groups with a total of five pretransfer participants. Due to difficulty recruiting pretransfer students for focus groups, we received IRB approval to conduct individual interviews and conducted four in spring 2022. All nine pretransfer participants attended one partner community college; we were unsuccessful in recruiting participants from the other two institutions. Due to the timing of data collection, none of the post-transfer students would have experienced the expanded resources and structural supports provided by the larger project at the time of their participation. The pretransfer students may have experienced some of the resources and supports instituted in the early phases of the larger project (e.g., dedicated transfer advising, degree pathways, online resources) by the time of their participation, but these would have been newly established, and indeed only a handful of participants mentioned knowing about or utilizing them.

In total, we conducted seven focus groups and four individual interviews with 33 participants. Each focus group ranged in size from two to nine participants. The first focus group took place in person prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic; it was audio recorded and transcribed by a member of the research team. The remaining six focus groups and four interviews were conducted, recorded, and transcribed using

Zoom. Each participant received a $10 Amazon gift card. Of the 33 participants, 69% identified as female, 28% as male, and 3% as nonbinary; 69% identified as white, 28% as students of Color, and 3% as biracial;[1] 50% were aged 18–22, 38% were 23–39, and 13% were 40 or older; 47% were Pell Grant eligible, 41% were not eligible, and 13% were unsure of their eligibility; and 28% were first-generation students. Table 2 presents selected demographic characteristics for each of the 33 participants.

Nationally, among students who transferred from a two-year to a four-year institution in spring 2022, 45% identified as white, 6.4% as Asian, 13.3% as Black, 19.7% as Latinx, and 15.5% as "other" (including Native American, Pacific Islander, multirace, nonresident alien, and unknown/missing); 58% identified as female and 40% as male; and by age, 24.4% were 18–20, 33.2% were 21–24, 16.3% were 25–29, and 26.0% were 30 or older (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2022a). This dataset does not include pretransfer students nor post-transfer students who transferred prior to spring 2022, so we cannot directly compare with the demographics of our sample; however, those who identify as female and white may have been overrepresented among our participants. National data are not available documenting the representation of first-generation and Pell-eligible students among the vertical transfer population. However, first-generation students are more likely than their continuing-generation peers to begin their postsecondary education at a public two-year institution (Postsecondary National Policy Institute, 2022), and "of those who began postsecondary education at a community college in fall 2015, lower-income students were nearly half as likely than their higher-income peers to have transferred to a four-year institution (25% vs. 41%)" (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2022b, para. 3).

The semistructured focus groups and interviews asked participants to reflect on their knowledge, use, and need of supports (both academic and nonacademic) at the community college and receiving institution as well as their overall transfer experience. Sample questions included "How did you utilize academic advisors during the transfer process, and what has your advising experience been like?," "What aspects of your transfer experience have been positive [negative]?," and "Talk about the academic and nonacademic supports you relied on during the transfer process." We used the same set of questions for every focus group and interview, adapting the wording of questions where necessary for the pretransfer participants (e.g., "What interests you about transferring to [the university] to complete your bachelor's degree?" versus "Tell us about your decision to transfer to [the university] to complete your bachelor's degree."). We also administered a demographic survey to participants and requested consent to collect institutional student data (e.g., GPA, major).

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1   The demographic form participants completed allowed them to respond freely to the questions about gender and nationality/race/ethnicity rather than providing them with preselected categorical options.

Table 2. Selected Demographic Characteristics by Participant

Focus Group/ Interview	Pseudonym	Nationality/Race/Ethnicity[1]	Gender[1]	Age	First- Generation	Pell Eligible	Major	Pre- or Post-transfer
FG	1. Alexa	White	Female	22	No	No	History	Post
FG	2. Aria	Bi-racial	Female	20	Yes	Yes	Psychology	Post
FG	3. Charlotte	White German/Polish	Female	60	No	No	Dietetics	Post
FG	4. Eleanor	White	Female	36	No	Unsure	Special and Deaf Education	Post
FG	5. Evelyn	American/ Caucasian	Female	50	No	Yes	Nonprofit Management	Pre
FG	6. Ezra	White	Nonbinary	20	Yes	Yes	English	Pre
FG	7. Frank	White	Male	39	No	Yes	Physics	Post
IN	8. Gerold	Peruvian/ American	Male	48	Yes	Unsure	Business Management	Pre
FG	9. Grace	White	Female	21	Yes	Yes	Zoology	Post
FG	10. Jayden	American/White	Male	20	No	Yes	History and Classics	Post
IN	11. Jeff	White	Male	27	No	Yes	Undecided	Pre
IN	12. Joel	White	Male	22	No	No	Criminal Justice	Pre
FG	13. Kari	Caucasian	Female	21	No	No	Early Childhood and Special Education	Post
FG	14. Katelyn	White	Female	21	No	No	Education	Pre
FG	15. Layla	White	Female	20	No	Yes	Radiology Technology	Post
FG	16. Louis	White	Male	23	No	No	Journalism	Post
FG	17. Lucas	Black	Male	21	No	Yes	Human Resources Management	Post
FG	18. Maddie	White	Female	20	No	No	Political Science	Post
IN	19. Marcos	White	Male	64	No	No	Undecided	Pre

(continued)

Table 2. Selected Demographic Characteristics by Participant (*continued*)

Focus Group/ Interview	Pseudonym	Nationality/Race/Ethnicity[1]	Gender[1]	Age	First- Generation	Pell Eligible	Major	Pre- or Post-transfer
FG	20. Maya	White	Female	19	No	No	Early Childhood Education	Post
FG	21. Megan	White	Female	31	No	Yes	Nursing	Post
FG	22. Mia	White/Caucasian	Female	20	Yes	No	Economics	Post
FG	23. Mila	Black	Female	29	Yes	Yes	Computer Science and Psychology	Post
FG	24. Molly	Caucasian/ American	Female	21	No	No	Early Childhood Education	Post
FG	25. Nancy	White	Female	32	Yes	Yes	Theatre	Post
FG	26. Polly	Asian American	Female	27	Yes	Unsure	Psychology	Post
FG	27. Scarlett	African American	Female	20	No	Unsure	Journalism	Post
FG	28. Shane	Black/African American	Male	27	No	Yes	Math Education	Pre
FG	29. Stacy	Black/African American	Female	28	No	No	Visual Communication and Design	Post
FG	30. Stella[2]	-	-	-	-	-	Public Health	Post
FG	31. Tiffany	Black	Female	20	No	No	Psychology	Post
FG	32. Violet	African American	Female	31	No	Yes	Business Management	Pre
FG	33. Zoey	White	Female	27	Yes	Yes	Middle Childhood Education	Post

[1] The demographic survey from which this information is drawn allowed participants to respond freely to these questions rather than providing them with preselected categorical options. This table reports participants' verbatim responses.

[2] Stella did not complete a demographic survey.

Data Analysis

All analyses were conducted by the research team, consisting of one faculty member and two graduate assistants. To provide insight into the research question—how relationships both within and outside of their institutions support students' vertical transfer journeys—the research team coded transcript data using our conceptual framework. We created 11 codes, following MacQueen and colleagues' (2008) guidance for team codebook development: two codes drawn from Putnam's (2000) forms of social capital (bonding and bridging), eight social support-related constructs from Moser's (2013) expanded transfer capital framework, and one open code we developed to capture social support outside the institution, a concept not reflected in the transfer capital framework. Each team member was assigned a subset of the 11 codes from our conceptual framework and applied these codes to the focus group and interview transcript data. The research team then met to share coding and resolve disagreements in code application. Table 1 provides codebook definitions and the number of coded excerpts for each of the 11 codes.

Trustworthiness

A component of trustworthiness in qualitative research involves sharing the researchers' positionality to enable readers to understand the perspective from which they designed the study and interpreted the data (Jones et al., 2006; Merriam, 2002). The first author, a fulltime PhD student, has served in a variety of roles focused on student success in higher education prior to returning to the classroom as a student and research assistant. As a first-generation student and scholar, she recognizes relationships as key to helping her navigate the academy, and part of her research agenda explores the impact of relationships in higher education. The second author is a faculty member in a higher education administration program and served as Principal Investigator of the larger, grant-funded project as well as the lead member of the research team. One strand of her research agenda examines the experiences of underserved and minoritized populations along their educational and career trajectories, and her research seeks to inform educational practice that advances higher education's role in promoting social justice and equity within U.S. society. The third author, a fulltime higher education professional, returned to academia after years of working in international education. She is interested in questions of equity and access, particularly around where academic institutions can better understand and serve their underrepresented students.

Having a research team in which each member brought a unique perspective relative to the topic helped to enhance the trustworthiness of this study, and the team took steps throughout the study design and data analysis processes to challenge each other's assumptions; for example, our objective in discussing coding disagreements was not coming to consensus but rather to share and test our individual interpretations of the data, seeking alternate interpretations in the interest of credibility (Merriam, 2002). An additional step we took to enhance trustworthiness included sharing findings from the focus groups with scholars and educators who work with vertical transfer students

(e.g., through conference presentations and draft written summaries). This feedback indicated that what focus group participants shared about their vertical transfer experiences was congruent with existing scholarship and educators' first-hand experiences, bolstering credibility of our findings (Bowen, 2005). Our extensive use of participant quotes in presenting the findings also enhances trustworthiness by providing direct excerpts from the data rather than merely our researcher interpretations (Jones et al., 2006).

Limitations

There are several limitations of this study. First, we collected our data amid the substantial disruption to higher education caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, participants' experiences are in some ways unique to this time period—notably the difficulty some reported in making social connections at the university. Nonetheless, given the amplified mental health challenges college students overall have reported since the pandemic's onset (Center for Postsecondary Research, 2021), as well as the likely continued disruptions to higher education's "normal" operations for the years to come, we believe our bottom-line findings regarding the critical importance of social connections and capital for transfer students are transferable to the postpandemic era.

Second, we had difficulty recruiting students to participate in focus groups at two of our three partner community colleges, possibly due to the increased challenges and bandwidth demands students were experiencing during these semesters (Center for Postsecondary Research, 2021). Although we adapted our approach with pretransfer students in spring 2022, the experiences of pretransfer students are underrepresented in this study, and the nine pretransfer participants were all enrolled at the same community college.

Finally, we recognize that the findings reported here largely represent the experiences of "survivors"—students who successfully transferred from a community college to a four-year institution (24 of the 33 participants). We had hoped to include in our study community college students who had reported an intent to transfer to the university but did not; however, the three community colleges were unable to share contact information for former students meeting this criterion due to data limitations and privacy concerns. Yet, capturing the experiences of students who are unsuccessful in their vertical transfer attempts is as—if not more—important in painting a full picture of the needs of transfer students to inform policies and practices to support them more effectively.

Findings

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationships within and outside of the institution that serve as sources of capital to support students' vertical transfer

journeys. Roughly approximating phases of the transfer student journey (Achieving the Dream, 2016; Rassen et al., 2013), we first present findings regarding experiences at the community college followed by experiences at the university, aligned with forms of transfer student capital from Moser's (2013) expanded transfer capital framework. We then address our findings regarding socially supportive relationships outside of the institution, applying the concepts of bonding and bridging capital (Putnam, 2000). Our findings suggest a patchwork of socially supportive relationships that participants utilized to search for, gather, and employ transfer capital.

Socially Supportive Relationships Within the Institution

The transfer capital framework (Laanan, 2004; Moser, 2013) privileges socially supportive relationships within the sending and receiving institutions. These relationships include faculty, staff, and peers. First, we share our findings regarding socially supportive relationships with faculty at the community college. Then we share our findings regarding staff (with particular attention toward academic advising) at the community college and then the receiving institution. This is followed by findings regarding participant experiences with faculty at the university. Finally, we conclude with findings regarding the role of peers in social adjustment at the university.

Supportive Relationships With Institutional Agents

Participants in our study discussed social support they received from institutional agents (e.g., faculty or advisors), which often served as bridging social capital as participants negotiated their transfer. Participants discussed relationships with faculty and advisors at their community colleges that supported their transfer journeys. At the receiving institution, institutional agents helped participants feel a sense of belonging in addition to providing important information about navigating the transfer process and adjusting to the university. Six forms of transfer capital capture socially supportive relationships with institutional agents: (a) faculty mentoring at the community college, (b) formal collaboration with faculty at the community college, (c) faculty and (d) staff validation at the community college, (e) academic advising experiences (at both the community college and university), and (f) experiences with faculty at the university.

Faculty Mentoring at the Community College. Moser (2012) stated that students who had a mentoring relationship with a faculty member at the community college "performed better at the university" (p. 131); thus, she included this in her framework as a form of transfer capital. In our study, three participants discussed how mentoring relationships with community college faculty provided them with transfer and bridging capital. Polly, who had already attained her associate's degree but did not immediately transfer to a four-year institution, discussed reaching out to a community college faculty member for help:

> There was one counselor/professor who really kept on top of me to make this leap to a four-year college, and when I reached out to her, even after three years, she still took my email, and she still gave me a call and she still explained the process to me and what I need to do.

Zoey remarked upon the support she received from a professor she had at both her community college and at the university:

> It's nice to have those professors who work at multiple places, because he is the one who guided me at [my community college] to go to [the university]. He's my professor now, he's the one who's going to be my advisor and everything, all through my student teaching next semester. . . . My advice for other students who don't have that [is] to seek someone out or be able to have someone like that.

Both Polly and Zoey demonstrate how transfer students can leverage relationships with faculty at the community college. When faculty serve as mentors and provide concrete guidance on the transfer process, they give students both bridging and transfer capital.

Formal Collaboration With Faculty at the Community College. In recounting their transfer journeys, participants did not discuss any examples of this form of transfer capital, which Moser (2013) defined as "collaborat[ing] with faculty members outside of class" (p. 59). Given that most of our research took place during the COVID-19 pandemic, opportunities for collaboration with faculty members outside of the classroom may have been limited for the pretransfer participants.

Faculty and Staff Validation at the Community College. Two other forms of transfer capital within Moser's (2013) framework are faculty and staff validation at the community college. Because of the similarity of their definitions—both reflect the occurrence and quality of interactions between students and professors in the classroom or staff outside of the classroom—we present the findings for these two forms of capital together. Five participants commented on validating interactions with faculty members, which served as affirmation of their educational goals, like when Frank's physics professor shared a summer research opportunity: "He thought about me and sent it to me; it wasn't just sent to everybody." Lucas shared that his community college professors "actually were curious and actually were concerned about each individual student."

Three participants described interactions with staff members that served as validating experiences for their educational goals. Shane, a pretransfer student, discussed how he meets with his institution's TRIO Student Support Services advisor weekly and how the program provides him with resources to "help further my education and career once I graduate."

Academic Advising Experiences. Academic advising experiences were the most common form of transfer capital described by participants, with 132 coded transcript excerpts. Pretransfer participants highlighted both positive and negative experiences with academic advising at the community college. Scarlett noted, "I did use my advisor over at [my community college] to help me navigate how to get my stuff transferred over, like what classes that would work well to transfer over and everything, and that was really helpful." Similarly, Ezra noted they had positive advising experiences that allowed them to "figure out which classes would be good for me," and Alexa noted that her relationship

with her community college advisor was "the biggest highlight of my transfer experience" because he made transferring "really easy and . . . really smooth, and he explained everything really well." Still, some participants described not receiving critical information about financial aid, transcripts, and details about the transfer application process. Despite being enrolled at an institution with a preestablished degree pathway for her chosen field of study, Evelyn was still placed into the wrong track: "I told [my community college] I wanted a nonprofit management degree, [but] they didn't even tell me about the pathway program . . . I had to find it on my own."

Post-transfer students described similarly varied experiences with academic advising both at orientation and post transfer. Charlotte felt satisfied with advising at the university: "I like my counselors, the way they organize everything . . . they've seemed to always help me." Molly, an education major, described particularly meaningful interactions with her advisor: "She took me on a tour . . . of [the education building], and then took me over to the [child development center] . . . I feel like she made me so excited to come here." The bridging capital Molly obtained from her advisor allowed her to see herself enrolled and succeeding at the university. Not all university advising interactions were positive, however. Some participants described how the size of the institution negatively affected their advising experiences, noting that advisors were "always booked up" and that it was "easy to slip through the cracks." Multiple participants discussed jumping from one advisor to another. For example, after a poor experience with an advisor who gave her "bad advice," Maddie took it upon herself to start "seeing random advisors in the College of Arts and Sciences until I found one that I liked."

Experiences With Faculty at the University. We coded 29 transcript excerpts describing participants' experiences with faculty at the university. Post-transfer participants who connected with university faculty members benefited from the social and transfer capital provided by those relationships, including guidance in establishing their footing academically, getting involved on campus, receiving emotional regulation tools, and meeting mentors. Among participants who did not connect with university faculty members, institutional culture as well as lack of knowledge about the potential benefits of such relationships and how to establish them created barriers to accessing the capital these relationships could have provided.

Connecting with faculty members provided some participants with a sense of direction and support. Polly had recently reached out to a faculty member and felt "so much more on track to getting [my] goal" as a result. Scarlett commented, "I did reach out to a couple of [faculty members] in regards to what student media organizations that they had mentioned . . . [Now] I am involved with the fashion magazine." Zoey commented on the long-term bridging capital relationships with faculty members would provide her: "Transferring to a university, I have really found some good mentors and people who I can continue to communicate with throughout my teaching career."

Not all participants established relationships with university faculty, however. Nancy described feelings of regret over not having connected with a faculty member because

"they might have been able to give me some kind of advice or tell me their experience, and maybe it would help me think about what I wanted or decided to do." Several participants discussed wishing they had received more guidance on reaching out to faculty members, recognizing the important capital these relationships can provide. Zoey suggested that a portion of the first-year experience courses be dedicated to helping students connect with faculty: "I think that as young students we need more advice and resources to help us kind of come out of our shell and be more confident and talk and meet those faculty members."

For others, the lack of connection with professors was a result of moving from more individualized attention at the community college to the larger, less personal four-year university. Lucas felt disconnected from his university professors, noting that compared to his community college, professors at the university "aren't as willing to really be assisting. It's just like [a] description, so 'I have to do it because it's part of my job,' but it's not passionate." Similarly, Frank lamented that the larger size of the university made it difficult for him to have the regular interactions with professors that he desired: "A lot of times [at my community college] I'd be studying in a . . . study room that's across from all the [faculty] offices, so I would see my teachers all the time. Here I don't see anybody."

Social Adjustment and Supportive Relationships With Peers at the University
Students' perceptions of their social adjustment process to the university after transfer is one form of transfer capital originally proposed by Laanan (2004). Moser's (2013) additional construct, social support at the university, is part of her expanded transfer capital framework. Although these two constructs represent distinct forms of transfer capital in Moser's framework, our findings for each construct overlapped considerably, so we have synthesized them here. Together, these two forms of transfer capital reflect the ease with which students feel they are adjusting to the new institution's social environment and meeting peers and making friends at the university. They also reflect whether transfer students feel included in the university's social environment, have a network of others to support them, and feel that they belong at the university.

The post-transfer participants discussed aspects of their social adjustment process (29 coded excerpts) and social support (22 coded excerpts) after their transition to the university. Participants discussed their perceptions of the social environment at the university; opportunities for interacting and developing friendships with other students through transfer orientation, classes, student organizations, and living together; and whether they had developed supportive relationships with peers.

Multiple participants commented on feeling that other students at the university were "really helpful," "very friendly," and "cooperative." Positive interactions participants had with fellow students eased their transition into their new institution. Meeting peers who had been at the university for longer allowed participants to benefit from the knowledge and practical wisdom these other students had accumulated. Layla stated,

"I met this really nice girl . . . She's been [here] for already like two years. That's why she helped me so much through classes and what notes to take and who to go with like professor-wise." Few participants discussed participation in formal peer mentoring, but those that did described impactful interactions. For example, Polly stated:

> One person that really helped me is my peer mentor . . . [She] helped me to schedule for my classes next semester. She pointed me towards like a professor who could help me actually guide my way through my bachelor's and then make plans for my master's. And she's helping me to find labs to work remotely so that I can get some experience in. She proofs emails to people that I want to reach out to, like, she's like on top of everything with me and it's just like such a relief.

Lucas felt that the university provided opportunities for "networking" with peers, and he expected the new connections he formed to continue providing him with social capital after graduation: "I can say, 10 years down the line, I could be like, 'Hey, we used to go to college, man.'" Lucas's observations demonstrate awareness of the value of bridging social capital.

Additionally, some participants discussed forming deeper friendships at the university, which developed through participation in institutional opportunities such as clubs, living on campus, and transfer orientation. Mia shared the value of making a friend through orientation: "It's a lot easier to get through college when you have someone there with you, someone to study with." These friendships aided participants in their social adjustment to the university and helped them feel like they belonged at the new institution.

However, some participants reported difficulty in making friends at the university as transfer students. Aria noted that despite living in a residence hall on campus, she lacked the peer social support she had hoped for as a new student: ". . . when I first lived there, I felt more distant from everyone than I should have. And I tried to reach out, but didn't really get much help back in." A couple of participants shared that they wished the university had done more to help them connect with other students on campus, to ease their social adjustment. Maya wished that the university provided resources to connect transfer students with roommates, like they do for new first-year students: "I had to work a lot harder, it seemed, to find a roommate, because there just aren't as many options for transfer students to find a roommate." Scarlett commented, "It would be nice to go in and know someone as a friend or anything. Instead, you just, you know, probably end up eating by yourself or whatever."

A few participants discussed becoming involved with student organizations at the university and the positive role this played in their social adjustment and transition. Frank, a physics major, discussed how joining the physics club on campus facilitated his social adjustment: "We have a room, a lounge, in the physics buildings, people just hang out there and do homework. It's cool if you got stories or questions about anything . . . That's been a pretty big positive." Frank's experience reveals the development of bonding social capital at the university. Louis shared that he was pleasantly surprised to

be invited to join the student newspaper, an organization aligned with his academic and career goals: "To me, the most positive aspect of my transfer was just I guess how they were willing to actually accept me . . . in the middle of the semester." Despite the challenges posed by the move to remote learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Scarlett expressed appreciation to the student organizations she joined because "they're still trying to involve people who aren't able to go [to meetings in person]. So that's been nice."

However, multiple participants commented on the particular challenges for social adjustment posed by transferring to the university during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, when relatively few students were present on campus. Scarlett shared, "With [classes] being online . . . you ultimately don't end up getting to know [others] because if you're in a class, at least for me anyway, the cameras are off." Similarly, Kari wished the university had resources "for being able to make friends for transfer students, or ways to meet other transfer students that are coming to [the university] because I don't make friends easily, and now that we're online it's pretty difficult." Several participants discussed how the move to remote meetings made joining student organizations more difficult than they had anticipated, which they felt negatively affected their social adjustment. Jayden commented on the difficulty of joining clubs during remote instruction: "You just . . . look on the [club's] website and email people and keep waiting for a response. So, it's harder and I guess a little more intimidating."

Socially Supportive Relationships Outside the Institution

The experiences reported by the participants in our study highlight how peers, faculty, and staff play a role in facilitating vertical transfer students' journeys by providing social support and capital (bonding, bridging, and transfer). Many participants also shared examples of receiving social support and capital from relationships outside of the institution. Despite their importance to participants' transfer journeys, these extra-institutional relationships are not captured within the transfer capital framework; thus, we developed this additional code to capture these relationships, and 29 transcript excerpts received this code. Next, we discuss how these relationships served as bonding and bridging capital to support participants' transfer journeys.

Extra-Institutional Relationships Providing Bonding Capital

Putnam (2000) described bonding social capital as "sociological superglue" (p. 23) because these relationships reinforce in-group loyalty and identity to provide social and emotional support. In total, 19 participants discussed relationships (sometimes multiple relationships) outside of the institution that provided support. Approximately three quarters of the extra-institutional relationships participants described functioned as bonding capital; these were often with immediate and extended family members.

Shane discussed how family support motivated him to continue on his transfer journey despite unexpected roadblocks: "It took me a little longer than expected to finish college . . . so to know that they have my back still through it all and are still there

to be supportive is actually very helpful." Polly credited her cousins for motivating her to apply to the university when she lost momentum to continue after completing an associate's degree: "They were like, 'We're not trying to like guilt or shame you. It's just, you're so smart, you have such big ideas, you need to start making a move on it.' So, I finally decided to send in my application." Gerold drew support from his wife, who encouraged his transfer aspirations: "She's always telling me, 'Do it!'" Alexa described how her mother was familiar with the concept of "community colleges and state schools" collaborating to develop transfer pathways, and this information was critical for her to make an informed enrollment choice.

Evelyn, a student who was returning to postsecondary education later in life, described how her sister pushed her to consider opportunities to continue into a bachelor's degree: "My sister said, 'Have you talked to [the university] yet? Did you see that nonprofit [major]?'"

For several participants, family members who were graduates of the receiving university showed support by modeling the transition process and providing guidance. Layla described how her cousin, an alumnus, gave her tools for how to be a successful student: "He actually helped me a lot, like how to study, how to take notes fast, and what to focus on [and] what not to focus on." Mila discussed relying on her older brother, also an alumnus, as her safety "net": "Because he checks on everything I do [to] make sure I'm doing everything."

Other participants described extra-institutional relationships beyond family that provided them with bonding capital to support their transfer goals. Alexa credited the support of her boyfriend in her successful transition to the university and the physical relocation it required: "We both need to get out, so like, let's go. . . . And we moved down to [the university town] . . . he's been my main support system." Pretransfer student Joel shared how his girlfriend, who had previously transferred to a different four-year institution, "knew exactly what to do, knew exactly what questions to ask . . . If I have any questions, I'll reach out to her." One participant, Katelyn, noted, "One of my social supports is actually my workplace . . . They've always made it very clear that school comes first." Scarlett shared, "I didn't know how the school offered a bunch of scholarships through the school and I found out from a friend of mine . . . how to sign up for them." Maddie described how "a lot of my friends and my boyfriend were all in the same boat transferring from [community college], so they all helped me through that process, and we all gave each other advice."

Extra-Institutional Relationships Providing Bridging Capital

Although less common than bonding capital, a few participants described extra-institutional relationships that opened doors along the transfer journey, thus serving as sources of bridging capital. Aria was one of three participants who discussed how past relationships with advisors from high school aided their successful transition to the university:

> When I first transferred . . . it was actually pretty tough because I'm not very good at talking to people . . . But I ended up reaching out to a couple of advisors that I had back in high school who really helped with a lot of understanding different concepts.

Mia credited two coworkers, who were alumni of the university, for helping her choose the best fit between two local institutions for her bachelor's degree aspirations: "They really liked it [at the university], so they were like, 'Oh yeah, go there.' They were recommending stuff."

In summary, extra-institutional relationships were as essential to participants' transfer journeys as relationships within their institutions. These relationships—with friends, family members, high school teachers, and others—provided bonding capital that propelled participants to overcome roadblocks and waning motivation as well as bridging capital that connected them with crucial information, resources, and educational opportunities.

Discussion

When "making the leap" (as Polly put it) from community college to a four-year institution, our participants relied heavily upon supportive social relationships, underscoring Solis and Durán's (2022) conclusion that "social connections prior to and during transfer played a critical role in the outcomes of students' transition" (p. 12). By applying Putnam's (2000) social capital framework in conjunction with eight social support-related constructs from Moser's (2013) expanded transfer student capital framework to our data, it became evident these relationships formed a patchwork system that participants utilized to search for, gather, and employ transfer capital. Notably, our findings highlight the importance of both intra- and extra-institutional relationships in supporting students' transfer journey, including the ways in which they use these relationships.

Congruent with prior research (e.g., Jabbar et al., 2022; Lukszo & Hayes, 2020), our study documents how vertical transfer students draw upon their social networks—especially those in their innermost circles, like close family and friends—to navigate the transfer process. Yet these extra-institutional relationships are not recognized as forms of transfer capital in existing frameworks. Our findings contribute to the growing literature on transfer students by highlighting the critical role of socially supportive relationships outside of the institution.

Although some post-transfer participants in our study sought academically purposeful socialization opportunities, reflecting the findings of Lester et al. (2013), they also sought out purely social connections at their new institution through friendships, roommates, and social organizations. Yet transfer students can find it challenging to connect with peers on campus (Sanchez & Morgan, 2022). Congruent with Ellis (2013), participants in our study shared a wish for the institution to facilitate interactions with

other transfer students as well as with native students. When transfer students find community at their new institution, they are more likely to feel a sense of belonging and experience an easier adjustment (Bahr et al., 2013; Moser, 2013; Sanchez & Morgan, 2022).

Overall, participants relied on a patchwork quilt of supportive social connections both inside and outside of the institution throughout their vertical transfer journeys. The relationships with peers and institutional agents they established at their community colleges and after transferring to the university as well as existing relationships with family, friends, and other members of their networks provided them with the bonding, bridging, and transfer capital they needed at various points along the way. As with the community college transfer students in Sanchez and Morgan's study (2022), the experiences of participants in our study emphasized the criticality of "feeling safe and supported by institutional agents (i.e., professors and staff), family, and friends" (p. 8) for a successful transfer journey.

Implications

We suggest several implications for practice oriented around providing opportunities for transfer students to cultivate a quilt of supportive relationships—or "microsystems," per Schudde et al. (2021)—to help them "make this leap" from community college to a four-year university. First, given the importance of relationships outside the institution in providing instrumental (bridging) and emotional (bonding) support throughout the transfer process, we encourage educators working with students at both the pre- and post-transfer stages to involve family members, coworkers, and off-campus friends in their services and programming. The support drawn from family and other extra-institutional relationships is particularly important for students from low-income backgrounds (Roksa & Kinsley, 2019), who are overrepresented among students who begin their education at community colleges (Fry & Cilluffo, 2019), and racially minoritized students (Bensimon & Dowd, 2009; Lester et al., 2013; Sanchez & Morgan, 2022; Solis & Durán, 2022).

As a starting point, advisors can ask students during advising meetings about the people in their lives who are instrumental or influential in supporting their educational and professional goals and suggest ways for students to more deeply involve these important others in their transfer journeys. If a student indicates a lack of such relationships, advisors might utilize their own networks and resources to help the student build bridging and bonding relationships within the institution (e.g., student organizations, mentoring programs, faculty collaborations) as well as in the local community (e.g., through volunteer opportunities, paid employment, or mentorship). We recognize that at many institutions, particularly community colleges, high student-advisor ratios (Wang, 2020) can impede the investment of time and energy necessary to foster such connections. We therefore echo the call

others have made (e.g., Wang, 2020; Wyner et al., 2016) for institutions to invest financial resources to reduce advising loads and support advisors' professional development.

Although only a few participants discussed orientation programs, they are another promising avenue for facilitating the development of students' social and transfer capital. The social engagement opportunities transfer students seek should be incorporated into orientation (and ideally throughout the academic year). Orientation programs are an optimal setting to begin establishing the connections with cultural navigators (Strayhorn 2015), institutional and transfer agents (Bensimon & Dowd, 2009; Nuñez & Yoshimi, 2017; Urias et al., 2017), or champions (Ellis, 2013) who can provide social support, practical guidance, and bridges to other resources and relationships throughout students' vertical transfer journeys. This is particularly important given inequities in social capital accumulation (Chen & Starobin, 2019). To offset inequities that first-generation, low-income, and racially minoritized students experience, institutions must offer opportunities for students to build socially supportive relationships and capital.

Finally, a few participants in our study highlighted how the social support they gained through faculty mentorship provided them with capital that facilitated their transfer success. Their experiences are congruent with prior literature documenting the strong positive influence of faculty mentors, especially for racially minoritized and first-generation students (Crisp et al., 2017; Sanchez & Morgan, 2022; Urias et al., 2017). However, developing close relationships with faculty members is challenging for students who transfer from community college (Bahr et al., 2013; Ishitani & McKitrick, 2010). We therefore recommend sending and receiving institutions invest in the creation of faculty mentoring programs oriented specifically toward transfer students (see, e.g., Morton, 2019) and train mentors on the concepts of transfer and social capital so they understand the unique needs of transfer students and how they can help meet them.

Ultimately, our findings highlight that relationships outside of their institutions are as crucial as relationships with fellow students and institutional agents as sources of capital to support students' vertical transfer journeys. We therefore encourage educators invested in transfer student success to intentionally recognize the unique patchwork quilt of supportive relationships—both within and outside of institutions—each student has woven, and to assist every student in reinforcing, expanding, and drawing upon the relationships comprising their quilts to bolster them in achieving their aspirations of bachelor's degree attainment.

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