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# Supporting Reverse Transfer Students: From Trauma to Transition and Triumph

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## **Supporting Reverse Transfer Students: From Trauma to Transition and Triumph**

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Action Research

August 10, 2022

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### **Abstract**

This study explores the reverse transfer student identity, a population or group that transfers from a four-year college or university to a two-year community college. The research utilizes a San Diego two-year community college as the sample institute to discover more about a sample of the reverse transfer student identity. The theoretical framework includes a combination of intersectional stigma and the ethic of care that is implemented throughout the transition process for the student. The purpose of this study is to seek and uncover patterns as to why students reverse transfer and what support looks like for them. How does intersectional stigma affect the reverse transfer population during their transition into a two-year community college and what ethics of care could be integrated? Using qualitative interviews and O'Leary's cycle of research model, the three interviews illustrate that the reverse transfer identity has varied backgrounds and goals. Ultimately, the decision to reverse transfer can vary but there are differences on whether it is a positive experience or a negative one. This interview study enhances future research by highlighting a small sample of the reverse transfer student population and displays personal experiences that contribute to their intersectional identities.

*Keywords:* reverse transfer, community college, intersectional stigma, ethic of care, transition, narrative, higher education

### **Supporting Reverse Transfer Students: From Trauma to Transition and Triumph**

Often, a young adult seeks adventure, change, and experience when they are in the transition of entering college. During these exciting times, there is a lack of understanding what one is really getting themselves into when starting college. Nonetheless, the college experience is expected to be worth every penny. The best part about college though, is that everyone's experiences are unique. Students have a tendency to learn about themselves during these stages in life and understand what their identity is in the community of the institution.

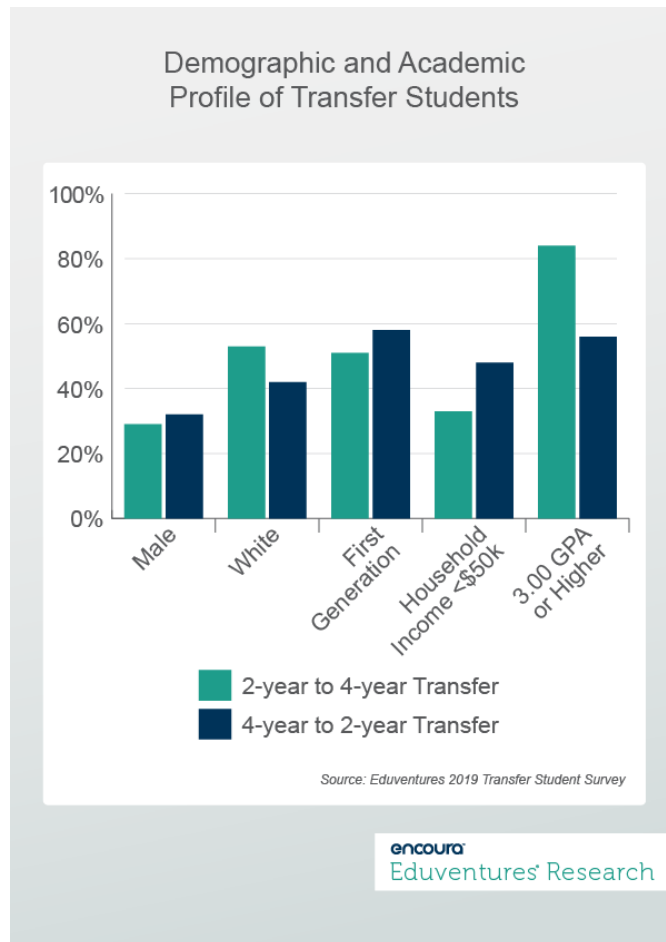
In the field of post secondary education, the term *transfer student* is quite common. Transfer students are known as a demographic that typically come from a 2-year community college to complete their associates degree at a 4-year institution or can also be an undergraduate moving from one 4-year university to another 4-year university. However, there is another demographic of college students who are highly underrepresented, known as *reverse transfer students*. Reverse transfer students are pupils who may begin their "typical" college journey at a 4-year institution, but then transfer to a 2-year community college, in hopes of earning an associates degree. The step seems backwards in the traditional college experience timeline, but personal issues or motives can transform one's pathway. Though the ultimate goal during one's post secondary education should remain the same, which is to earn a degree.

While there is a system set in place to leave an institution at a certain time, there could be self-defeating actions due to not meeting a particular standard and a lapse of judgment. Becoming a reverse transfer student can be challenging for some and a decision that was not entirely their choice. A few examples include being home sick, an ill fit with the campus, personal circumstances, but mostly high tuition costs. The College Board (2020) estimates the average budget (tuition and fees, room and board, supplies, transportation, and other personal expenses) for 2020-21 is \$10,560 at a public in-state 4-year university for full-time undergraduate students. Costs tend to increase for *out-of-state* students or students who attend a private institution. The decision to attend college for some may seem easy, but there can be

neglect in establishing financial costs or other important matters when accepting the university's offer. The Eduventures 2019 Transfer Student Survey highlights the demographics of reverse transfer students and how they represent the minority. They are more likely to be non-white, report a lower household income, and are more likely to be first-generation students (Figure 1).

**Figure 1**

*Demographic and Academic Profile of Transfer Students.*



*Note:* From “What Reverse Transfer Students Mean for Your Institution's Retention,” by Johana Trovato, Eduventures 2019 Transfer Student Survey, (What Reverse Transfer Students Mean for Your Institution's Retention).

## Background & Literature Review

Becoming a post secondary student requires increased investment and persistence, but many first-year students are unaware of these commitments (Abel & Deitz, 2014). In the case of the reverse transfer student, it is possible they could hold other intersectional identities that are marginalized (Cox & Watson, 2011). According to the Foundation for California Community Colleges, over 69 percent of California community college students are people of diverse ethnic backgrounds (*Facts and Figures*, n.d.). While the student may be juggling familial roles and jobs, they are also attempting to be a student or trying to live out a fictional portrayal of what college looks like (Bourke et al., 2008). Institutions must recognize these different identities and factors to implement support and resources, even if it means the student is leaving their institution to find a more suitable one.

Regardless of the reason for becoming a reverse transfer student, practitioners must not forget that these students do not need to give up their dreams of receiving a post secondary degree. The reverse transfer option can be seen in a positive light, rather than a discredit. Looking for the right fit, enrolling into community college could be the right answer to the challenges being faced by the student. Adopting an empathetic approach to exit a 4-year institution is also something to be considered. Building empathy can be seen as a critical skill in leadership and demonstrate importance for innovation and retention.

The study is unique because reverse transfer students are given a platform to share their stories and to acknowledge this undermined group of individuals in the field of higher education. Understanding the importance of voice, these students share their experiences with intersectional stigma to build awareness of the community. There is hope for campuses, both 4-year and 2-year, to think about ethical care to assist these students when it comes to changing their self-perception or persist in their academic success. The research question for this study is: How does intersectional stigma affect the reverse transfer student population



during their transition to community college and how can institutions implement ethical support during these times?

### **Theoretical Frameworks**

Connecting Berger's (2004) intersectional stigma and Tronto's (2010) institutional ethic of care, I studied how the reverse transfer student identity is challenged throughout their post secondary educational journey. There is a large body of research that correlates to the broad term of intersectionality, that originated in women's studies and was coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) to describe individuals with multiple minoritized identities (e.g., race, gender, sexual orientation, social class; Harris & Patton, 2019). When researchers study identity holistically rather than a series of variables, like race, class, and gender, there comes a better understanding of "simultaneity of oppression" that are experienced by the minority (Simien, 2007). Berger (2004) defines intersectional stigma as a variant of intersectionality that exists in individuals with both minoritized and socially stigmatized identities.

Institutional ethic of care (or "institutional caring") is a concept with three primary characteristics: (1) the institutional ethic of care delineates a purpose of care, (2) acknowledges the power relationships that exist between caregivers and care receivers, and (3) the institutional ethic of care must tailor care to the specific needs of the individuals (Toronto, 2010). While these concepts originated through the feminist lens, both are applied broadly in this research to examine how care can be extended to students who identify as a reverse transfer student.

The concepts of intersectional stigma and the institutional ethic of care overlap to understand the student experience during their post secondary level of education. Both concepts overlap in the shared emphasis to understand the lived experiences and to identify intentional practices that acknowledge diverse and minority populations, such as reverse transfer students.

## College Experience of Reverse Transfer Students

In this review of the literature, we examine aspects of the reverse transfer student identity and how it came to light in higher education. Then, there is an exploration of stigma in the community college context.

There is growing evidence that dropouts who seek readmission into a four-year institute are increasing (Kintzer, 1966). In early 1982, a preliminary study at Santa Ana College revealed that 21% of all credit students had previously attended a four-year institution which led to a further qualitative study to determine the educational interests and matriculation patterns of these reverse transfer students (Slark, 1982). Educators and legislators from Santa Ana College began to form questions about this particular population of students, some of them were: Are these students returning to the community college because they experienced academic difficulty at the four-year college? Was the four-year college too costly? Or are they largely students engaging in lifelong learning and self-growth pursuits? Most respondents (41%) indicated that they left their four-year college because they completed the degree which they sought, some (11%) left because they relocated, and others (10% of the sample) left because it was too costly and did not qualify for sufficient financial aid (Slark, 1982). While the reverse transfer student and its reasoning is diverse, research has shown that the student who has experienced academic failure at one college will not necessarily fail at the other (Brimm & Achilles, 1976). It is evident that the reverse transfer population is becoming known, and today it is understandable why students need an opportunity to reevaluate their initial educational and vocational plans. A two-year community college is an acceptable place to do so, but there are many negative connotations associated with 'community college' in today's society.

Cooley's (1922) conception of the looking glass self is that our self concept is, by definition, a combination of our internal self-perceptions and evaluations and what we receive from others. Nonetheless it is important to recognize that even though stigma is socially constructed and resides in culture, individuals internalize their looking glass selves because of

negative messages on the aspects of their identity (Bower et al., 2021). It is reasonable to consider whether stigma can be controllable.

It is known that community colleges are more likely to enroll students who fall under the minority and are socially stigmatized students than other post secondary institutions (Cohen et al. 2013; Hurtado et al., 2015).

Student populations that fall under a minority are known to experience different types of discrimination. For example, individual, structural and institutional discrimination and stigmatization are all different factors that elude to senses of shame or embarrassment (Nora & Cabrera, 1996). Also, some students may be reticent to their identities or disclose their status to campus personnel and their peers, there is such a thing as “invisible minorities” referred to in higher education (Ross & Richards, 2009, p.97). College campuses have yet to build an equitable college experience for all students that choose to pursue their educational goals. This is about ensuring that each student receives what they need in order to get the degree they seek. Plus this would help retention factors for college campuses.

### **Context**

Student retention refers to graduation rates and the loss of students who either drop out or transfer (Soika, 2020). Higher education professionals play a huge role in whether a student chooses to stay at an institution or not. From an epistemological standpoint, there is a need to find out more about the constructed reality campuses are establishing for their students to succeed. Engaging with subject-object relation, as a reverse transfer student myself, I have observed emotions and non-verbal cues that emerge from the telling of one’s narrative as an undermined student in college. Focusing on the narratives of these students, universities can begin to notice what areas of support look like for the students who are doing any type of transferring. Whether retention is in mind or not, it is far-reaching to make sure the student is getting the degree that they strived to get for from the beginning. Moving from one place to another is an act of transition, therefore it is a time of change where some might need guidance.

Some might need guidance and not know where to ask for help and others will unwillingly want any type of support. What is clear is that whatever that student might need, higher education professionals must commit to student success.

The study took place in the county of San Diego, but I met with participants virtually through Zoom. While working with folks from Cuyamaca College, the director of admissions, Gregory Vega, was my initial person of contact to reachout to students who were indeed considered reverse transfer students at the institution. Looking for data and numbers from the institution and its website, I was only able to seek out the department of the Cuyamaca College Transfer Center, which did not give data on the specific group of students I was to engage with. The center is established as an equity-minded approach towards preparing students for successful transition to a baccalaureate-level institute (*Transfer Center*, n.d.). There was no particular area or center that offered the same successful or smooth transition out of a baccalaureate-level into their community college. The institution is not at fault because it is incredibly rare for any type of institution to have this sort of department or center built into their missions, values, or goals. The point is for institutions to make note of the negligence and hopefully incorporate these terms into their vocabulary in the future.

The main goal for this study is to hear from reverse transfer students and have each individual share their stories with the researcher, themselves, and one another. By doing so, building a safe and sacred space is objective number one and then to validate feelings or emotions is objective number two. Moments of shame, embarrassment, or discomfort based on what their educational journey has looked like thus far could arise, but reminding students to stay open-minded throughout this process is pivotal.

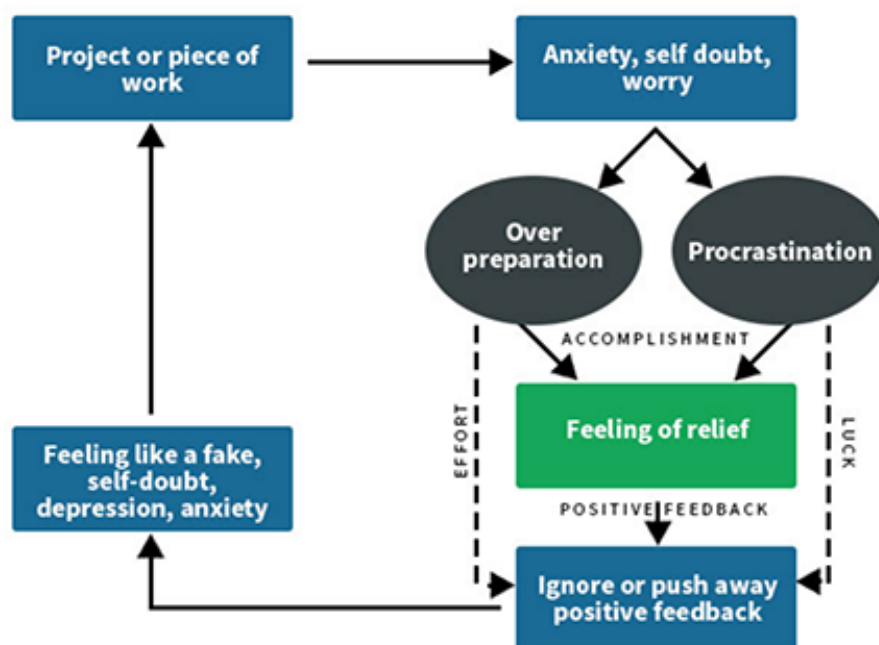
### **Project Rationale**

While understanding that everyone's journey is different, there will always be moments of defeat that students face because of status, identity, and trauma. Both students and faculty have sensed this idea of imposter phenomenon, feelings of self-doubt about accomplishments

or abilities (Williams, n.d.). Briefly, imposter phenomenon (sometimes known as “imposter syndrome”) is a pattern whereby individuals sense a fear of being exposed as a fraud, and this concept is stigmatizing whereby individuals may be suffering silently. The imposter phenomenon cycle (IP cycle) portrays the experiences of rejection of success, worry and anxiety. If the task is achieved successfully, then there might be senses of accomplishment or relief. The new cycle would begin once a new achievement task is encountered (Figure 2).

**Figure 2**

*The Imposter Cycle*



*Note:* The Imposter Phenomenon cycle (Clance et al., 1995).

Understanding these concepts gives the researcher an idea of what the interviews and focus groups (treated more like casual conversations) might lead to. Given the concerns or challenges the student might be facing at that moment, it is important to invite all emotions into the space to create authentic dialogue and findings for post secondary research. The literature indicates knowledge in understanding key concepts or identities, but the population of reverse

transfer students in higher education are not being recognized, which neglects ways in which we can diminish the self-doubt and stigmatization.

When students are given the enlightening awareness to explore their “me-search,” (N. Sánchez, pers. l comm, March 4, 2021) which signifies work and understanding of their person-hood, students can begin to understand self-awareness. Involvement on a college campus creates a connection between students, faculty, and staff, which can then signify meaning in the work and why paths cross, to support one another (Scholssberg, 1989). The act of connection can be seen as a survival tool in higher education. Scholssberg’s theory of marginality versus mattering is important to consider especially for professionals in higher education. Students must comprehend the power of voice and how their vulnerable act will gain attention to enhance support on college campuses. Being aware of the classifications that divide the community (e.g. race, gender, ethnicity) allows the educator to be aware of the different experiences and expectations (Scholssberg, 1989). The act of mentorship throughout this study could build upon the concept of marketing an equitable campus.

While the participants are at the forefront of this study, it is an important reminder for educators to look at their own educational journey and understand why their path looked a particular way. Each individual is given an opportunity to articulate their experiences that have shaped their identity today.

### **Research Design**

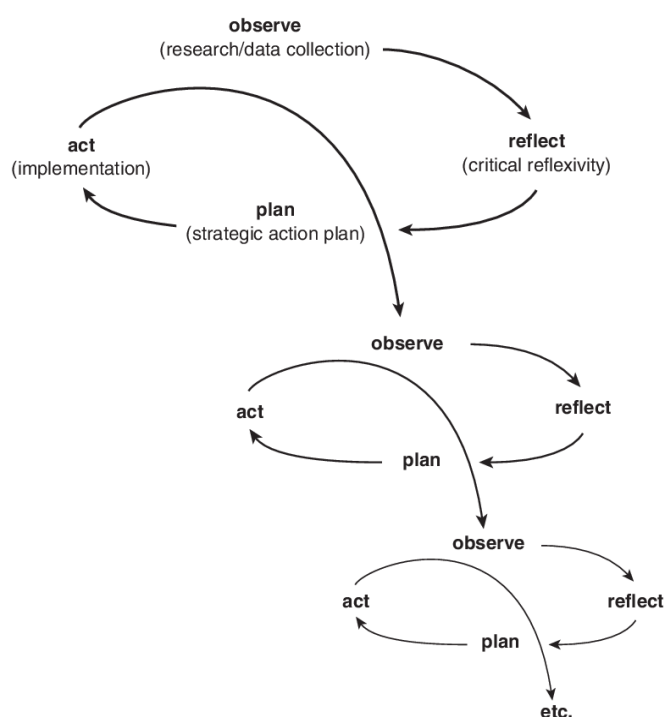
Because qualitative inquiry is a unique way to study social phenomena and is seen as holistic (Corbin & Strauss, 2014; Denzin & Lincoln, 2017), the qualitative study done with reverse transfer students in this study explores three individual reverse transfer student’s narratives. Specifically, there is a deeper exploration of affirming these experiences and recognizing the student population. Hoping to pick up on ethical forms of care transmitted to students, we will gather on whether support is administered from two different types of institutions (2-year & 4-year). Further, the study creates a foundation for my own exploration as

a reverse transfer student through my undergraduate journey. There is strength in finding clarity through my own experiences by demonstrating leadership within this study.

Using O’Leary’s (2004, as cited in Koshy & Waterman, 2011) cycles of research model (Figure 3), which centers action research as a cycle process and takes shape as the awareness emerges, O’Leary stresses the importance of the model and its convergence towards a better understanding and improved action implementation (Koshy & Waterman, 2011). The cycle is based on evaluative practices that alter between action and critical reflection (Stringer & Genant, 2004). Thus, as an interactive process, the cycles balance our problem solving action to comprehend the underlying cause, enabling future predictions about change (Reason & Bradburry, 2008). Being drawn into this method’s focus on critical reflection and implementations, its capacity to support endless cycles, and emphasis on strategic planning is vital to the study. O’Leary’s model gives the reverse transfer student population and participants to focus on their journey and what they choose to share with the public.

**Figure 3**

*O’Leary’s Cycle of Research*



*Note:* O’Leary’s Cycle of Research (adapted from Koshy, et al., 2011).

O’Leary’s model encompasses four stages in each cycle, beginning with *observation*, also known as the collection of data and knowledge stage. While the model seeks to create and implement change, rather than simply increase our knowledge about the subject matter, it is important to further assess the findings and understand their concern on a deeper level. This will help determine which type of intervention would be beneficial and effective. After the *applied research*, the data can be further assessed during the *reflective stage*. With the feedback I obtained from the participants, I further contributed towards the *planning and implementation* of new ways to support reverse transfer students. As someone who has faced the unexpected change of becoming a reverse transfer student, I find myself in a unique position as someone who could relate and engage with the participants on a deep level.

### **Data Collection**

Marketing and recruiting was my initial point to begin the data collection. First, I reached out to local community colleges in San Diego County by emailing their admissions offices to gain some type of insight on the data of reverse transfer students at their institution. The email (Appendix A) simply stated my title as a student and someone who I could be redirected to in regards to my research topic to discuss further. While, not one institution reached back out, which spoke volumes already, was a push to move this recruiting process in a different direction. Networking was next. I was able to connect with the teacher assistant from my *Action Research Methods I* course at the University of San Diego. Gregory (Greg) Vega, the Director of Admissions and Records at Cuyamaca College, met with me virtually to give me some insight on the reverse transfer student population at their two year institution. Having Greg look over my permission letter to work with this institution's reverse transfer student population (Appendix B), I then received approval to do so (Appendix C). The Director of Admissions and Records at Cuyamaca College was the initial person of contact to outreach to the campus’ reverse transfer student population. Additionally, Greg made a list of those who met the requirement to partake



in my study. Because the roster list is kept confidential, the Director of Admissions was the only individual who could send out email solicitations to the collective of reverse transfer students who were currently enrolled at Cuyamaca College to begin the initial search. Promoting my flyer to get students to partake in the study (See Appendix D) gave reverse transfer students the opportunity to realize they belonged to a population they had not been aware of before and could convey the need to identify these students. Giving me a roster of six students who were interested, Greg then let them know I would be the next person of contact to further the study. The opportunity to participate was offered only to those who met the eligibility criteria. To be eligible for the study, the student had to have (a) transferred from a four-year institution within the last four years to a community college, (b) enrolled at Cuyamaca College, and (c) be 18 years or older.

While finalizing the search of participants, there were three students who found interest in being a part of the study. I explained the time commitment (2 hours virtually, split between a one on one interview and followed with a focus group), the benefits of participating, and a brief understanding on who I was and why I was doing this particular study. I also made sure to explain that there would be sharing of one's own narratives, and that there was no expectation to finish the study if they later chose to no longer participate. Benefits of this study were to make sure the realm of higher education began to consider this particular group of students and improve the support these students needed throughout such transition processes. Especially because it is more likely these students hold intersectional identities. To conclude this phase in the study, participants were provided with the informed consent form (Appendix E) detailing the overall study once again and their rights as a participant.

Using a qualitative method for this study, I first conducted one on one interviews with each student (Appendix F). I asked the participants ten questions, and rather than reading these questions allowed one by one, I made sure that the participant felt like we were having a more casual conversation opposed to a structured interview. Building rapport was my first step to gain

trust in the student. This practice and memorization of the questions was to allow their answers to flow in an organic manner. Their answers captured raw and vulnerable statements that allowed them to express their needs without any remorse, following with understanding and validation. The format of focus group schedule (Appendix G), was created to engage and build community for the participants. Due to the nature of everything being conducted virtually, I audio recorded the focus group with the participants' verbal consent so that I could further analyze the qualitative data and make notes right after the focus group. It was important for me to make sure that the participants felt like I was truly engaged in their conversations, so I made sure to partake in the exertion of the study. At the start of each cycle, participants were reminded of their rights and were given time to ask questions prior to starting the groundwork. All student participants then consented via the audio recording during each session and we began the study. For student participants to remain anonymous and keep their identities confidential, I have gone ahead and changed their names and have created pseudonyms. To simplify, we have student X, student Y, and student Z. Each cycle with the student participants could attribute towards trauma, stress, or anxiety because of the reflective nature and unanticipated emotions could emerge. I made sure students were provided with detailed information regarding their institute's resources, such as the Cuyamaca Health and Wellness Center. This information included their website link, phone number, office location, and their personal counseling services. These services would lead the student participant to experienced professionals or advisors to help process their experiences throughout the research.

To communicate with the participants, I strictly kept communication ongoing through email only. When sending out emails to all the participants, they were not able to see who else the emails had been sent to to maintain confidentiality. As I continued to communicate with the students, all scheduling was done via email. When we found set times that worked for the participants and myself, they were given my personal USD Zoom link for our scheduled meetings. All sessions were to be done virtually. During each session, the student participant

had the option to keep their cameras off, but I (as the researcher) kept mine on. When some Zoom meetings were neglected, we continued to reschedule these Zoom sessions via email until we met. All Zoom meetings were scheduled via Google Calendar for the participants and the researcher to keep track of, but they did not always utilize these tools.

Cycle 2 of the study was conducting one on one interviews with the participants to share their narratives and experiences with being a reverse transfer student. For all participants of the study it was their first time hearing this term, “reverse transfer.” To realize a new identity the student might not have been aware of before, the student was able to gain this knowledge and take it for what it is worth. The one on one interviews took place virtually on Zoom. The virtual space was set up with my camera on, welcoming the individual into the space. Doing these virtual spaces on the USD campus also gave me more authentication as to who I was and why I was conducting the research. Testing out the audio and removing any other technicalities that could interfere with the session was key. By doing so, I avoided all technical difficulties. The one on one interviews took exactly one hour to complete for each student. I made sure the sessions allocated enough time for introductions, building rapport, consent to record, an overview of the participation form, time for the student participants to give thorough answers to the questions, and a closing with the next steps of the study. Following the time boundary was important so that the student knew their time was respected and valued. Following the one on one interviews I made my own notes (recollecting the exact moment), I listened to the recording and made further notes manually. This was repeated three times, once for each student participant in the study.

Cycle 3 was the final step of the data collection for this study. Participants were emailed once again to figure out a scheduled time that would work for the focus group. The students were emailed separately to remain confidential. The first time these students would know about one another was to be in the focus group itself. Each student gave me times that worked for them. Once I set up a date and time, I added the individuals to a Google calendar invite with the

private Zoom link. All individuals accepted the invitation. Once again, we had a schedule mishap. I went over the steps above again and scheduled another Google calendar invite once we secured the second date. The focus group was done virtually through Zoom, all student participants had their cameras off while I kept mine on. The focus group was more of a scheduled hour to partake in an activity and to share each of our narratives. Treating this session was casual to make the student participants willing to share and feel comfortable with one another, assuming they have not met previously. The focus group took one hour to complete. The entirety of the focus group was recorded with the participants' consent. Once the focus group was finished, I made my own notes and reflections (recollecting the exact moment of the focus group), I listened to the recording and made further notes on the data.

When it came to each cycle, I reflected on what had occurred. The reflections entailed: what went well, what went wrong, what I could have done differently, what I learned from each individual and their narrative.

### **Cycle 1 Results & Findings**

The initial recruiting process was much more difficult than I had imagined. Working and doing a study on a demographic of students that is not recognized within higher education made it difficult to attain interest from anyone. At first, reaching out to institutions (3 community colleges in San Diego county) did not work out. Communicating with admissions offices and not hearing any sort of response was difficult to grasp. I wondered about the possibilities as to why admissions would not respond. My thoughts were, (a) admissions do not respond to individuals who are not enrolled or students at their specific institution or (b) they do not respond at all to students to guide them to the direct office or department they might be in search of. This type of information automatically became a small but important aspect of collecting data. The data communicated and acknowledged the need for institutions to improve communication with students and outreach.

### **Outcomes and Changes from Cycle 1**

In today's current climate, students have many different means to communicate with their institution. When the means and forms of communication lack, I believe this would cause a disconnect for the student and the institution. Of course, to help the student succeed academically, I would hope professionals do their best in communicating with their students and respond in a timely manner. Disastrous consequences could occur if there is a lack of communication between the student and the institution. This benefits neither party.

Something I could have done differently to perfect my own means of communication with the community colleges would have been to try different forms of communication. What I could have done was send a follow up email or outreach to other departments. I also could have called their admissions office to get a rapid response. Lastly, I could have connected with their transfer center to find some information on the reverse transfer student population and to see if there were any areas that specifically supported reverse transfer students.

### **Cycle 2 Results & Findings**

Three students enrolled at Cuyamaca Community College participated in Cycle 2 of the study. Student X transferred from the University of San Diego, Student Y & Z transferred from San Diego State. Each student was unaware of the term "reverse transfer" before this study. Each student had their own agenda and course of action for their remaining time at Cuyamaca Community College. Each individual has similar, yet different motives as to why they reverse transferred. Some had positive experiences while others had negative ones.

### **Cultivating Comfortable Conversations**

I took the time to memorize my questions for the one on one interviews. I cultivated a space that was not so structured, so that the student participants felt like they could open up. The one to one interviews felt more like a casual conversation between the researcher and participant. I attempted to avoid any sense of resistance the student participant might have during the study, especially to start.

Before getting started I reiterated the study and made sure students understood what the reverse transfer student identity was and that they identified as such. Building rapport with the student participants was my initial approach towards an unstructured environment. By doing so I was smiling and being positive throughout the interviews and coordinated with the energy they came into the interview with. Sharing a common understanding and identity with the students got them to open up and willing to share. Their answers went in depth. Each interview used up the entire hour. I could sense nerves and discomfort at moments.

For a couple of students (Students X & Z) the conversation carried on organically, while for the other student (Student Y), the conversation lacked interest. Nonetheless, each student voiced their narrative and concerns of being a reverse transfer student. I saw many commonalities between each participant in some shape or form. Two concepts, failure and finance, stood out to me the most while having these conversations. Motives seemed to differ, but they all shared commonalities as to why they made the decision to reverse transfer.

### ***Failure***

Each participant shared their initial thoughts on their experiences as a reverse transfer student and what it meant to identify as a reverse transfer student. Emotions emerged from each student. Student X was really into the conversation. They were eager to share their experience with me and open to sharing many details about their transition into a community college. A notable topic within this study were feelings of failure. Coming from two student participants mostly, they believed that community college was not their ideal form to earn a post secondary degree. With the connotations community college has (these connotations came from their peers) one shared how they were ashamed of what felt like a “backwards step”. One participant even mentioned feeling like a failure towards their family members. Wanting to achieve the most from a 4-year institution, they felt they could not attain similar merit at a community college to ultimately support their family. Another participant (Student Y) acknowledged other factors that contributed towards the feeling of failure, like financial stability.

***Finances***

Finances were also brought up by each student participant. Some felt the rigorous realities of paying tuition without enough financial aid or resources. The fact that students were talking about financial worries and anxiety was difficult to hear. Making sure they could balance their work lives and their academics was a key topic that was constantly brought up during a one on one interview.

Student Y acknowledged the fact that they were aware community college was much cheaper and this is why they chose to reverse transfer. For the participant, it was an easy decision and they felt no remorse towards their actions. They were proud of themselves for making a “smart move” within their college journey.

Financial stress is a waking nightmare, and for one participant (Student X), they thought they needed to drop-out completely. Thankfully with outside support from family and friends, they found the positive side of reverse transferring. Recognizing that community college can progress the journey of earning your degree and doing it without breaking the bank was enough to keep them going and hopeful to transfer back to earn their bachelor’s degree.

***Stigma***

While the negative connotation affected the student’s emotions towards their journey of post secondary education, it all tied into the topic of stigma. Intersectional stigma was brought to my attention when students began to share their hidden characteristics by bringing up minoritized populations. There were brief literary sketches that highlighted their appearances to me even with their cameras off. Mentioning, gender, race, and socioeconomic status during the one on one interviews.

All students held intersectional stigma and typically experienced feelings of defeat, missteps, or poor self-concept. I noticed students connecting and correlating the different identities they held. An example shared was being family-oriented and needing to take care of their family members, but feeling like community college would not give them that opportunity to

support their family in the long run. This seemed to stem from socially accepting what they heard or saw from the media or in discussion with peers.

**Table 1**

*Quotes from Cycle 2, One on one interviews*

Participant	Transferred From	Quote
Student X	USD	I felt like a failure, sort of like a college dropout... I thought I was never going to come back from this. To top it off, telling people that I left USD to go to a community college was embarrassing and I still don't like to mention my current school because of the connotations community college has."
Student Y	SDSU	"On one side, I miss the four-year college experience, but on the other side I am offered cheap[er] courses." "Being an engineering major, the courses can be difficult and as a first-gen student and trying to figure out the ropes, I had to be my own support system sometimes."
Student Z	SDSU	"I decided to transfer to a community college because the [4-year] institution I was at did not make me feel at home... I also decided I no longer wanted to pursue nursing, but the unknown was very scary to face and so I was like I think I may need to move home... looking at what my options were is what I decided to do."

### **Outcomes and Changes from Cycle 2**

Understanding and talking about their experiences was a moment to reflect on misconstrued ideas. Breaking down the words they shared with me, led them to giving themselves more credit than what seemed like they had in the past. During these sessions we pondered on how some things might "happen for a reason". Completing Cycle 2 (the one on one interviews), I prepped differently for Cycle 3 (the focus group). The focus group for Cycle 3 had a planned schedule. This schedule was posted under the Google invitation notes. The student participants were given the schedule in advance. Knowing that they would be in community (in a



virtual space) with other students who identify as reverse transfer students, the schedule would put them at ease to prepare. This was to accommodate the nerves I felt from the one to one interviews. It is possible nerves were not present for the participant either.

The schedule presented a short timeframe for students to share their narratives with one another. The schedule refrained from strict technical rules. Student participants were allowed to keep their cameras off if they desired.

### **Cycle 3 Results & Findings**

In Cycle 3, students were able to be in community with other students who also shared a similar experience or identity as themselves. For all participants, it was their first time amongst other reverse transfer students. They all shared how they didn't know other students who also reverse transferred. For one participant, they found the focus group as a starting point to find more support for student's like themselves. They felt connected to the study more so than they had expected to. Students seemed to agree that they could have used more support from the four-year institution rather than the two-year institution. Living during the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, they felt like this was also a factor in their decision to reverse transfer, although this was not mentioned during one on one interviews.

#### **Finding Others Just Like You**

There was a lot of support that occurred during the conclusion of the focus group. Each participant acknowledged in their closing breath terms that made them feel at ease, like *grateful*, *supported*, and *acknowledged*. The power of sharing their narratives with one another, gave them the opportunity to create change and build upon next steps for this underrepresented population. Keeping cameras off the entirety of the time did not seem to keep them from being connected. This spoke volumes to the power of voice and how it builds bonds in an unforeseen way.

Towards the end of the focus group, the students unexpectedly spoke about the ways institutions could build community within a community. I could tell that once the students began

to feel comfortable, time had wrapped up quickly. Beyond the students looking into the organizational culture, they also expressed gratitude towards a professional who contributed their studies to students like them.

**Table 2**

*Quotes from Cycle 3, Focus Group*

Themes	Quote
Support	"It has been a pleasure to be in community with others who might have shared a similar experience as me. I feel supported by you [the researcher] as someone who seems to care about acknowledging me or just people like me."
Balance	"Reverse transferring didn't turn out to be so bad. I gained a balance in my schedule that allowed me to work and study at the same time and it was like some weight had been lifted off my shoulders, so I am thankful for things occurring the way they did."

### **Ethics of Care**

Considering the small number of participants who partook in the study, the students felt like it was possible for institutions to adopt some sort of support system in place for individuals like themselves. Talking about students who carried multiple identities, they thought about steps administrators can take in adopting adaptive approaches towards guiding and transferring students in and out of an institution. They expressed how some advising sessions helped more at their community college. This would build lots of potential for higher education administrators. When mentioning the bridge that could be built between universities and community colleges to help support the reverse transfer student population, they agreed with emojis, such as the *heart* and *thumbs up*. The overall consensus was turned towards staff who glossed over resources they could have provided early on or staff who unwillingly gave support. These factors help us understand that ethics of caring goes a long way.

### **Limitations**

Limitations of my study include the small sample size of student participants. Though I intended to have 10 reverse transfer students from multiple institutions, I ultimately ended up only being able to recruit from one institution for this study. Also, receiving a pool of 6 reverse transfer students from Cuyamaca Community College, there were only 3 students in total who participated. Thus, the results of this study may not be profiled to all reverse transfer students at Cuyamaca Community College. In addition, because the student's came from different 4-year universities, the process or direction varied in ways ethics of care, support, or narratives clashed with one another.

Conducting this study through virtual means was also a deterring factor in the way the data was collected. There were a lot of emotions that could have been interpreted incorrectly because there was a lack of using the camera during the Zoom sessions. The Covid-19 pandemic played into this study being conducted through a virtual space, and there was a lack of actually getting to meet other reverse transfer students face to face and to build community with one another. Luckily, we avoided technical difficulties. Meeting with students who manage busy schedules was another deterring factor in the study because I wondered if their focus was solely on the study during the meeting times.

### **Recommendations**

The conceptual framework that emerged from the qualitative study assessed how improving the self-concept of stigmatized students might lead to improved outcomes for students in community college. Further research could help divulge the reverse transfer student identity in post secondary education. While introducing this term with others in my field throughout my graduate school journey, many disclosed that they have never heard of that term before. While researching for this study, I had also recently become aware of the term for an identity I too am a part of. This is a small but huge step in the right direction. An upscaled version of this study could help determine the strength and the direction to best support reverse

transfer students. Qualitative and quantitative research on students who identify as reverse transfer could expand on their stigmatized intersectional identities and understand the diversity climate in community colleges.

Also, though not prevalent in this data and beyond the study, institutional policies and practices that stigmatize students through insitutional and strucrctual discrimination are valuable to further examine.

In addition, the question could focus or explore areas in which stigmatized students actively work to de-stigmatize themselves and their peers while creating a positive change and outlook towards the journey they find themselves in, no matter the institution they are in community with. Using their voice for the greater good could help build upon the reverse transfer student population to gain more support and care from professionals.

### **Conclusion**

Through using O'Learys (2004) method of action research, this study was able to address the question: How does intersectional stigma affect the reverse transfer population during their transition into a two-year community college and what ethics of care could be integrated? Results that were obtained through one on one interviews and a focus group acknowledged that the reverse transfer student population is real. They deal with intersectional stigmatization and may need more support than we/they think. Regardless of their motives on becoming reverse transfer students or being an outlier in this study, finding a community for these students could help their self-esteem and their academics. Students were willing to share and be vulnerable with one another. Students also mentioned that even though the transition process could have felt like a difficult time, there was at least one person who was there to support them. Whether it was a professional in the field of higher education or a friend or family member, they expressed that it was always helpful to find someone who was in your corner. The focus group allowed them to get to hear about others who have been in the same situation.

Recognizing that these students are not alone, I see ways in which institutions could adopt ethics of care for these students.

An approach would be for higher education professionals who work in admissions and student affairs play into helping reverse transfer students refrain from the “looking glass selves.” To build upon student success, understand and consider the reverse student population when it comes to changing the ethic of care and support the institution can offer. Campus personnel must work harder to perform with intention and systemically.

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## Appendix A

### Initial Reachout Email, sent to two-year institutions



Department of Leadership Studies  
Stephanie Burga  
5998 Alcalá Park  
San Diego, CA 92110-2492  
P: (760)405-4277  
sburga@sandiego.edu

September 3, 2021

To the Admissions Office of **[Insert Institution Name Here]**,

My name is Stephanie Burga, I am currently a second year M.A. Candidate at the University of San Diego. I am currently enrolled in the SOLES program for Higher Education & Leadership. This email is regarding a passion and reach topic I am conducting for my program. My research topic involves reverse transfer students, student who leave a four-year institution and enroll into a two-year institution or community college. I am wondering if I could be directed to your director or anyone who can help me further discuss this student identity to help me further this research and study I hope to finalize in May 2022.

Please let me know if you have further questions or concerns. I am looking forward to hearing back soon.

Kind Regards,

**Stephanie Burga**

University of San Diego | Higher Education Leadership, M.A. Candidate  
Graduate Assistant, Community & Leadership Development  
[sburga@sandiego.edu](mailto:sburga@sandiego.edu)

*Pronouns: she/her/ella*

## Appendix B

### Permission Letter for Cuyamaca College

Gregory Vegas  
Director of Admissions and Records  
900 Rancho San Diego Parkway  
El Cajon, CA 92019

Dear Gregory Vegas:

My name is Stephanie Burga and I am currently a second-year graduate student at the University of San Diego earning an M.A. degree in Higher Education Leadership. As a part of my graduation requirement, I am conducting an Action Research study, *Supporting Reverse-Transfer Students: From Trauma to Transition, and Triumph*. The purpose of this letter is to ask permission to work with reverse transfer students from Cuyamaca College and request assistance with participant outreach.

In my study, I will use the following process to engage with my participants:

First, have a one-on-one interview regarding the type/amount of support the student received from their 4-year institution when making the transition of going to community college. The one-on-one interview will consist of ten questions. Each participant will have the opportunity to share ending remarks. Then, the students will participate in a focus group. Students can share their success stories, participate in a group discussion, and learn more about my story as a reverse transfer student. Everything will be done virtually.

Students will be audio recorded during the one-on-one interview and focus group. All files will be erased after the study is completed in August 2022.

I would greatly appreciate your permission to engage with Cuyamaca College reverse-transfer students. If my request to conduct research with reverse-transfer students is acceptable, please confirm with a letter of permission with your signature and date on letterhead via email to: [sburga@san Diego.edu](mailto:sburga@san Diego.edu). Please note that this letter is required for the Institutional Review Board at the University of San Diego.

If you would like further clarification prior to approving this request, please feel free to contact me directly by phone at: (760)405-4277 or via email: [sburga@san Diego.edu](mailto:sburga@san Diego.edu). You may also contact my faculty advisor, Dr. Kecia C. Brown at [kecaibrown@san Diego.edu](mailto:kecaibrown@san Diego.edu) for more information about our Action Research requirements.

Thank you so much for your consideration. I look forward to hearing from you.

Respectfully,

Stephanie Burga

## Appendix C

### Approval from Cuyamaca College

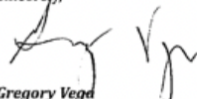


October 5, 2021

Dear Stephanie Burga:

In my capacity as Director of Admissions & Records at Cuyamaca College, I fully support the research project titled "Supporting Reverse Transfer Students: From Trauma, to Transition, and Triumph." I am prepared to support your research endeavors, which includes giving permission to recruit participants and outreach through the office of Admissions & Records. I also understand that this research will be carried out following sound ethical principles and that participant involvement in this research study is strictly voluntary and provides confidentiality of research data, as described in the consent forms.

Sincerely,



**Gregory Vega**  
Director, Admissions & Records  
Cuyamaca College  
[www.cuyamaca.edu](http://www.cuyamaca.edu)  
[gregory.vega@gcccd.edu](mailto:gregory.vega@gcccd.edu)

Admissions and Records office

900 Rancho San Diego Parkway, El Cajon, CA 92019-4369 619-660-4275 Fax 619-660-4575 [www.cuyamaca.edu](http://www.cuyamaca.edu)

## Appendix D

### Flyer



**SUPPORTING REVERSE TRANSFER  
STUDENTS: FROM TRAUMA, TO  
TRANSITION, & TRIUMPH**

# LOOKING FOR PARTICIPANTS

*Interested in sharing your story as a reverse  
transfer student? Please consider  
participating in this study. You will be asked  
to have a one-on-one interview and then  
participate in a one-hour focus group with  
other reverse transfer students via Zoom.*

---

**CONTACT: STEPHANIE BURGA  
(MA CANDIDATE AT USD)  
SBURGA@SANDIEGO.EDU**

If you identify as a reverse transfer student (someone who  
transferred from a four-year institution to a community college) and  
want to share your experience through this transition, please reach  
out!

## **Appendix E**

### **Consent Form**

# **University of San Diego Institutional Review Board Research Participant Consent Form**

For the research study entitled:  
Supporting Reverse Transfer Students: From Trauma, to Transition, and Triumph

## **I. Purpose of the research study**

Stephanie Burga is a student in the School of Leadership and Education Sciences at the University of San Diego. You are invited to participate in a research study she is conducting. The purpose of this research study is to explore the experiences of reverse transfer students currently attending a community college and to look at what support and resources look for them to be successful.

## **II. What you will be asked to do**

If you decide to be in this study, you will be asked to:

First, have a one-on-one interview with Stephanie Burga regarding the type/amount of support you received from a 4-year institution when making the transition of going to community college. The one-on-one interview will consist of the same ten questions and the opportunity to make ending remarks. No group or question will be randomized. Then, the students will participate in a focus group. The focus group will give you the opportunity to participate in a group discussion, an activity, and hear about the researcher's story as a reverse transfer student. Both events will be done virtually on Zoom. I will ask each participant to have a journal with you to jot down any thoughts and they can be shared with me if willing.

You will be audio recorded during this interview and the focus group. All files will be erased after the study is over (May 2022).

Your participation in this study will take a total of 120 minutes.

## **III. Foreseeable risks or discomforts**

**a) Sometimes when people are asked to think about their feelings, they feel sad or anxious. If you would like to talk to someone about your feelings at any time, you can call toll-free, 24 hours a day:**

**San Diego Mental Health Hotline at 1-888-724-7240**

**Or you can reach out to Cuyamaca's Health and Wellness Centre:**

**(619)660-4200**

#### **IV. Benefits**

While there may be no direct benefit to you from participating in this study, the indirect benefit of participating will be knowing that you helped researchers better understand how reverse transfer students are affected by 4-year institutions. You are now giving voice to an under-represented group of students higher education rarely focuses on.

#### **V. Confidentiality**

Any information provided and/or identifying records will remain confidential and kept in a locked file and/or password-protected computer file in the researcher's office for a minimum of 6 months. All data collected from you will be coded with a number or pseudonym (fake name). Your real name will not be used if you choose. The results of this research project may be made public and quoted in professional journals and meetings.

The information or materials you provide will be cleansed of all identifiers (like your name) and may not be used in future research.

#### **VI. Compensation**

**a) You will receive no compensation for your participation in the study.**

#### **VII. Voluntary Nature of this Research**

**Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You do not have to do this, and you can refuse to answer any question or quit at any time. Deciding not to participate or not answering any of the questions will have no effect on any benefits you're entitled to.**

**You can withdraw from this study at any time without penalty.**

#### **VIII. Contact Information**

**If you have any questions about this research, you may contact either:**

**1) Stephanie Burga**

**Email: Sburga@sandiego.edu**

**2) Kecia Brown**

**Email: Keciabrown@sandiego.edu**



**I have read and understand this form, and consent to the research it describes to me. I have received a copy of this consent form for my records.**

---

Signature of Participant

Date

---

Name of Participant (**Printed**)

---

Signature of Investigator

Date

## **Appendix F**

### **One on one Interview Questions**

1. I understand you are a reverse transfer student. Would you mind telling me about your experience when you became a reverse transfer student and what it meant to you?
2. What feelings emerged when you left your four-year institution? Was this caused unexpectedly?
3. What was the entirety of this transition process like?
4. Who did you consider your support system during this time?
5. What did you learn about yourself as a result of becoming a reverse transfer student?
6. If any, what impact did tuition have on your experience of becoming a reverse transfer student?
7. If anything, what has your current two-year institution done to support you?
8. If you could, what would you change about the process from both types of institutions [4-year & 2-year]?
9. How are you doing now that you have come to terms that you may hold a new student identity you might have not been aware of before? Or Has becoming a reverse transfer student shaped your identity today?
10. Is there anything else you could share with me about your experiences of being a reverse transfer student or what could have been most beneficial to you during this time?

**Appendix G**

## Focus Group Schedule

12:00 - 12:05	Listen to music, wait while everyone logs in
12:05 - 12:10	Introductions; name, year, where you reverse transferred from, a hobby you partake in
12:10 - 12:25	Activity; Who am I?
12:25 - 12:30	Break
12:30 - 12:35	My Story - Why I am conducting this research
12:35 - 12:55	Share YOUR narrative on the reverse transfer student identity
12:55 - 1:00	Closing; 1 breath exercise