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**Community College Transfer Student-Athlete Transition to USD: Cultivating a Campus
Village of Awareness**

Will F. Guarino

Prepared for the Degree of
Masters of Arts in Higher Education Leadership

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Acknowledgments

This paper and the research are the work of my family, friends, student-athletes, and fellow coaches because they have made me the person I have become. I genuinely believe in the strong village and my community's work, and I will be the writer of their intense labor. I will begin by honoring my mother, María, for teaching me so much about the essence of working and for sharing with me the native Indian spirit comprising deep love, intuition, healing, food, nature, and the honoring of informal education. She also shared her love of México and its rich culture with me. I also wanted to honor my father, William. His teaching values were so different. They were lessons of travel and exploration and love for large cosmopolitan cities: world culture, its food, and the game of chess. This game taught me so much about tactics and strategy that have benefited me in making sense of the world around me. I am so sorry to have lost you both at such a young age, and I thank you dearly for your sacrifices for our family. The risk you took bringing us to both sides of the Mexican-American border introduced me to understanding change and transition.

I wanted to also dedicate this to my immediate family, beginning with my life partner Michelle. I can't see life without you; I am so grateful we found one another and for your friendship, love, and spirit. I also dedicate this work to my three children: Diego, Angelo, and Gabriella, whom I love dearly. Michelle and all three mean the world to me. You also have been incredible teachers and have supported me in being a better father, husband, and coach to the many student-athletes at the University of San Diego. I am thankful that I have a family that has been so supportive. Love transcends us all, and it shows in our richness of living.

I also wanted to thank the faculty who supported me throughout my graduate experience—specifically my researcher, Dr. Cheryl Getz. You helped me as an outstanding research coach for this project.

Lastly, this study is dedicated to the USD community, a relatively new institution that has grown so much. As a transfer student, I came to USD to honor my parents' dream of attending a Catholic school. I was unaware I would spend so many years studying my passion for running, and I also thank the many student-athletes who helped me better understand it. This study is for all campus community members, for I feel connected to you all and honor your contributions to a university I hold so dear to my heart.

Abstract

The purpose of my action research project was to enhance the incoming transfer student-athlete experience from the community college system to the University of San Diego (USD). The study examined a subculture of student-athletes that met this transfer demographic on campus and explored the system that supported them. The discovery came from the powerful storytelling recorded by student-athletes as they discussed how they navigated their undergraduate dreams of pursuing their specific academic degrees at USD. The heart of the research came from the one-on-one interviews that explored their values and the support groups that helped them transition academically, socially, and athletically at USD. This activity allowed the participants to reflect upon and be self-aware about their transfer experience. Interviewing campus leaders, to include coaches and staff, gave me additional insights into connecting our campus community and adding tools to improve the community college transfer experience.

Keywords: belonging, community college transfers, student-athlete, transition

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Introduction and Social Location

My research aimed to improve the adjustment process for students transitioning from community college to being a first-year student-athlete at the University of San Diego (USD). As a campus leader, I felt a similar responsibility to minimize the first-year shock these students experience. The culture of the tribes of Northern Natal in South Africa, as discussed in *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook*, inspires me as they acknowledge people through their daily greetings. Their salutation of *sawu bona* translates into “I see you,” while the response of *sikhona* means “I am here” (Senge et al., 1994). I brought this concept to my research and the stories of the people to whom I listened. It has also permitted me to reflect on how USD can affirm those who need to be seen—a simple honoring of the way of life with those who comprise a united community.

Life is not only about adapting to change, but also maintaining ethical values to improve a community. In this case, it is to ease the pain of change for the student-athlete. Higher education leaders serve a dynamic learning village at a critical growth period of their lives. When educators detach ourselves from this purpose and care for our political aspirations; for example, when you remove yourself from your authenticity, it disrupts the needs of marginal communities seeking our inspirational leadership. To make this change, one must look at each student-athlete’s experience and help remove barriers hindering their transition. The outcome of this research is critical for opening new doors of opportunity for community college transfer students at USD. I use the metaphor of transitioning student-athletes away from the bench (i.e., staying in the dorm room) and into the playing field (i.e., campus involvement). This call to action is the purpose higher education professionals must have when serving community college transfer students.

My role at USD is to develop distance runners' athleticism and help them with their collegiate experience while they attend the university. The caring values and overall emphasis on athletic development are what I bring to the student-athletes I serve. I work with a community closely mirroring the general student population on campus. In my position, I have seen an uptick in students from community colleges. Although few, they are enough to change our limited incoming roster spots. I have also observed community college transfer student-athletes' difficulty with their first-year experience. It brings me back to what I felt while transitioning to being a student on our campus. This area of unfamiliarity and lack of belonging can trigger challenges that ultimately result in reduced self-esteem.

The voices of the student-athletes and staff interviewed challenge USD to unite and inspire the groups that support student-athletes so they can bridge gaps related to academic, athletic, and social injustices. My goal was to be objective while respecting the intersectional identities of the study participants. The research aimed to understand their experience and improve their growth, which ultimately impacts their retention and timely graduation. I leaned on my research question for grounding and guidance: How could I strengthen the academic experience of student-athletes who transfer from a community college by ensuring a positive transition to the University of San Diego?

Background

My interest in helping student-athletes who have transferred from community colleges to USD led me to understand how to enhance the qualitative experience of our campus community. A university like USD traditionally channels its resources to first-year undergraduates rather than transfer students. This strategy supports the campus's historical heritage, academic growth, buildings, and sustainable expenditure responsibilities. I looked at USD's current distributions of

academic merit (i.e., financial aid to students) to keep this perspective. Historically, these funds have been distributed solely to first-year students, not transfer students. The Torero transfer merit scholarship completed its first implementation in the 2021–2022 academic year. This investment was a significant step in assisting transfer students, but the distribution still needs to catch up to that of first-year students. First-year students can participate in an annual merit award up to \$25,000, while the transfer student can obtain a maximum yearly award of \$10,000.

The financial message sent to community college transfer students is to take a secondary position to first-year students. They are not relied on as active starters on the academic playing field. Astin's (1984) involvement theory suggested defining the playing field is essential because transfer students must be supported to engage in every segment of campus participation. Therefore, academic, athletic, social, and community participation are crucial. The bench would be the community college transfer student watching others actively engaged in campus participation while they sit out in their transition to the field of campus life. This framing is an excellent way for the campus educational community to look at the transition and push for incremental involvement from the community transfer student-athlete until they are fully engaged in campus life. Economic parity is vital because it permits the academic merit transfer student to be on the same level playing field as the first-year merit award student. They will not have to offset the additional cost by working a job, which makes it harder to transition to campus life.

Literature Review

I reviewed literature to further inform me of community college transfer issues and help me understand the problem, which will ultimately help our future students' transition and timely graduation. This research helped me understand academic transition, social balance, and

seamless adjustments addressing the needs of the transfer community college student-athlete.

The goal was to enhance the experience of this specific student demographic at USD, ultimately leading to a surge in their overall confidence and qualitative experience, and graduate with a degree permitting them to find a meaningful profession that fits their talent, financial values, and emotional needs. The literature I reviewed includes the history of community colleges, financial aid, semesters of struggle, and support systems needed for a successful transition.

History

Having a baseline of how the community college concept was born was essential for this study, which led me to begin in Chicago, Illinois, where the movement started. The literature described community college as an academic experiment that began in 1902 (Maliszewski Lukszo & Hayes, 2020). The purpose of community college was to simulate the first 2 years of the undergraduate experience at a 4-year school through work at a post-secondary high school. It allowed students to stay in their community while completing credits in preparation to transfer to the University of Chicago. This monumental agreement intended to unite two institutions by establishing definitive roles and was considered a “vertical transfer pathway-transfer from a 2-year to a 4-year college” (Taylor & Jain, 2017, p. 276). Joliet Community College prepared students academically, and the University of Chicago accepted students with credits completed at Joliet (Maliszewski Lukszo & Hayes, 2020, pp. 32-33). The evolution of this idea flourished, and California later contributed to its growth by playing a significant role in its implementation. The addition of athletic programs added layers to this experiment, bringing other challenges and opportunities for universities and community colleges to tackle, such as financial aid for students.

Financial Factors

The function of the community college has evolved into an essential bridge for many students who financially would not be able to obtain a higher education degree. Students face increasing academic costs and state schools have finite limitations for student learning capacity (Townsend & Wilson, 2006). The demand for a college education to continue the economic ascent in the workplace has increased. These variables have created a perfect storm and higher numbers of student transfer opportunities to 4-year colleges by community college students. For this study, I focused on the group identifying as community college transfer student-athletes.

Making college affordable is critical for this student demographic. The literature supports the idea that financials are the biggest concern for most transfer students. Students face significant “sticker shock” when comparing the cost of a community college education to that of a 4-year education (Gard et al., 2012). The other important factor is that many community college students tend to work while attending school due to the need to contribute financially to their education (Gard et al., 2012). The financial variable is not a new challenge but a truth as conditions push new economic thresholds. My concerns are the inflationary pressures we are witnessing in the financial markets and escalating rent, food prices, and tuition costs. These costs impact all students, specifically those who contribute financially to their education, and likely reflects the experience of community college transfer student-athletes. The escalating financial pressures on students will increase the demand for community college transfers to 4-year institutions.

Struggle and Support Systems

The literature supports the difficulties associated with the first year “semester of struggle” (Burgess & Cisneros, 2018, pp. 276-277). Other literature also coins this period as “transfer shock” (Maliszewski Lukszo & Hayes, 2020, p. 33). This change can result from the demands of

navigating the environment and new expectations that may differ from the school left behind. The difference is a similar experience faced by regular transfer students who do not participate in athletics. Student-athletes have additional pressures from adjusting to a new coach, a new team, new time management demands, and new academic and athletic systems. Additional pressures can come from a talent pool continuously competing for a spot on the roster or a starting role on a team.

The literature also points out that what is often lost when a student leaves their community college is the role family plays in the daily life of the student-athlete (Burgess & Cisneros, 2018). Community college athletes have a higher likelihood of living at home. Family support is critical because students can feel their social and emotional connections. The new student is looking at building their new family community through roommates and friends. The transfer student-athlete has an advantage because they will have a team, and if they land in a positive culture, they can potentially end up with a supplemental family support group. Relationships are vital to retaining the student-athlete. Positive relationships are often associated with student-athlete participation in rosters. Those not chosen to play on the field or court may have negative relationships with team members, including coaches (Burgess & Cisneros, 2018). This negativity can be related to roster cuts or conflicts within the team and highlights the importance of creating a supportive family within the group. These negative or positive relationships can impact the retention rate of transfer student-athletes at 4-year institutions.

Institutional agents are an essential grounding base for the transfer student-athlete. These agents are faculty and staff who inspire students (Maliszewski Lukszo & Hayes, 2020). This support group is vital to transfer student-athletes because it is something they are used to in the community college. The literature indicated transfer student-athletes worked best when they

received feedback from campus community members (Townsend & Wilson, 2006). It also discussed the importance of faculty affirmations through academic work, which help students feel more at home because they know influential leaders on campus support them.

Academic support is essential as transfer student-athletes transition from community college to a new school. Much research has focused on community college transfer students' challenges with the limitations of financial aid (Handel & Williams, 2012). I was most interested in exploring these differences with transfer student-athletes at USD and the data addressing the issue of academic readiness. The tools vital to their academic success are institutional strategies related to their educational support, particularly as they transition to USD and address their first semester or first year of school.

Context

The research site was USD, a private Catholic liberal arts institution. Its academic ranking is in the top 100 nationally and its goal is to further diversify campus to capture growing demographic trends. It is a university seeking a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) designation. It also continues to diversify its campus student body to reflect ever-increasing regional and national demographic trends. A unique aspect of this campus is that it also has a Peace and Justice Center that drives the rich ethical core values of the institution. It serves a population upwards of 8,500 graduate and undergraduate students. Approximately 440 student-athletes comprise athletic programs, including 17 Division I collegiate sports. The incoming trend line of transfer student-athletes at USD has averaged 30 student-athletes for the last cycle (2022-2023) and the institution looks to duplicate the same pattern for the upcoming academic annual year (2023-2024; V. Browne, personal communication, April 20, 2023).

My research targeted community college transfer student-athletes, who represented 17 of the approximately 450 student-athletes. This group represented 3.9% of the student-athlete population at USD. Although a relatively small group, there was plenty to learn about transitioning to USD from this academic pathway.

My connection to this research is that I once was a community college transfer student to USD. I transferred as an undergraduate from Southwestern Community College. My current role at the institution is the head men's and women's cross country and track coach for 20 years. My oversight in the program deals with recruiting, training, fundraising, alumni relations, and the development of male and female student-athletes. Relationship-building is critical to daily tasks, and includes helping athletes attain personal goals through group and individual coaching. It requires a time investment to continuously check in regarding the strategic and tactical planning necessary to obtain their athletic, academic, and social goals. I work with approximately 40 student-athletes per year. A challenge for me in this research study was my authority role at the institution. I had to be aware of power dynamics and look for ways to gain and maintain the trust necessary to acquire the truth and improve the community college transfer student-athlete experience.

This topic is essential because I serve a student population important to me. After all, they remind me of my own experience. As both an educator and a campus leader, I believe any vulnerable student population must receive the necessary services to help them minimize the risk of failure. The study's outcomes will increase retention and contribute to students' chances of becoming positive contributors to society, especially if they are supported, validated, and given the tools to grow as student-athletes. Positive experiences and affirmations of their work and culture will signal to students they matter on campus (Schlossberg, 1989) as they focus on a

qualitative educational experience leading to a degree and ascent to a post-graduate profession. It was essential to create this awareness and I therefore worked with other campus community members to improve the organization. This action research project stems from my personal experiences to improve the community college transfer process. The aim was purely to make a professional change from the moral view of the needs of transfer student-athletes. I cared for the students, treated them with respect, and recruited them to make changes through the research outcomes. My participants included the academic, scholar, and support staffs, and I also interviewed coaches who interact with community college transfer students.

Project Rationale

When exploring research topics, I learned about the difficulty of the first year of school for transfer students. The issue allowed me to reflect on my transfer and undergraduate experience at USD and made me reflect on the students on my teams with the most challenging time transitioning. I identified those students who transferred in and also those who attended community college. The literature supported the observations and genuine concerns I have had with this transition period. After reviewing this need, I felt responsible for researching this topic and creating an action plan.

I approached Ron Valenzuela, who oversees academic support for student-athletes and is my acting supervisor. I sought his direction, perspective, and assistance in further exploring my topic. Some intersectional research connects transfer students, commuter students, students of color, community college students, and first-generation students. I focused on the community college transfer student-athlete. USD is predominantly a first-year freshman school. Changes in financial and demographic trends in higher education place transfer students in a growth segment in higher education. I used action research as the method of understanding the current transition

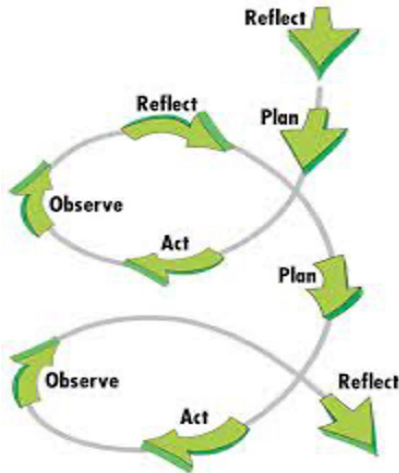
of community college student-athletes at USD, which permitted me to listen to the stories of student-athletes undergoing this difficult period of transition. I also used this action research to interview members of our campus community. My aim was to listen to and seek input from our current staff and administrators regarding their views on improving the transition for community college transfer student-athletes. I felt it was important they voiced both obstacles and an appreciation for the incremental growth they saw in improving the transition. The last step of this action research was to make recommendations for improving the community college transfer system for student-athletes at USD, ultimately addressing ways to better support them and ensure their academic success, involvement, athletic growth and overall wellness.

Research Design

Embarking on this action research project was exciting. Being the researcher permitted me to be one with the participants as we worked together to look for meaningful ways to improve our system and community. I used the reflect-plan-act-observe cycle (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988), which continuously rolls into repeated cycles (see Figure 1). This model helped me observe the connection between the participants and the data. To me, the power came from the reflection, as it allowed me to craft ways to approach the study and form conclusions authentic to situations, stories, and outcomes. I appreciated this model as it allowed me to enter the research process through the steps fitting the given moment.

Figure 1

Kemmis and McTaggart's (1988) Action Research Model



Note. This figure demonstrates the four steps of the action research model. They are: reflect-plan-act-observe cycle that duplicates again. Kemmis and McTaggart designed the model. The figure is from the Scribd website.

(<https://www.scribd.com/doc/232329702/Action-Research-Model-by-Kemmis-and-McTaggart>).

My epistemological stance on learning worked well with translating ambiguity and exploring the information discovered. A variable can impact the outcome of an environment. Therefore, capturing as much detail as possible to build a story and paint a complete picture is essential. I enjoyed seeing the factors influencing the outcome of the situations explored during the research. This outlook reflects my way of life, my experiences, and a cumulation of my formal and informal education.

This action research project aimed to make systemic improvements to the future environment or system for those taking on student-athlete roles. I wanted to empower the participants to extract the learning necessary for change. I enjoyed the framework's simplicity and loved how it captured the synergy from the gathered data. The reflection's advantage was allowing one to take a step back, analyze the data, and connect it to the humans it impacted. I

like how the cyclical process allowed me to coexist with the study participants. The approach enhanced community learning and led to shared decision-making and creating a better system. It is a democratic approach mirroring the community's continuous building of a village. The cyclical process matches my leadership style of listening to the ideas of the community and using the data to adjust to the community's needs. This action research is relevant because it sought the participatory engagement of community college transfer student-athletes.

One of the strengths of the method is it allows for co-learning. It is not a stale nor didactic approach requiring a top-down directive. It is an even wheel exchange that acts, observes, and reflects as all become researchers in progress. A qualitative approach works with human dynamics through verbal and nonverbal communication. The power came from the exchanges done through interactions and reflections that allowed us to learn continuously.

Participants

The participants for this study were eight community college transfer student athletes enrolled in active team rosters at USD and eight administrators and staff members from different departments. Once potential students were identified, I recruited them by email and asked them to participate in the research. I relied on athletic peers who knew the population to help me identify students. I also leaned on the academic support staff who interacts with student-athletes. The student pool for this study was minimal, so I knew I had limited participants to secure. Initially, the design was for the students to participate in an initial meeting that included a demographic questionnaire. Then they would return for a follow-up one-on-one interview incorporating two simple drawing exercises to help them reflect on their transition experience at USD. The individual interviews included semi-structured in-depth interview questions based on

their experience at USD (see Appendix A). These methods allowed flexibility for clarification and the opportunity to explore and reveal additional information.

One-on-one interviews also took place with eight administrators and staff members. This data collection segment aimed to gain the perspective of those supporting the transfer student-athlete experience at USD. I wanted to build a group with the passion and drive to improve the community college transfer experience so I sought eight community members who worked at USD. I wanted different perspectives so I had various departments represented with diversity of gender, ethnicity, age, and experience. I wanted to tap into people with information to ensure a comprehensive view of the variety of campus experiences. Participants for my study were selected based on convenience sampling, with the first step being the participating teams on our athletics website. Secondly, I had a conversation with our compliance officer who reports athletic participation in each section to validate the integrity of the athletic roster. Once Ron Valenzuela granted permission, I emailed the community college student transfer population about the study's objective and requested their involvement. As the principal investigator, I video-recorded all interviews and carefully connected the names associated with each participant during the student demographic survey and the one-on-one meetings. I used the recorded video interviews and the art prompts as my data. After the study's completion and the data review, all recordings and identifiers associated with the participants were deleted to ensure the privacy and anonymity of the participants. The students were reminded the study focused on improving the community college transfer student-athlete experience at USD. They had the freedom to leave the study at any stage and I assured them I intended to focus purely on hearing and ultimately telling the stories of participants like them.

Data Collection

The study took place on the USD campus. The objective was to identify student-athletes who met the criteria of studying at a community college and then transferring to USD. The aim was also to gather information for the research, beginning with a questionnaire participants completed during the first cycle of the study. The information collected included participants' demographic data and the athletic and academic goals they set for themselves at USD. My intention was to gain the authentic experience of the participants through storytelling, which occurred in Cycle 2b of the research. This process provided me with the opportunity to interview student-athletes individually. I led athletes through a semi-formal question session focused on listening and asking questions that dug deeper into their unique academic journey at USD, if needed. Because I did most of my research in the participants' environment, I gathered information about where they do their athletic work with team members. This experience permitted me to connect with them and collect more data than if the athletes had come to a designated area I had chosen.

The process of data gathering for administrators and staff was similar. This aspect of the research came through Cycle 2b and focused on individual interviews and meeting the administrators or staff in their workplace. The questions were limited and focused on understanding the system from the viewpoint of those who supported student-athletes. The secondary objective was to collect ideas to improve the transfer system of the community college transfer student-athletes at USD.

This action research intended to have a third cycle, but I was unable to complete this. The original goal was to share information and have the student-athletes connect and discuss their experiences through storytelling and support one another in a focus group setting. The limitations

all participants faced were time, competition, and scarcity. All were serving the same timepiece, juggling the time required to manage academics, training, rehabilitation, recovery, travel, matches, weather delays, and overtime games; there is also the value of time spent freely after a competition to recharge the energy system. San Diego faced a unique year of record-setting rain storms that impacted practices, games, and travel. This uncharacteristic weather not only created changing obstacles for the participants, but it also gave me a unique setting to understand student-athletes in an adaptive environment.

The last type of data collection I enjoyed was taking notes in my research journal. This journal helped me stay on task, set project goals, and record notes that led me to appreciate the research process, the participants, and the learning that blossomed. Being a sole researcher can be a lonely experience, but when you have a place to record data and explore, it brings life to the research.

Pre-Cycle: Preparing for the Work

My IRB approval came via email in mid-January when I was inside the famous Guadalajara Cathedral, the symbol of Guadalajara, a structure built in 1541. The IRB gods had removed the weight so I could now embark on the project. The semester was about to begin. I was excited to start my action research work. When I returned to San Diego, I began speaking to coaches about the research and requested their experience and insights. I began laying the foundation of support and the preliminary discussions necessary to start the project.

The first place I began my pre-cycle was the annual Alcalá Bazaar on USD's campus. This event takes place at the beginning of every semester and allows campus clubs to solicit and recruit students to get involved in school. I set the goal of analyzing the physical event and placed myself in the mindset of a community college transfer student. I wanted to test the

campus's culture for supporting the community college transfer student-athlete. I used the physical measurement of Schein's (2004) organizational culture model, which looks at an organization's values and beliefs. The test was how a community college transfer student-athlete might perceive an invitation to get involved on campus. I was seeking a transfer identity or an invitation to connect the student to the campus, so I walked around the Alcalá Bazar searching for a space where a group of students or a person could be my connection. I sought help finding a transfer booth or a group of students recruited at the event. I found other clubs with intersectional connections through academics, outdoor adventures, and other involvement. I spoke to two different organizers, and the third organizer led me to a vacant booth, which was disheartening. This scene gave me a clue about the values USD supports for the general transfer student culture. I immediately found an opportunity that could strengthen the values of the transfer identity.

Later in the week, I ran into one of the research participants on campus. I had spoken to him about the research idea in the fall. He told me he had spoken to his professor at the beginning of the semester and the professor had asked him to invite me to introduce my action research to the class. This was a class focused on communication while also connecting transfer students. The participant felt it would be good for me to have an academic insight into a course connected to students' transfer experience. I was unaware of this opportunity and was glad to visit the session. I ended up speaking to the class one early morning at the beginning of the spring semester and presented my research theme. Many students were intrigued as we discussed how they felt like the outgroup of the social transfer experience at USD. I could read the room utilizing my group relations training and connected their experiences and perceptions; it seemed like they were in the earlier part of their USD transition. As an example, I noticed they had surprised facial expressions when we discussed how it felt to be at USD while still carrying the

emotions of our past experiences. I understood the beginning of the semester had an impact on them as well. It was a valuable insight for the research study as it permitted me to see a class helping students transition into the mainstream while also allowing them to build connections with members of the campus community with similar experiences.

Cycle 1

My recruitment efforts targeted the 17 student-athlete participants who met the research criteria. The first cycle of the research incorporated a welcome meeting that the selected community college transfer student-athletes attended. I invited athletes to attend one of two different sessions on March 15th and 16th. The objective was to welcome them to the research study in person and have them complete a demographic and personal data questionnaire (Appendix B). I also wanted them to sign their consent form to participate in the study. This information would give me an understanding of their unique backgrounds.

It was March 15th and time to begin the formal steps toward the study. I purchased pizza for the participants, printed the questionnaires and community college student-athlete consent forms, and was excited to meet the participants. I walked into the meeting spot on campus, the Warren Room, set it up, and waited. There was silence, for nobody showed up on the first day. An athlete who appeared to be a football player came in. I asked the student if he was here for the meeting. He answered he thought he was in the wrong room. He saw nobody in the conference room and left. I never found out if he was one of the participants, but I observed that he was dressed the part and walked in as a participant. Still, once he found out nobody was around, he returned to his other obligations. This space gave me some reflection time to plan and act. I quickly felt I needed to get the research started, so once I put the pizza items away, I went directly into action mode.

After this initial debacle, I tried another tactic. I walked into one of the coaching offices and asked one of the assistant coaches if I could speak to some players who met the study criteria. I walked into their offices carrying a recruiting flier (Appendix C). He asked me to return in 15 minutes, for they were about to begin practice. I walked back over and spoke to the four athletes and a team followed them to listen to the research pitch. Some other athletes were transfer students and they wanted to know if they could be part of the research. I informed them the key to this research was they needed to be a community college transfer student-athlete, not a 4-year school transfer. I focused on the athletes who met the criteria, gave them an overview of the research, and had them ask questions and complete the demographic and student-athlete consent paperwork. Three athletes agreed to participate.

After having success, I walked to another office and asked if I could speak with the coaches. My observations were a read of physical stress, meaning it was not a good time to talk about opening an opportunity to discuss research. The staff was unfamiliar with me outside of an athletic context and the discussion of research was rightfully outside of the athletic domain. I then walked to the third sports team and began to discuss the study, and one of the coaches there was intrigued. It was an opportune time for him to discuss an athlete having trouble transitioning and wanted to gain insights from the research. After speaking with the coach informally for nearly an hour, we shared information about community college transfer student-athletes. I quickly found that members in athletics preferred to deal with in-moment experiences, as it is an environment where athletes and their coaches feel more comfortable. I reflected on this experience, that athletes and coaches choose to meet each other where they felt at home. This action set the tone for the research and I made it a priority to meet the athletes, coaches, staff,

and administrators where they felt most at ease, which is where they were at. This became the theme that drove my research cycles.

The next day, March 16th, was another Cycle 1 make-up day. I had one athlete who showed up to complete his demographic questionnaire and consent form. We discussed his experience and excitement to participate in the participant group. His biggest concern was the time limitations because he felt he was juggling academics, athletics, and social life during his competitive season. I assured him I would commit to valuing his time as a research participant. I concluded the cycle by attending the remaining student-athlete athletic practices or meeting environments.

Cycle 1 Findings

The demographic questionnaire gave me data to better understand the participants. This information (see Table 1) permitted me a baseline for my one-on-one interviews.

Table 1

Participant Information

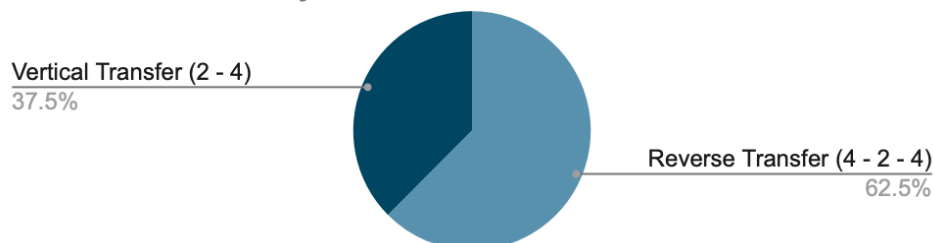
Pseudonym	Age	Degree	USD Pathway	Transferred Units	AA Degree	Racial Identity
Daria	21 +	Undergraduate	2 - 4	31-45	Yes	Mexican
Hendrix	21 +	Undergraduate	4 - 2 - 4	46-60	Yes	Caucasian
Karla	21 +	Undergraduate	4 - 2 - 4	46-60	Yes	Hispanic & Pacific Islander
Robert	21 +	Undergraduate	2 - 4	16-30	Yes	Caucasian
Grant	21 +	Graduate	2 - 4	61-80	Yes	Caucasian
Carter	21 +	Undergraduate	4 - 2 - 4	46-60	No	Two or more
Jordan	21 +	Undergraduate	4 - 2 - 4	N/A	No	African American
Zion	21 +	Undergraduate	4 - 2 - 4	31-45	Yes	African American

The findings of Cycle 1 were that I would be dealing with an older group, for all of them were 21 and older. They were primarily working on their undergraduate degree, as only one participant was working on their graduate degree, and 37.5% of the athletes followed a vertical transfer pathway, meaning they took the traditional route from a community college to USD. Each of the vertical transfers obtained an associate degree. “Reverse transfers” are also referred to as “drop-downs” (Townsend, 2001, p. 33). Athletes who transferred from a 4-year college to a 2-year college and then to USD were the dominant force, representing 62.5% of the population surveyed which is reflective of USD’s academic campus culture, as a private liberal arts college (see Figure 2).

Figure 2

Community College Transfer Student-Athlete Pathway to USD

Transfer Pathway to USD



Regarding units transferred to USD by the participants, 75% brought 31 or more units to USD. One participant did not complete the unit credits question. This void in data indicated to me the student was possibly facing an academic struggle. Further supporting this assumption was that he was one of the two student-athletes who did not transfer with his associate’s degree. What I found interesting is that 50% brought over 46 units to USD. These excess units gave me an indication they had a long road to USD as they sought their academic journey.

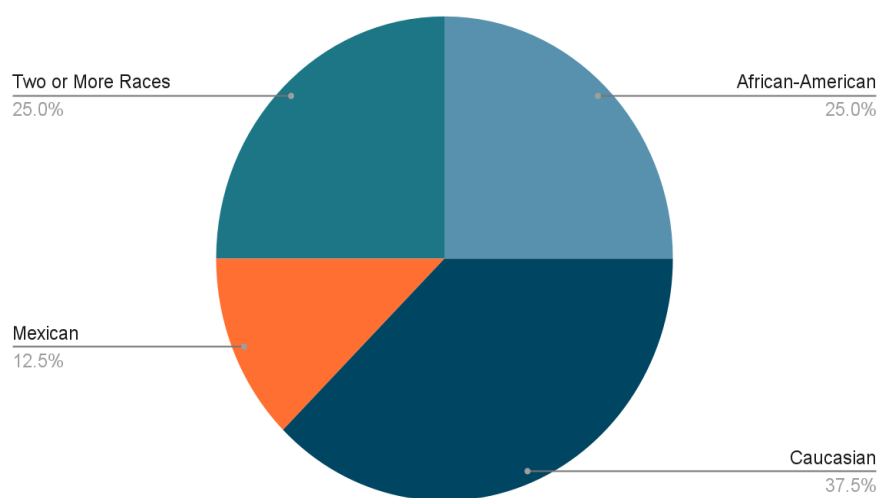
USD is a Catholic school, and 75% of the participants followed this identification as Catholic or Christian. Racial identification results were: 37.5% Caucasian, 12.5% Mexican, 25%

African American, and 25% two or more races (see Figure 3). Lastly, only 12.5% had a job this semester and 87.5% were enrolled full-time. The athletes also responded they came from a two-person household.

Figure 3

Participant Enrollment by Race or Ethnicity

Enrollment by Race or Ethnicity



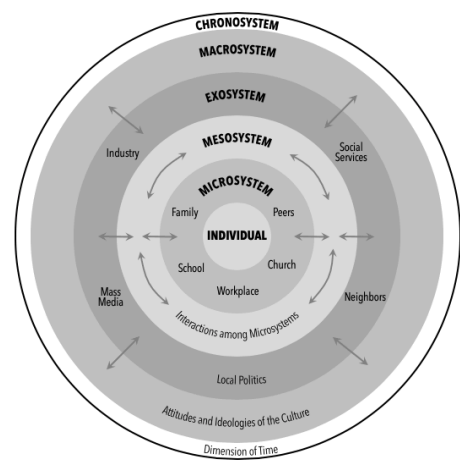
From a qualitative perspective, the study took me to the training environments of the student-athletes and “Meet Me Where I Am” surfaced as a theme. This approach gave me insights into the physical environment provided for student-athletes through the locker rooms, fields, courts, hang-out areas, and formal offices. Most athletes I spoke to seemed pressed for time; they respected me but felt they had to transition to their practice. I enjoyed their interactions with teammates. Each gave signs of connection through fist bumps and warm embraces. The second theme I saw was student-athletes preferred in-moment experiences. The athletes enjoyed tackling the research head-on and choose not to wait for the next cycle. They were always asking what was next. The reaction was not out of obligation; they were very business-like, for the activity was a challenge for them. This action was similar to their

competitions and how they were mentally prepared to react to game-like situations. The third theme I obtained from this cycle was “Let’s Get it Done.” They thanked me for coming to them as they felt comfortable in their team setting, adjusting to them in their environment, and viewing a much more authentic version of themselves.

Cycle 2a: Interviews with Student-Athletes

As discussed in the introduction, the purpose of Cycle 2 was individual interviews. I choose this platform to understand the student-athletes and their stories better. I also decided to video-record these meetings in person. I could have done this via Zoom, as it would have been more efficient, but being present to capture as much of the moment as possible was essential. The plan incorporated two drawing prompts that the participants completed to help capture their ideas and feelings. In the first microsystem drawing (Appendix D) participants identified the interactions between them and those with whom they are in contact. In the second mesosystem drawing (Appendix E) the student athletes were asked to draw their circles of culture at USD through their interactions on campus. These warm-up exercises helped the student-athletes draw meaningful connections and prepared them for their individual interview.

I used the two first rings of ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1977), which are the microsystem and mesosystem. I did this to capture the environment that most impacted the student-athlete on campus. I aimed to go all in and obtain those variables—people, media, buildings, neighborhoods, nature, and symbols—that made the students be themselves. I chose to exclude the three other systems because I wanted to concentrate on the community college transfer student-athlete experience through the eyes of the participant at USD (see Figure 4).

Figure 4*Ecological Systems Theory*

Note. This figure demonstrates ecological systems theory framework designed by Urie Bronfenbrenner (1977). The model explores the five rings that environmentally impact the individual. This image was adapted from an online image that is posted on the Discourses on Learning in Education website. (<https://learningdiscourses.com/discourse/ecological-systems-theory/>).

The student-athlete was the subject, but the microsystem's influence (Appendix D) captured the direct interaction between student-athletes and those with whom they are in contact. The second drawing intentionally captured the mesosystem (Appendix E) to connect the relationship between the microsystem and the energy that supported them. This preparation was intended to create a visual of participants' on-and off-campus environments. Student-athletes were given up to 10 minutes to complete both exercises to help them capture their ideas. I chose not to record this part of the interview, giving the student-athlete the space to transition to the study and giving them the space necessary to reflect in the moment.

After concluding the drawing, we went into the 24 questions covering their experience, goals, and activities. The second section explored areas of campus support and how they used the support, and the last segment of questions dealt with family and team transition. The questions were semis-structured, which gave me the flexibility to ask clarifying questions to appreciate and further explore the information shared by the participants.

Cycle 2A: Findings

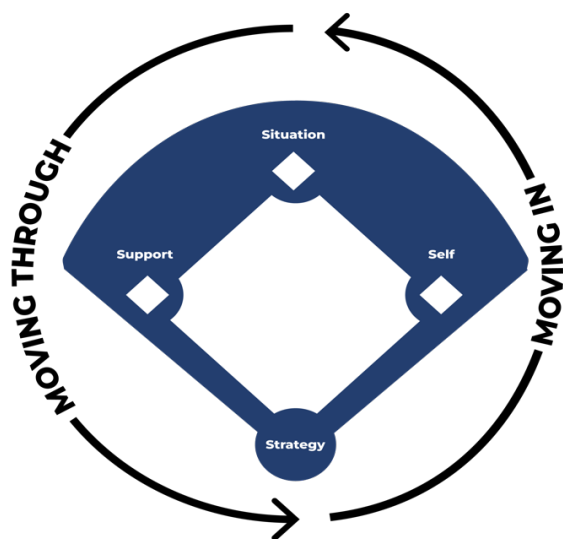
I used the framework of transition theory (Schlossberg, 1984) to help me decipher and categorize the themes I heard and coded through the storytelling journey of the student-athlete at USD. It is a valuable model with tools to help students understand the transition stage they are facing. Schlossberg (1984) used the 4 S's as the foundation of the model: self, situation, support, and strategy. An essential piece of this model is the dynamic movement that takes place as a student goes through the stages of "moving in, moving through, and moving out" (Chickering & Schlossberg, 1995, pp. 3-248). This study focused solely on moving in and moving through, looking at the macro view of student-athletes' chronological experiences during their transition to USD. Moving out deals with graduating from USD and transitioning into the professional world, travel, or graduate work; this study did not deal with this phase. It is still essential to look at each event in a student-athlete life through all three movements. These events are necessary to recognize as student-athletes constantly face multiple transitions. I want to highlight this because each experience is unique and cannot be predicted, but can be anticipated. The storytelling shared by the participants reinforced this, for all had a different phase connecting them from moving in to moving through. The critical variable is how they faced the situation and were supported to tackle it. The community college student-athlete transition can take one semester or 1 year for an athlete to feel at home at USD. Those athletes who do not progress toward making

USD their home can potentially get thrown out and return home. The moving through component of the model was the academic, social, cultural, or athletic challenges the student-athletes need to overcome. This 4 S's process is significant to highlight and it sets the stage for the baseball metaphor. Student affairs professionals, coaches, and professors who support these students can strengthen the bridge by understanding and applying the theory in action. In other words, I take Schlossberg's 4S theoretical framework and operationalize it into a model for coaches and academic professionals to use for community college transfer student-athletes.

The beauty of this model is that one can plug in all of these variables and analyze the individual and their situation once support is given and build a strategy to move forward. I begin with the self simply because this is what one brings to the university. The self, in this case, represents the community college transfer student-athlete. In baseball or softball terms, the self is first base, the situation is second base, support is third base, and strategy brings one home (see Figure 5).

Figure 5

The 4 S's Connection to USD Student-Athlete Participants



Note. This figure captures the community college student-athlete "moving in" and "moving through" themes (Chickering & Schlossberg, 1985) of the participant study. It connects them to the 4 S's transition theory framework by Schlossberg (1984). This image is my own work

In the spirit of meeting the athletes where they were in their transition, I was inspired to connect the themes I heard to a baseball or softball diamond that followed their transition phases. I love running, and to me, base running is movement. I visualized the student-athletes action as to the emotional hurt to move forward, which they feared, but they had to get over, for it was vital for their development. It is time to analyze the participants' path toward finding a home at USD.

1st Base - Understanding Self

Each story expressed the energy that all student-athletes were excited to begin their journey at USD—the metaphor of getting on base as the start of the student-athlete experience and beginning with the understanding of the self. One described the experience as “a culture shock in every single way possible.” Each of the athletes interviewed discussed how they had to look within to understand themselves and begin looking at their values to make sense of the differences. They began to feel homesick, for these self-values brought them back emotionally to what they left behind. The interviews brought out their appreciation for who they were. It was what Alan S. Waterman describes as the philosophical identity understanding of the “true self” (Waterman, 1984, p. 332). One student-athlete participant said, “I love where I grew up, so like, I am going to say it has the best food ever and the hardest working people too.” Another athlete spoke about the difficulty of integrating into the campus at first, and much had to do with her cultural identity as this athlete did not talk to people outside of their team at first. The athlete would drive around outside of campus seeking people that identified with whom she was

comfortable. She needed that validation as she transitioned through a different cultural impact because the school was not as diverse, and there was more affluence at USD than she was used to. Another athlete spoke about being overwhelmed. “I am plopped down into the whole new world, a big city.” Students faced loneliness as they looked to adapt to the school. One student discussed, “I did not have a social life my first two months here.” The interviews revealed the stories of the family left behind, the teams, rooms, coaches, or teammates. This self-reflection was vital for what arose was their purpose as they were going through to a new transition regardless of where the shock was coming from.

2nd Base - Facing the Situation

Now to move to the second base, the situation connected to the self-analysis. It gauges the situation as one translates emotions to the new world. A student-athlete spoke about her first-year challenges, and said “I felt like a fish out of water my first year here. I had no friends; I did not mind, for I was trying to make sense of the new world here.” What was essential was to capture the direction the participant was emotionally facing. One of the athletes said, “When I first arrived, I was physically here, but emotionally, I was still there.” In other words, the closer they looked at the home base, the more they avoided the second base situation. The moment they looked at facing the shock, the better they navigated through the situation they entered. Essentially diving into second base with all of their might to avoid failure and potentially getting called out. This fuel of purpose allowed the student-athletes to gain the confidence to step out of the base and begin to face their opponent. In this case, the situation.

Academic Challenge

The theme of challenge that resonated with me was how the athletes felt they had to improve their academic intensity. As a student-athlete, one student described their transition “It

was intense. I had to stay on top of school and my sport. There was no playroom, or else I would never catch up.” “The demands are so much higher at USD,” another athlete described as they saw community college as a build-up but still appreciated their collegiate ascent and experience. Regardless, each student-athlete told the story of the need to push the first year at USD to a higher rigor.

Athletic Challenge

The transition that was equally eye-opening for community college transfer student-athletes was the first day of official practice. All of the athletes discussed the first day they showed up to practice. It was a critical moment for them, for many felt they were the stars of their teams and the state community college where they came from. Once practice began, they were shocked at the similar talent. One athlete said they mentioned, “I all of a sudden felt like there were so many athletes that were the same.” One athlete described that this pressure was tremendous for him, and blending the academic pressure on top of it made him feel, at times, like leaving. Another athlete described how he was used to being the big dog, and now he felt like a puppy. Things came so quickly for him; this was the moment of truth. One of the participants said, “It was just different. The game’s speed had changed. The pace of the ball, preparation, drills, flexibility, and practices was so intense.” As a researcher, I asked what got them through this, and an area that many touched upon was the self-talk that made them cope with the belief that they could rise to the challenge. Coaches helped, older athletes supported, and only 37.5% sought sports or clinical guidance professionally.

3rd Base - Support in Binary Dynamics

When rounding second base fast, looking at your third base coach for support is critical. No communication or support, and a good throw fired at the situation covering 2nd will quickly

get you out. A theme of support that I found interesting is the binary connection between transfer student-athletes. For example, it captured the foundational relationship between two athletes determined to overcome their challenges. They had a bond from going through a new experience at USD and being able to relate to their experiences in leaving their previous school. The limited time a community college athlete has at an institution, and the feeling of being an outsider create this incredible support dynamic that can be with another team member experiencing the same situation (Schlossberg, 1989). One student-athlete interviewed said, “The closest friend on the team, she is also a transfer. We connect easier because we are both oddballs.” This appreciation was supported in another interview by looking at the interaction between two teammates that had back-to-back interviews after one another. The athlete waited for us to complete our formal interview. Once the camera went off, it was beautiful to see the connection between two friends who cared for one another, spoke endearingly of their friendship, and supported it through their microsystem drawing activity. I was able to witness a similar interaction with another team. Yes, they were teammates, but the chemistry between dear friends going through the same journey creates an electric and powerful bond to witness if one can recognize it. Lastly, this binary dynamic helps support the transition. I interviewed one of the athletes, and the multiple questions gave me constant support for his loyalty to teammates that transferred. I asked him a probing question to reflect on his connections with the people he had been roommates with historically. He answered that he had never thought about transfer connection and felt that it naturally came to be organically, precisely, orbiting towards other transfer connections to create support and community.

This connection between the two people was critical to my research. It was the moment I captured athletes gaining the support to tackle the situation head-on, gaining another member’s

perspective as they were uniting to beat the situation. This support gave the student the confidence to charge forward. Support came from other sources, including coaches, roommates, family, and friends. The theme I captured was finding a friend who had or was going through your experience.

Bring me Home

Being an aggressive base runner takes time to come naturally. It comes after you gain the synergy given by a team. This determination includes the confidence earned by your success and intelligent base running as coaches give you the green light to go home. A good base runner relies on their intuition and utilizes momentum gained. This power comes from support and often by gaining a friend on the team who believes in you and supports you in achieving your purpose. Those teams with a culture of bringing in community college transfer student-athletes seemed to have a better bridge to help those entering USD. Most participants needed to have that foundation in place in their teams. They faced the social adjustment for the team that mirrored what would happen on campus. Those that came in as first-year students had their established friends. One described it as the “outsider looking in.” Many athletes’ breakout points occurred when they started excelling athletically. “Things changed when I started getting on base and stealing them.” Another athlete described their experience: “My team treated me differently when I had success. I was now a contributor. The junior college kid can play.” The stories displayed the confidence gained as the student connected to their potential. This embrace of team acceptance helped the student-athlete come home. This movement is the intrinsic essence of moving in, and once achieved, you feel like you belong at home.

Cycle 2B Interviews with Administrators and Staff

I wanted to understand the community college transfer experience, but I needed to do it by understanding our system at USD. I sought to gather a group of people that would educate me and help me build this system. I could not understand this alone without the help of the professionals whose work and passion are to help students with this transfer identity. Exploring this experience and capturing and sharing information with the other USD campus leaders was vital.

It would require work to recruit this group. I reflected on who would join me. I would seek help from the central departments that supported the community college student-athlete experience. I sought balance, professionalism, and the intention to seek help from people that would educate me and embrace the guiding question of this study. After the lesson learned about recruiting people through email, I recruited people in person. I would have time in my day to recruit for the study. This activity is natural as it is part of my coaching job. I would have to change hats, gain trust, and also sell the idea of what their role was. I also could not violate my authority or the confidence they shared with me, which I assured them from the beginning. I also wanted the video to capture all of the information to protect the data's integrity. In the spirit of meeting people where they were and capturing their environment, I made it a point to stick to the theme that evolved throughout the research. These in-office meetings would make the formal informal by allowing people to relax in their workspace.

I developed eight research questions focused on gaining system knowledge and ideas to help the community college transfer student-athletes (Appendix F). The interviews were video recorded, similar to cycle 2a dealing with student-athletes.

Cycle 2B Findings

The findings gained through these interviews were information gathered on systems and processes. I was impressed that USD had a transfer living community (TLC), which gave transfer students a place to live in community with other transfer students. The opportunity in this aspect would be to connect the student-athletes to this living community. I learned that we had several formal classes that supported the transfer student, as I found through one of the participants during the pre-cycle. I loved hearing how one of the members that teach it is having fun as he is learning through the transfer experience. The ethics course connects them to their transition and the institution's core values.

From a student perspective, the transfer student had support within the organizational structure through peer group mentors. These agents of support are called TSA (Transfer Scholastic Assistants). They are students with experience with the first year of shock and they help new students navigate the waves of the first year.

I could see the financial picture of how USD deals with one of the significant obstacles learned from the literature review. USD was tackling the academic aid piece in two areas: it had increased academic community college transfer students through a merit award. This scholarship was in its second year of implementation.

I gained information on the systems and processes I was looking for. The gain I also received from administrators and staff was the formative experience as we shared our ideas and gathered feedback. It was a sounding board of people that kept me on the rail, not to get lost in the data and make meaning out of it. I wanted angles and views to reflect on this valuable transition. I ultimately gained a group that also wanted to be heard and wanted to share their beliefs on making things better for the community college transfer student.

A significant voice that threaded all of the administrative interviews was the need for a transfer center at USD. The findings of these discussions included two overarching themes: Involvement and Support. All coaches and staff interviewed felt that the transfer student-athletes needed to be involved in more than their sport. They respected the time boundaries but brought up that to get the true benefit of a liberal arts college USD experience. They would have to engage in the campus village life socially and academically. The second central theme discussed was the support needed that the community transfer students faced as they transitioned to USD. The cultural and academic tools and the teaching needed through an informal yet formal environment to teach transfer students how to navigate their new culture and embrace the USD community as their own. Many professionals in the study discussed that there was no ordinary place on campus for student-athletes to mix with other than their teams. The suggestion was to build a center to connect the students with others navigating the transfer process. The demographics of those interviewed consisted of eight senior-level university professionals who averaged 13 years of experience and incorporated five men and three women who represented white, black, and Latin race groups.

One outlier coaching participant discussed the pathway international students take from Community College and then to USD. This path allows foreign student-athlete to figure out language in the community college system while maturing two years in the American education system and ultimately bringing a more mature player who has figured out the college process and the cultural simulation. It is essential to note this as there are other paths athletes take to enter USD, as discussed in the earlier section (see Figure 2).

Limitations

I faced a few limitations throughout this study. First, the timing of the research was later than I expected, as I began my first cycle in the middle of March. Having a good start to your transfer experience was the theme discussed by the student-athlete participants in the study, and an excellent reflection to my research also became one of my primary limitations based on weather, timing, and participatory challenges. I often felt that I was under pressure to begin, and there was always a hurdle that I thought I had to jump over to begin the research. Being a head coach and researcher required intense focus on both duties. The calendar for coaching consists of campus meetings, inter-team meetings, training, writing the training, discipline, motivation, workouts, fundraising, budget control, recruiting, travel, constant development, and competitions. I considered the challenge an adaptive opportunity.

The sample participant was limited because I only had 17 participants to recruit from for cycles one and two. Some students had conflicts and needed time to recover from the demands of their season. I valued wellness, personal time, and balance. I wanted to be sensitive to the authority I brought to the research and respect my boundaries as a researcher that had power through the nature of being a head coach. It is only appropriate that I address this power, for it is something that I knew that I had to deal with to strengthen the trust of the participants.

Therefore, I was intentional about leaning on intrinsic motivators with the student-athletes.

Another limitation to discuss was the weather. San Diego had received rainfall records in the Winter and early Spring of the semester. It differed from the city the community recognized, for it felt more like San Diego was a version of the Pacific Northwest. This change in nature created opportunities for the participants, for they had to compete in and out of season times that they did not expect due to rain delays. Teams were impacted by these challenges to practice

schedules, make-up games, and competitions. This action meant delays and postponing research dates. Adaptive behavior was the norm for scheduling matches and practices to those changes that occurred at the moment.

We did not have an international student-athlete that attended community college and transferred to USD to study. The participants who met this pathway did not want to participate in the study due to time conflicts. The objective for this group to attend community college would be language acquisition and time to be looked at in the United States to play in the NCAA. One of the Cycle 2B findings coaching interviews discussed earlier voiced this perspective.

The last limitation was the third study cycle I had planned for. I had to remove it due to conflicts in time. There was travel, competition, practice, and class. The participants were in their season as well. The one-on-one interviews would be the heart of the research because I had so much information from the participants and their stories. I wanted to focus on the quality experienced through the study. There were already so many stories and data to decipher I, therefore, leaned on quality as this was my research typing point.

Recommendations

The study findings of student-athlete interviews and campus leaders bring to mind some suggestions to improve the system to support community college transfer student-athletes. The most pressing need is a student-athlete transfer center in the heart of campus. The physical designation of a building is crucial for it leads the student to gain support as they transition to USD. It is a transfer center with outer beauty, but it also incorporates the inner strength of the environment that reinforces the students and those who support them. It is best defined by the book *The Timeless Way of Building* “The great buildings of the past, the villages and tents and

temples in which man feels at home, have always been made by the people who were very close to the center of this way” (Alexander, 1979, p. 7).

A standard answer is that we do not have space. We must think strategically and develop a transfer center in the heart of campus. The current locale is an office in the Valley at Mission Crossroads. The best place is to create a long-term plan that moves the location of our maintenance department. The department relocation should move to the lower east side of the campus. This shift would open space for a center and other academic support to place this purpose in the heart of campus living. The current site is an office that is hidden and uninviting and needs a place for students to feel comfortable. The mission of a transfer center is to create the bridge where the emotional moving (Schlossberg, 1989) takes place on a college campus. It is the refuge that provides support when needed. It helps the transfer director working as an out-of-class agent (Rendón, 1994) with the tools to help students move through and gain the confidence to find their core at USD.

The most crucial part is that it creates a “third space” (Zeichner, 2010) necessary for the psychological connection between the “hybrid space” discussed by Zeichner. What you have left at home and where you are going on your campus journey. Waterman, in his writing on identity formation, quotes Erik Erikson as “the young person, in order to experience wholeness, must feel a progressive continuity between that which he has come to be during the long years of childhood and that which he promises to become in the anticipated future” (Waterman, 1984, p. 331). This space would help the student make cultural connections and translate their experience. Our transfer opportunity is to grow beyond the binary space design between university and home. The transfer center and its people, including the students themselves, would help create a

third space for the student to make the connections needed to have the campus become their home.

The fact that USD is transitioning toward a more diverse and Hispanic serving institution would help our students create a center where the third space could foster the transfer experience, but also those other identities that would be supported by having a center that also unites them. USD does a good job supporting the formal transfer experience. The opportunity is the informal space. The participants mentioned that the formal is ok, but the informal is where the growth happens. The student-athletes felt that they had to seek these experiences, and many gravitated to one another to create their own space. The center would act as a bridge to facilitate this vital transition. This suggestion of creating a space for student transfers tackles the transfer shock head on.

The second suggestion is a student-athlete tool-building workshop incorporating the community college transfer with other transfers. This stage of learning would focus on building the supportive tools (Sanford, 1966) needed to soften academic shock. It would create a forum that unites other student-athletes that have intersectional connections. One of the themes I listened to is how awkward it felt for transfer students to be placed with incoming Freshmen. They felt their time could have been more valued, for they felt that the orientation meetings focused on the needs of the first year-entering student rather than their own. Part of the center would incorporate informal workshops that would develop the transfer student to gain skills and tools for academic and professional success. One area to begin is to hold informal educational sessions on financial literacy to help students understand money management. Topics could include debt management, taxes, credit responsibility, budgets, and monthly personal expenditure forecasting. This recommendation also focuses on the financial support needed that

impacts students and colleges. It is a solution connected to the literature review's financial truth. The calling here is for USD to be a change-maker in higher education. To lead by having a sustainable model that helps educate its students on the importance of *Laudato Si'* value of adapting to needed change: "Our efforts at education will be inadequate and ineffectual unless we strive to promote a new way of thinking about human beings, life, society and our relationship to nature." (Francis, 2015, section 215).

Lastly, the following technical suggestion is increasing academic funding for community college transfer students through the Office of Financial Aid. All non-scholarship community college student-athletes that participated in the survey had a financial concern. Increasing the academic merit award from \$10,000 will narrow the gap of the \$25,000 given to first-year students. This money would help create parity and keep those students spending more time on campus developing their academic and athletic development purpose. This increase in funding would keep them from having to work other jobs to help fund their financial deficit. It would promote justice by leveling out the playing field for students who do not have financial support from their households. It is essential to acknowledge that USD has also improved its financial support by adding ten scholarships of up to six-semester full-ride scholarships to community college transfer students. The students must have gone to San Diego Unified School District and received an Associate Degree from the San Diego Community College District. Hence, steps are moving toward an equity environment for San Diego footprint institutions.

Conclusion

I enjoyed the action research because it challenged me to grow as a researcher. This study taught me to look at situations and events and to categorize themes. This journey also provided me with a different approach to looking at incidents by looking at the literature reviews to

formulate data explored by other researchers to expedite my learning. Since the beginning of this research, when I was looking for a topic, I often felt that I was in a tunnel going through a dark journey similar to what entering student-athletes think when they are going through the beginning of the transition journey at USD. There is illumination at the end of the tunnel, but as you move forward, you don't know how it will end. This feeling can sometimes be scary as you might second guess your decision along the voyage. Giving myself to the research allowed it to find me. I tried to envision where I was going. But this would be further than the truth. I often listened to the village's sounds as the people gave me clues that helped me find my purpose and connect the themes to the voices. In other words, the research found me.

It also validated my research on the transition topic. Reflecting on my journey, which has covered many changes, made me understand why I am interested in transition, explicitly dealing with community college transfer student-athletes. Through my leadership academic preparation, I have gravitated toward Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, and Ambiguity (VUCA) leadership. A style of leadership that challenges one to be ready for disorder and confusion. As one takes a stab at providing agile leadership solutions, Covid 19 challenged all of us, and it was a daily health war as we as a society had to navigate the madness. Still, it gave me time to examine what we were going through. It motivated me to connect my background with my passion for helping young student-athletes transition from community college to a beautiful place like the University of San Diego. It inspired me to research the challenges of the collegiate population as they are maturing in our village community and the importance of being recognized, checked in, listened to, connected to, and supported. The lesson I learned most is to meet the students where they are and respect their time. I am grateful for the candid interviews

that came from all the student-athlete participants. I will forever thank them for their involvement in this research.

I also learned the importance of community college student-athletes having a solid pre-transition, solid start, and constant support to succeed in higher education. A bonus is a discovery that we at the University of San Diego recruit authentic student-athletes collectively and employ caring people to support them. It has been a joy to discuss my research topic with those I come in contact with formally or informally. I plan to make people aware of transitions and their importance at college campuses and to build a coaching system that gets students out of their dorm rooms, away from their technology, and into the beauty of campus living. I began introducing this research by saying, “I see you” (Senge et al., 1994, p. 3). However, its strength comes from the collective village that resonates with the power of “We see you.” This energy is the balance sought in transition when the students say what the Tribes of Northern Natal in South Africa say in their validation “I am here” (Senge et al., 1994, p. 3). In conclusion, it translates to a student feeling at home where they will learn and fully bond throughout their undergraduate collegiate cycle with people and their environment. This challenge of belonging is one for us to serve all in higher education, including the appreciation for the diversity in thought that the community college transfer student-athletes bring through cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005, p. 78) to a welcoming village like USD.

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Appendix A

Individual Interview Questions for Student-Athletes

The following questions will guide the community college student-athlete interviews with the intention of data gathering to better understand the community college transfer student-athlete transition from the voice of the student-athlete. The questions will be asked in sequence giving freedom to learn from and gather data from the interview. Once the interviewee has been granted permission, the entire interview will be video recorded. The interviewer will take notes during the discussion on paper.

The session will begin with two drawing exercises (please see Handout #1 INTERACTION & RELATIONSHIPS, and Handout #2 RELATIONSHIPS OF INTERACTION / CULTURE THAT SPEAK WITH YOU.) The intention of the drawing exercise is to help the participants visualize their story.

Questions:

1. Please tell me about your powerful journey to USD. Nobody can tell it better than you. You may begin from where you feel comfortable.
2. What advice have you received from peers (CC Student-athletes) that have gone through your experience?
3. What are your goals for your experience here at USD?
4. How well do you understand the campus and the support services that USD has to offer you?
5. What activities have you been involved with on campus at USD?
6. What advice have you been given on time management and study skills?
7. What has your experience been with the support of health and wellness on campus?
8. How comfortable are you connecting with campus organizations outside of your team?
9. What USD online support sites do you go to connect to USD-specific transfer events, activities, or other USD community college student-athlete transfer sites?
10. Take me through your on-campus or off-campus housing experience at USD.
11. Share how you have taken advantage of the USD counseling center or the psychological support services when you need support?
12. Have you connected with the people at USD who share your identity and similar interests? If so, how have you connected with them?
13. What right fits of your college experience have you discovered at USD?
14. Where have you found the advocacy to support your transition to USD?
15. How is your family transition going?
16. How is your city/geographical transition going?
17. Tell me about your collegiate athletic team's transition from community college to your team at USD.
18. Tell me how you see your student role differs from that of your community college team.
19. Can you discuss your academic transition and what you see as different from your community college experience?
20. Talk about your moving (or entering impressions) into the USD transition.

21. Are you transitioning over the getting-to-know USD phase and into the phase of feeling at home at USD?
22. How do you see your transition differ from those entering college at USD as incoming freshmen?
23. What strengths and roadblocks do community college student-athletes transfer students face at USD?
24. What are the services you seek for support at USD?

Thank you for your participation and for voluntarily sharing your story and experiences.

Appendix B

Student-Athlete Questionnaire

The purpose of the meeting will be to welcome and provide the intention of the study. The prompt that will lead to the questionnaire completion will be:

Script:

Thank you for agreeing to participate in my action research project titled: Community College Transfer Student-Athlete Transition to USD. The consent form is attached to the email. By completing it you are agreeing to participate in the research.

I want to preface this questionnaire by saying that you can answer things you are comfortable answering. The prompts may lead you to answer, but feel free to type "N/A" or select the "Prefer not to answer" option. This questionnaire should take up to 20 minutes to complete, and it can be completed on your computer.

A video recording will be made of you during your participation in this segment in the study. If a participant objects to the recording we will not record the session altogether.

The information shared in the focus group session should not be shared with anyone outside of the group, and the confidentiality of anything you choose to say during the session cannot be guaranteed.

If you have any questions about completing this, you are welcome to speak to me at the meeting or you may email me at wguarino@sandiego.edu. You may also contact my faculty advisor for the study, Dr. Cheryl Getz, by email: cgetz@sandiego.edu.

Contact Information:

- Full Name:
- What is your preferred/chosen name?
- Email:
- Cell phone number:
- Preferred pronouns:

Preferred method of communication?

- Email:
- Text messaging:
- Phone call:
- Social Media:
- Face to face:

How old are you?

- 17-19
- 19-20
- 21 and older

Please share your ethnicity:

- African-American
- Asian
- Caucasian
- Native-American
- Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
- Two or More
- Other/Unknown
- Prefer not to answer

What city and state is your home located in?

- (city answer.)
- (state answer.)

If applicable, please provide your religious affiliation:

- Buddhism
- Catholicism/Christianity
- Hinduism
- Islam
- Judaism
- Other:
- Not applicable
- Prefer not to share

Did you work to earn money to support your community college experience? •

Yes

- No
- (If so, how many hours per week?)

Are you working this semester to contribute to your university experience? •

Yes

- No
- (If so, how many hours per week?)

What is the highest grade or educational level your parents have completed? •

High school

- Some College
- Associate Degree
- 4 year undergraduate degree
- Masters degree
- Doctorate degree

How old are your parent(s) or provider(s)?

- (answer write-in)

What is their gender?

- (answer write-in)

Where were your parent(s) or provider(s) born?

- (answer write-in)

Do you have siblings?

- (answer write-in)

If so, how old are they?

- (answer write-in)

What city was your high school in?

- (answer write-in)

What community college did you attend?

- (answer write-in)

What other colleges or universities did you attend?

- (answer write-in)

Did you receive an Associate degree before at your community college prior to transferring to USD?

- Yes
- No
- An explanation of your degree status

Who motivated you to pursue a 4 year degree?

- (answer write-in)

What is your current academic year as of Fall 2022?

- Freshmen
- Sophomore
- Junior
- Senior
- Graduate-Student

What is your student enrollment status for Fall 2022?

- Part-time (Less than 12-semester units).
- Full-time (12 or more units).

How many units did you transfer into USD from your current institution? •

15 or fewer units

- 16-30 units
- 31-45 units
- 46-60 units

- 61-80 units
- 81-99
- 100 or more units

Other Information:

Is there anything else you want to share about your transition to USD? ●
(answer write-in)

Appendix C

Student-Athlete Recruitment Flyer

Community College Transfer Student-Athlete Transition to USD

Seeking participants for a research study

Participants will be Community College Transfer Student-Athletes that are attending USD.

The purpose of this study is to enhance the incoming transfer student-athlete experience from the community college to the University of San Diego

Participants will meet in-person on campus for:

- A 50 minute general information meeting where student-athletes will complete a 23 question demographic and educational questionnaire in the meeting.
- An individual 50 minute one-on-one meeting on campus that will focus on 24 interview questions and two simple drawings. The purpose is to seek data and circles of influence and relationships connecting you to USD and the campus culture.
- A 50 minute in person focus group with other student-athletes that focuses on insights gained from this research process.

You will be video recorded in the general, one-on-one, and focus group meetings. If you don't agree to video recording; you are not eligible to participate in the study.

The group and focus meetings will be at the Warren Room on campus.

Pizza will be provided in both the initial information meeting and the closing fact sharing focus group meeting.

For more information, contact Will Guarino at wguarino@sandiego.edu or Faculty Advisor: Cheryl Getz at cgetz@sandiego.edu

Appendix D

Drawing 1 of 2 The Microsystem

Circle of Influence - Activity 1 of 2

Handout #1 INTERACTIONS & RELATIONSHIPS

Script:

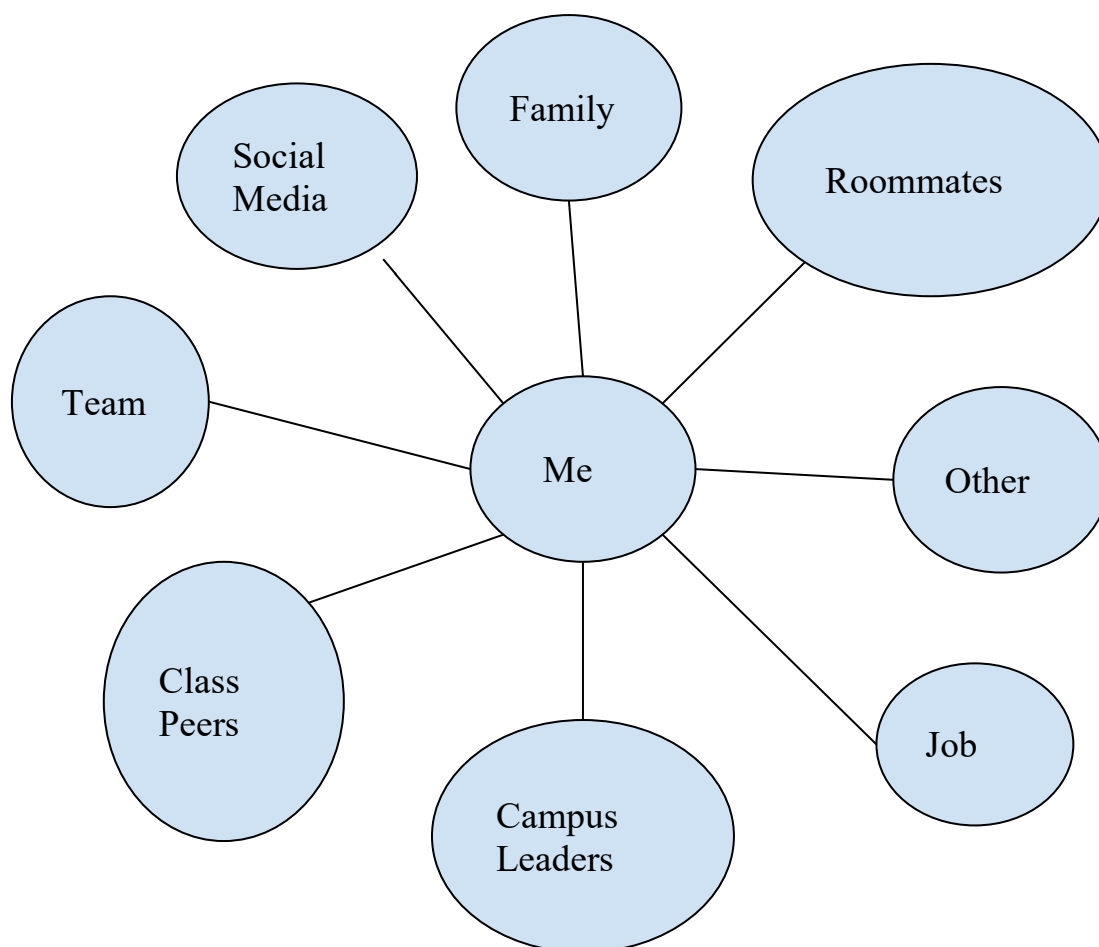
Given the guide below, please attempt to draw your own personal circles of influence on a piece of paper that reflect your connection with your environment at USD (This drawing is to be used as a guide). You may begin by drawing yourself in the middle. I will be here if you need help answering any questions.

Cycle II A - Community College Student-Athlete this is the 1st of 2 drawing exercises prior to the 24 questions asked}

Handout #1 INTERACTIONS & RELATIONSHIPS

Script:

Please draw the following circles where you have face-to-face interactions within your environment at USD (these circles are guides). These relationships influence one another. You may now start by drawing yourself in the middle. I am here if you need any help.



Appendix E

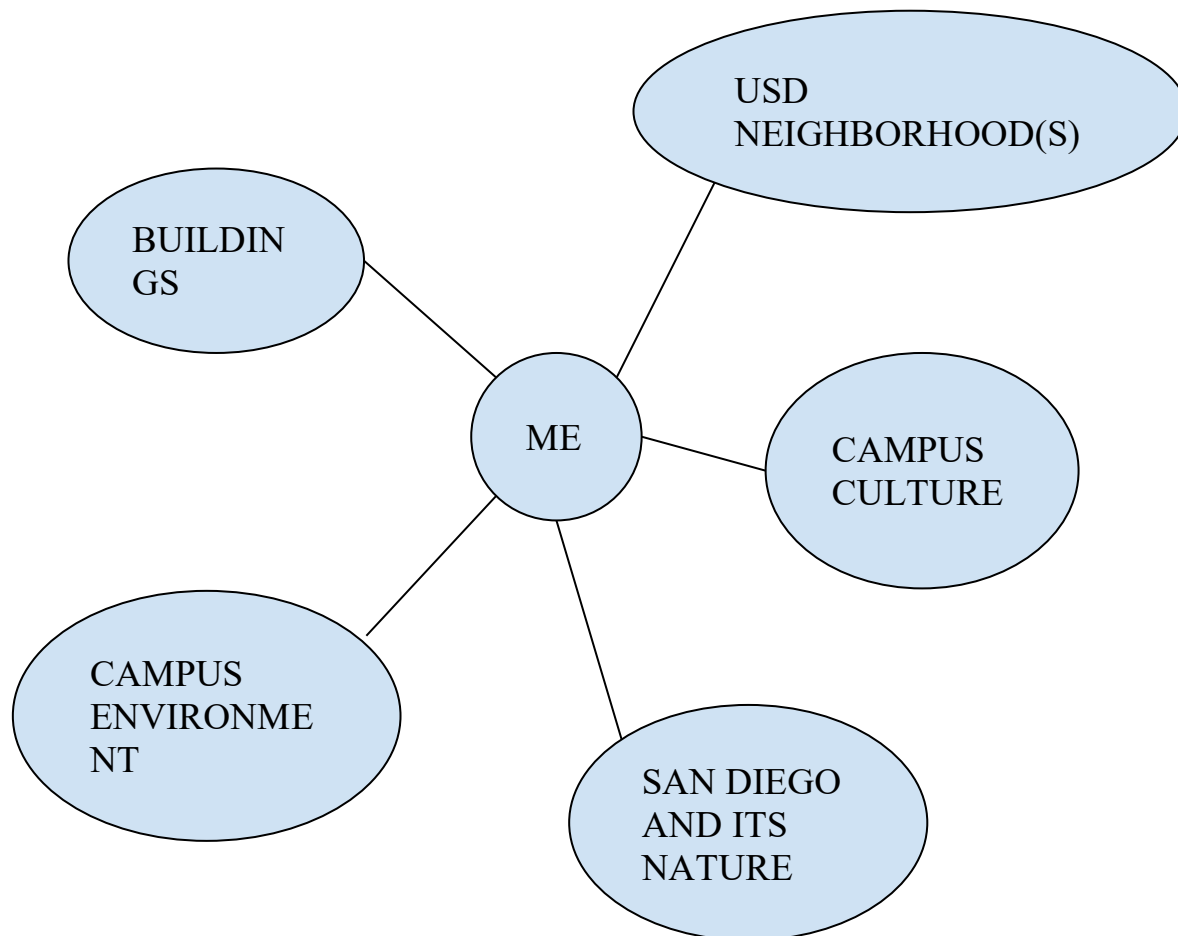
Drawing 2 of 2 The Mesosystem

Circle of influence - Activity 2 of 2

Handout # 2 RELATIONSHIPS OF INTERACTION / CULTURE THAT SPEAKS WITH YOU

Script:

Similar to your first drawing, please draw the following circles of culture that speak to you at USD (these circles are guides) through your interactions on our campus and its community. You may expand the circles. Please share your story visually by drawing and describing your processes of influence. You may now start by drawing yourself in the middle. I am here if you need any help answering any questions.



Appendix F

Individual Interview Questions with Administrators and Staff

The following questions will guide the leadership interviews with the intention of data gathering to be used to reflect on the system and its support of the transition of the community college transfer student-athletes at USD. The questions will be asked in sequence giving freedom to learn from them in the moment data gathering interview. Once the interviewee has granted the interviewer permission, the entire interview will be video-recorded. The interviewer will also take notes during the discussion on paper.

1. What is your role at USD?
2. How do you interact with community college transfer student-athletes at USD?
3. How do you see the role of an administrator and staff helping the community college transfer student-athlete get involved at USD?
4. How do we check in on community college transfer student-athletes to see how they are doing as they transition to USD?
5. What specific things would you suggest to your department that they could do this week to build social bonds for the community college transfer student-athletes at USD?
6. What areas are you most proud of that your department has implemented that has helped the community college transfer student-athlete at USD?
7. What new ideas would you like to consider when reframing the system of supporting community college transfer student-athlete experience at USD?
8. Is there anything else that you would like to be considered in the transition of the community college student-athletes at USD?