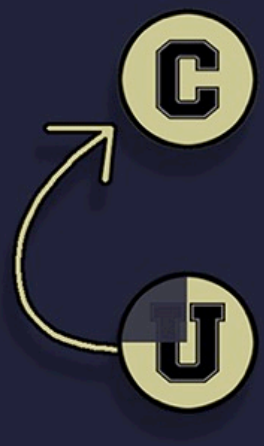
Exploring "Reverse Transfer" in Ontario:

A Qualitative Study of University-to-College Mobility



Dr. Reana Maier and Dr. Karen Robson

McMaster University

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Participants and Institutions

Reana Maier, McMaster University
Karen Robson, McMaster University

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In this study, we explore the experiences of Ontario students who have engaged in 'reverse transfer', i.e. moving from university-to-college (UTC), focusing on their reasons for doing so and their transfer experiences, with particular attention to obstacles they may have encountered in order to address systemic barriers through targeted policy recommendations. Data was collected through qualitative interviews with 20 participants who began their post-secondary journey in a university program, but left that program before completing it, and subsequently pursued a college program.

Our research questions were as follows:

- What factors led to the decision to reverse transfer?
- What were participants' experiences and perceptions of the reverse transfer process, particularly in regard to any barriers encountered?
- If barriers were identified (by the participant or in the analysis phase), how might they have been reduced?

Major Findings

Transfer Motivations

- It was necessary to separate motivations for leaving university and motivations for entering college in order to fully understand PSE journeys.
- Motivations for leaving university were clustered into three themes: academic struggles, mental/physical health/SEN struggles, and future prospects. These were highly interconnected and characterized by difficulties, ranging from mild to severe, coping with university.
- Despite struggles, participants often spent prolonged periods of time attempting to progress through university before deciding to leave.
- Motivations for entering college were more practical and straightforward, related to: subject interest, college learning environment, location, and future prospects.
- UTC transfers are unique in the transfer landscape as they appear to happen only in response to plans going awry; they are never planned.
- The 'pull factors' of college only become relevant after the 'push factors' of the participants' university experience force them to reevaluate their plans.

Transfer Experiences

- On the whole, participants found the process of transferring credits quite simple.
- Fifteen participants knew before applying to college that transferring credits would be a possibility, four were informed shortly after starting college, and one was not informed until well into his college program.
- Key sources for information on transfer credits were: online sources (primarily college websites) and college staff (student services, program staff, career services, academic advisors).
- Steps in the transfer credit process were highly similar among the participants, involving three main steps: 1) filling out a form; 2) arranging a university transcript to be sent to college; and 3) providing course descriptions/syllabi to prove equivalency.

- Six participants had all transfer credits requests approved, seven had some of their requests approved, four had no requests approved, and three did not apply for any transfer credits.
- The most common reason for having a request rejected was that the college course was too specialized, and the university course was not enough of an equivalent.
- Main transfer facilitators were college websites and college staff.
- Main transfer obstacles were highly specialized college courses and finding outlines/syllabi from university courses.
- Participants' advice to other potential UTC transfer students fell into two main categories: practical advice about the transfer process and more general advice about post-secondary pathways. In particular, they encouraged transferring students to do research, explore options, and not to let biases in favour of university over college hold them back.

Transfer Reflections

- Overwhelmingly, the participants reflected very positively on their decision to leave university and pursue college.
- Several participants expressed a wish to have transferred earlier or to have gone to college straight out of high school instead of going to university.
- There were some negative or ambivalent reflections about having left university before completing their degrees. These were largely related to a sense of personal failure and/or the negative reactions of others, particularly parents.
- Personal and external (usually parental) negative reflections were tied to cultural and societal expectations about high achievement and perceptions of university education as superior to college education, hence the language of 'reverse transfer'.
- External negative reflections were often tempered over time to varying degrees by relief over participants' improved health or state of mind or 'just doing something' and having a direction again.

Policy Recommendations

- Make transfer credits part of the college (and university) application process, or at least advise any applying student that if they have post-secondary credits, they may be transferrable.
- Colleges to target UTC transfer students with information sessions or packets advising of transfer credit process and make them aware of all support services available, academic and personal, in order to address the struggles that derailed their university studies.
- Continue to develop universal course database to facilitate transfer credits.
- Abandon 'reverse transfer' language in favour of something neutral.
- Make persistence, academic performance, and completion data available to better track PSE pathways and the success of UTC transfer students through their new programs
- More information about post-secondary pathways aimed at high school students, building awareness from the beginning that transfer is an option and may well be a feature of their post-secondary journey.

INTRODUCTION

In response to increasing demand in the 1960s for an expanded post-secondary education (PSE) sector, the Ontario college system was created to operate separately from the already established university system, providing an alternate PSE route that offered shorter, vocationally focused courses (Anisef, Axelrod, Baichman-Anisef, James, and Turrittin 2000). Today, direct entry from high school into either a university degree or a college diploma and completion of that program within the standard timeframe remains the most common post-secondary pathway for Ontario's students. This is sometimes referred to as a 'linear' or 'traditional' pathway. Over the past few decades, however, there has been an increase in the number of students taking 'non-linear' or 'non-traditional' pathways through PSE. Such pathways can include gap years, temporary program interruptions, transfers between and within post-secondary institutions before programs are completed, changing from full to part-time studies or vice versa, or attending and completing multiple programs at multiple institutions, with varying amounts of time in between. According to the National Graduates Survey 2013 conducted by Statistics Canada, only 53% of those who graduated with a baccalaureate degree in 2010 entered their program directly from high school. Of those who graduated from a college program, only 28% entered directly from high school. For both college and bachelors program graduates, over 30% had previously completed some other form of PSE (Ferguson & Wang 2014).

The upswing in transfer activity, particularly between colleges and universities, sparked an increased interest on the part of PSE institutions and policymakers in how to evaluate and treat previously completed PSE courses. This led to the provincial government establishing the Ontario Council on Articulation and Transfer (ONCAT) in 2011 in order to, 'enhance student pathways and reduce barriers for students looking to transfer among Ontario's 45 public postsecondary institutions" (ONCAT, n.d.a) by creating a knowledge base to facilitate the transfer of credits between institutions. The majority of Canadian research on post-secondary transfer focuses on college-to-university (CTU) pathways, reflecting the influence of the American PSE system, in which two-year colleges were established as a stepping-stone to completing a degree at a four-year college, shaping our ideas about the direction and purpose of post-secondary transfer (Bell 2006, Durham College 2016). Indeed, movement in the opposite direction, i.e. a university-to-college (UTC) pathway, is often referred to in the literature as a 'reverse transfer'.

Wilson (2009) noted that while UTC transfer appears to be a growing phenomenon in the Ontario postsecondary landscape, it is difficult to get an accurate idea of the extent of this growth. Data sources are scattered and difficult to link with other measures of interest (Kerr, McCloy, and Liu 2010). As a result, very little research has looked into UTC transfer, resulting in a paucity of data on the subject. There is no central database in Ontario that tracks students through various post-secondary pathways – or at least one that is accessible to education researchers. Data for each institution tends to remain within that institution and is often regarded as "proprietary" and inaccessible to researchers, particularly those outside of the particular institution in question. For that reason, research tends to be institution-specific. We can see from the centralized Ontario University and College Application Centre data whether individuals confirm an offer of acceptance at a college or university at one point in time and then later

confirm an offer at a different institution, indicating they transferred, but we cannot tell anything about success, completion, or motivations for the move. National and provincial surveys, such as Statistics Canada's National Graduate Survey or the MAESD Student Satisfaction Survey, have limitations when it comes to tracking pathways, especially for those who transfer out of a program before completion or continue their education more than 6 months after leaving a program (Kerr, McCloy, and Liu, 2010).

LITERATURE REVIEW

The evidence that is available about UTC transfer is often localized, though taken collectively, it does suggest that this type of transfer is indeed on the rise. A study from Confederation College (Ontario) examining student registration and the Graduate Satisfaction Survey found that from 2005 to 2010 the proportion of transfer students who came from university programs was higher than those who came from college programs. The number of students who transferred from Lakehead University, who make up the majority of UTC transfers at Confederation, increased by 7% over the period studied (Confederation College, 2012). Usher and Jarvey's study used a sample made up of transfer students from all Ontario colleges, and just over half of this sample came from university degree programs (2012). Academica (2014) reported that one-fifth of Ontario's total transfer student population were UTC transfers, and a report focusing on transfers amongst former Toronto District School Board students found a similar proportion (Robson, Brown, Maier, and Ranjbar 2017).

Who Undertakes a UTC Transfer?

Based on the type of localized studies available within the transfer research literature, the profile of students with previous university experience entering college programs is somewhat different than those who transfer from college to university. Transfer students, in general, are unsurprisingly older than direct entry students, but UTC transfer students are more likely to be over 25 years old, and they tend to enroll in narrow and applied (as opposed to general or preparatory) courses (ONCAT 2013). Goldrick-Rab and Pfeffer (2009) found that UTC transfer is also more commonly observed among students from low socioeconomic backgrounds compared to those from advantaged backgrounds, who tend to engage in lateral transfer (i.e., mobility from university to university). This could be partly attributed to the comparatively lower cost of college programs. The authors also attribute this finding to the poorer academic performance of low SES students, which they link to lower levels of parental educational attainment. A case study of student mobility between York University and Seneca College, one of the few quantitative studies available with a relatively large dataset, indicated that UTC transfer students were, in comparison to CTU transfer students, slightly younger (though still older than the direct entry student population) and more likely to be a Canadian citizen, speak English or French as their mother tongue, and have at least one parent with some post-secondary education (Smith, Decock, Lin, Sidhu, and McCloy 2016).

A 2017 report provides some wide-ranging information on UTC transfer students (Robson, Brown, Maier, and Ranjbar 2017). This study used data from the TDSB and Ontario College Application System to map the postsecondary pathways of Toronto high school students who graduated in 2011. The dataset followed these students through five successive postsecondary

application cycles (2010-2014), and approximately 19% of transferring students were found to have confirmed a college place despite having confirmed a university place in an earlier application cycle, indicating a UTC transfer. Because the dataset also contained various demographic characteristics, the authors were able to run bivariate analyses to determine correlates of UTC transfer. They did not find a statistically significant relationship between sex and UTC transfer, meaning that males were not more likely to undertake a UTC transfer or vice versa. They did, however, find some association between social class and UTC transfer, with UTC transfer occurring in lower SES groups, consistent with Goldrick-Rab and Pfeffer's findings (2009). Further exploratory analysis of the dataset indicated a statistically significant relationship between self-identified race and UTC transfer; Black, South Asian, and Southeast Asian students were also found to be more likely to undertake a UTC transfer. Unfortunately, the data did not include any information about students' motivations for or their experience of transfer.

Motivations for UTC Transfer

The literature addressing the motivations for UTC transfer is very sparse, and much of what does exist is based upon US data, whose 2 and 4-year college paths are similar to our college and university programs, but with important differences, the most important distinction being that college programs in Ontario are usually vocationally directed, unlike the US model. It is important to note that the available Ontario data on UTC transfer often indicates whether a college applicant/student has prior university experience, but usually does not differentiate between those who have completed a university degree and those who transfer before completing a degree. It is therefore difficult to discern how these two groups of students (UTC without completing university and UTC after university complete) differ. Kerr, McCloy, and Liu posit that, for those who have completed a university degree, returning to PSE to obtain a college credential is likely the result of employment concerns as the above research indicates, such as skills upgrading, career changes, or an inability to have foreign credentials recognized (2010, 14). Whether these are the same reasons for those who transfer to college before finishing a university degree is unclear. We do, however, include these studies in the review below because of the paucity of Canadian literature on the subject.

Concerns around Workforce Entry

Current research from Ontario suggests that the goals of UTC transfer students are largely focused on workforce entry, and they are therefore drawn to the practical experience offered by college programs (Kerr, McCloy, & Liu, 2010), although similar findings around acquisition of occupational training have been found in US studies (LeBard 1999). For example, focus group data from students who transferred from Lakehead University to Confederation College indicated that career preparation and time to pursue part-time work while studying were significant advantages to studying at college rather than the university. Participants were interested in finding a job, finding a steadier or more lucrative job, or upgrading their education in order to qualify for a professional designation (Confederation College, 2012). Students with previous university experience who transferred to the Ontario College of Art and Design (OCAD) reported making the decision to transfer in order to enter a more "applied" program with a more art-focused curriculum, which would lead to greater employment opportunities (Fisher et al., 2012). Wilson (2009) pointed out that Canada has a large and growing immigrant

population, and that students with university degrees who are now enrolled in college programs may be foreign professionals looking to gain credentials recognized in Canada.

Because UTC transfer students tend to be motivated by career-related reasons, it is unsurprising that access to co-op or work placement programs are listed as key to choosing college programs over further university education (Decock and Janzen 2015). Though some university degrees offer co-op programs, they are far more common in the college system, and transfer students often see these as a more promising stepping stone to job placement after graduation than a general arts or sciences university degree. The shorter programs and work placement opportunities also make colleges an attractive option for those looking for a career change (Confederation 2012). In a 2012 survey of post-secondary transfer students, Usher and Jarvey (2012) found that 73% of respondents who did a UTC transfer chose to pursue study in a different field in college than their original university program. Moreover, the majority of UTC transfers who changed fields were significantly more likely to have come from a university arts program.

Academic Failure in University

While improved career opportunity is by far the most commonly cited motivation for a UTC transfer in the existant Canadian literature, other reasons have also been identified in previous studies. A focus group participant in a study of student mobility between York University and Seneca College found her university program too difficult and felt she was unprepared academically for university, which became reflected in her academic record. College was an opportunity to continue post-secondary education in a less intense environment and redeem a poor university performance (Decock and Janzen 2015). Similar findings were revealed in American studies of UTC students who encountered problems keeping up with the academic pace required at university (Hagedorn and Castro 1999; Mitra 2018) and faced academic dismissal (LeBard 1999).

Emotional Reasons

There are a variety of reasons for students leaving university to pursue college education that can be labelled "emotional". Hagedorn and Castro (1999) found that UTC students reported homesickness, immaturity, substance abuse, and difficulty adjusting to university life. Similarly, Ontario-based research found that UTC students disliked the 'university learning style or environment' (Usher and Jarvey 2012, 15), and wanted to live closer to home (Confederation 2012; Usher and Jarvey 2012). Mitra's (2018) recent qualitative study of 28 UTC students in NYC concluded that participants were deeply affected by the emotional reasons for leaving university and argued that their ongoing persistence education demonstrated resilience. Similarly to Hagedorn and Castro (1999), interviewees in Mitra's study expressed embarrassment about leaving university and the need to prove themselves elsewhere. Hagedorn and Castro's participants also expressed a desire to save face by participating in UTC rather than admitting defeat in PSE.

Financial Reasons

The cost of university relative to college has also been found to be a motivator of UTC both in Ontario (Usher and Jarvey 2012) and in a California-based study (Hagedorn and Castro 1999),

with the cost of college being substantially less than university. An extensive review by LeBard (1999) also revealed that the lower cost of college was a common motivator for American UTC students.

The UTC Transfer Process

Because there has been little research specifically on UTC transfers, we do not know if the process in such cases is significantly different from other types of transfer. There is a theme of dissatisfaction with the transfer process in general across ONCAT research, centring on issues of expectation and communication. This may be due to the greater focus on CTU transfer, as the literature suggests that, on average, CTU transfer students receive fewer credits than UTC or university-to-university transfer students (Confederation College, 2012; Fisher et al., 2012; Stewart & Martinello, 2012). This has led many CTU transfer students to be less satisfied with the transfer process than other types transfer students, largely due to disappointed expectations about the transferability of their college credits to universities (Confederation College, 2012; Fisher et al., 2012; Gerhardt et al., 2013). Indeed, in a study focusing on transfers into college (from either university or other colleges), Usher and Jarvey (2012) reported that 69% of survey respondents received all the credits for which they had applied, and only 19% felt the transfer process was 'difficult' or 'very difficult' (28). Satisfaction levels have also been found to be directly related to the perceived ease of the transfer process (Blais & Harper, 2013; Carleton University, 2013; Durham College, 2016); transfer wait times (Confederation College, 2012); communication of admissions decisions (Durham College, 2014; Usher & Jarvey, 2012); and the requirements associated with earning transfer credits (Arnold & Woodhead, 2015; Confederation College, 2012; ONCAT, 2013). The common thread across these factors is communication, and it is the most important predictor of student satisfaction with the transfer process. Those institutions and transfer programs that overtly and comprehensively communicate the requirements associated with inter-institutional transfer, that are well-planned and properly administered, and that provide students with the rationale for their admissions decisions were rated the highest by transferring students (Arnold, 2012; Durham College, 2014; Fisher et al., 2012).

Proximity Dimension

The York-Seneca case study is one of the only studies that directly addresses UTC transfer, and it indicated there were some differences in the transfer process for this group (compared to CTU transfers), though the results must be treated with caution due to a very small sample size (three participants in the UTC focus group and 12 in the CTU focus group). The UTC group reported fewer difficulties in the transfer process, though frustration over locating accurate information was a common element for both groups. The UTC group also sought very little assistance from their sending institution, with the majority of their interactions around transfer taking place at their receiving institution. The 'Seneca-York partnership' appeared to largely benefit the CTU group. Both groups recommended more detailed information on each institution's website and dedicated, informed staff at each institution who work with counterparts at the other institution to address credit transfer (Decock and Janzen 2015). It should also be noted that these two institutions are literally on the same physical campus and thus the "proximity" dimension discussed by Wilson (2009) is particularly relevant. Wilson argued that when considering issues of transfer, whether it be UTC or CTU, shared campus agreements obviously enhance the

experience of students, and these agreements are more likely to be found between institutions that are in close physical proximity to one another.

UTC Transfer Outcomes

In terms of UTC transfer outcomes, there are at least two aspects to consider: those that occur shortly after the transfer process and those that occur later.

Transfer Shock

"Transfer shock" refers to the adjustment that students must make adapting from being a university student to being a college student. In the research literature on college-to-university transfer, some studies have noted the experience of 'transfer shock' on the part of the transferring student (ONCAT 2013; Blais and Harper 2013; Carleton University 2013). The new environment and different campus culture can leave transfer students feeling confused and isolated, especially as they tend to be older than direct entry students and may have little experience of the university system. In the York-Seneca case study discussed above, the CTU group appeared to have more difficulties adjusting to university than the UTC group did adjusting to college, suggesting culture shock may not be as much of a concern, but there has been almost no exploration of this in the rest of the literature.

Academic Success

There has been little investigation into the academic success or persistence of UTC transfer students. Much of the evidence available about the outcomes of transfer students has been limited to CTU transfers, and this is mixed. Stewart and Martinello (2012) found them to have poorer academic performance than direct entry students, and a summary of ONCAT research up to 2013 reported slightly below average persistence rates overall for transfer students (ONCAT 2013). However, a number of other studies have shown them to perform at least as well, if not better than direct entry students, particularly if their transfer was part of an articulated agreement (Shook et al. 2016; Gorman, Phelps, and Carley 2012; Drewes et al. 2012; Gerhardt, Arai, Carroll, and Ackerman 2012). Qualitative findings demonstrate that CTU transfer students can be intimidated by the demands of university study and feel academically unprepared to meet those demands (Carleton University 2013).

What little evidence we do have about UTC transfer students suggests that they do not tend to struggle academically post-transfer. A study of both CTU and UTC students who transferred from Algonquin College to the University of Ottawa and vice versa showed that the CTU transfers were more likely to leave compared to direct entry high school students, but the UTC transfers showed no difference in persistence rates to their direct entry counterparts (Finnie, Pavlic, Childs, Diaz, Mercier, and Lewrey 2013). A study of transfer students between York University and Seneca College (in both directions) between 2000 and 2012 found that UTC students fared better post-transfer in terms of GPA. The CTU students had an overall average GPA of 73% while at Seneca, which dropped slightly to 69% while at York. The UTC students, in contrast, improved their GPA post-transfer, going from an overall average of 64% while at York to 76% while at Seneca (Smith, Decock, Lin, Sidhu, and McCloy 2016, 4-6).

Completion
The available research on UTC students suggests that their completion rates were high, particularly when compare to CTU students. In the York/Seneca study cited above f the 47% CTU students had graduated by 2012, and 33% had withdrawn before completing their university program. In comparison 59% of UTC students had graduated by 2012, and 25% had withdrawn.

METHODS

Data

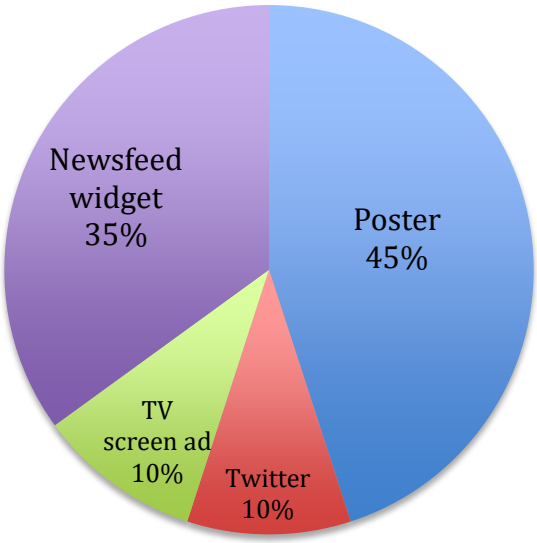
Due to the exploratory nature of our study and the level of detail required to answer our research questions, we employed a small-scale qualitative design, collecting data through in-depth interviews with 20 purposively-sampled participants who met the criteria of having been enrolled in a university program and then transferring to a college program without completing university. Because we were interested in UTC transfer scenarios where the university degree was *not* completed, we limited eligibility to students who were enrolled in a public university in southern Ontario, but transferred before completing the degree to a public college in southern Ontario within the last ten years. The study was open to those who were current students or had already graduated from a college program, and there was no restriction in terms of the length of time in between the participants' university program and their college program. Indeed, we hoped we would get a range of possible pathways, some including time off in between programs and some not.

Recruitment
Individuals were recruited in a variety of ways. One of the researchers advertised the study through her Twitter, Facebook, and LinkedIn accounts, which were shared by various connections. Studies were also advertised by the colleges themselves, but this was accomplished in a much more complicated manner, and depended upon the willingness of individual institutions to assist us. Participants were given $50 cash to participate in this study.

Recruitment, in general, was a difficult hurdle, not because of a lack of interested participants, but because of the administrative process involved in getting the study advertised at colleges around southern Ontario. In all but one case, advertising for participants required us to go through research ethics board (REB) reviews at each of the colleges at which we hoped to recruit, though we had already cleared the project through the REB at McMaster University. Once ethics clearance was obtained at each college, separate institutional approval was needed in order to display posters. REB contacts at each college were also not always clear on who we needed to contact to physically have the posters displayed, even once we had ethics clearance and institutional approval, leaving us to email several offices and departments in order to track down who had that responsibility. In the end, the earliest we were able to have posters displayed and begin recruiting at one college was late March, and the last college to get our posters up did so in mid-June. Most participating colleges put up paper posters around their campus, but two colleges advertised the study via information screens, and one of these also included an item in the newsfeed widget of their online student services portal. Figure 1 shows the various ways

participants found out about our study, with physical posters and the newsfeed widget being the most effective.

Figure 1. Participants' Discovery of the Study



Interested participants contacted us through a specially created project email address, and after answering a few eligibility screening questions, an interview time was arranged. We ensured that there was a balance of male and female participants but imposed no other criteria on our sample. All interviews took place either at McMaster or at the participant's college, whichever was most convenient for the participant. Interviews were audio recorded and ranged in length from 24 minutes to 91 minutes, with an average length of 42 minutes. Participants could indicate on the demographic form whether they would like to review their transcribed interview and correct or add any information. Eleven participants chose this option, though none of them returned any amendments.

Instruments

Participants were asked to complete a form which gathered information on the participants' background characteristics such as age, sex and gender, self-identified race, education, parental education and occupation, average marks in high school, and special education needs (see Appendix A for the full Participant Demographic Form). This items chosen in developing this form were derived mainly from the TDSB Student Census questionnaire (Yau and O'Reilly 2007), as this would provide us with the same demographic data we used in our previous ONCAT project 'Unraveling the Knot' (2017), allowing for possible comparisons to the findings from that study. Participants were asked to fill in this form at the beginning of the interview.

The interview schedule was semi-structured, consisting of open-ended questions that covered: 1) the participant's current schedule and commitments (inside and outside school); 2) latter high school years, particularly academic achievement and plans for PSE; 3) university experiences; 4) transfer motivations; 5) transfer process; 6) college experiences; and 7) transfer reflections (see Appendix B for the full interview schedule). We composed the interview schedule to address our research questions and based on information from the research literature review. Participants had an opportunity at the end of the interview to raise any points or issues they felt were important but that were not covered by our questions.

There were no other restrictions, e.g. age, sex, program of study, on eligibility for participation.

Data analysis

The interview transcripts were coded using the qualitative data analysis software package Ligre. We designed an initial coding scheme based on our research questions and on the research literature, but additional codes were added as the analysis progressed. The final 'codification tree' had eight 'roots', which represented the overall themes present in the data and largely corresponded to the major sections of the interview schedule: out of school commitments, high school experience, life expectations, university experience, transfer experience, college experience, transfer reflections, and perceptions of university vs. college. Each of these themes were further divided into subthemes or 'branches', which were in turn divided into the 'leaves' that were used to tag fragments of the interview transcripts. For example, under the root 'transfer experience', there were six branches – motivation, process, obstacles, facilitators, recommendations to institutions, and advice to other transferring students. Under the 'motivation' branch of the 'transfer experience root', there were five leaves that represented the various reasons given in the interviews for transferring from university to college, such as dissatisfaction with university program, health/personal circumstances, and future work prospects.

For the purposes of this report, we prioritize the transfer experience and reflections and use the other themes, particularly university and college experience, to provide more detailed context to the participants' responses regarding transfer.

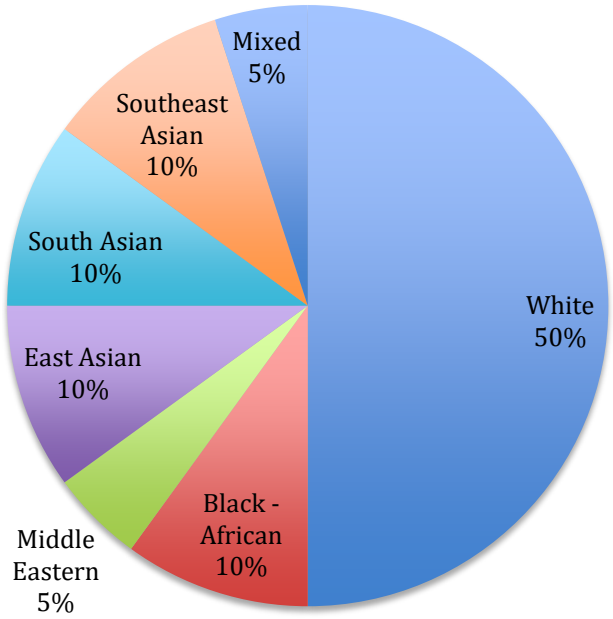
FINDINGS

Sample Demographic Characteristics

The sample was made up of 10 males and 10 females of diverse racial backgrounds and programs of study, ranging in age from 20 to 32 years old with an average age of 24.4 years old. Ten participants identified as White, and 10 identified as a visible minority (see Figure 1 for breakdown of racial backgrounds), with six participants having been born outside of Canada. Seven further participants identified as a second-generation immigrant, with one or both parents being born outside of Canada. Thirteen participants had at least one parent who had completed a university degree, a further four had at least one parent who had completed a college diploma, and three participants whose parents did not have any post-secondary education or who did not know their parents' level of education.

Table 1. Sample Demographics		
Age	24.4 (range 20-32)	
Racial Background		
White	10	
Non-White	10	
Born Outside Canada		
Participant	6	
Not participant, but at least one parent	7	
Employment Status		
Full-time	1	
Part-time	15	
Unemployed	4	
Income		
Under 10,000	11	
10,000-19,999	6	
20,000+	2	
Parents' Education		
At least one parent completed university	13	
At least one parent completed college	4	
No post-secondary/don't know	3	
Parents' Occupation	**Mother**	**Father**
Low	4	2
Medium	9	4
High	3	4
Small Business Owner	1	3
Retired	1	1
Unemployed	0	1
Don't know	2	5

Figure 2. Racial Backgrounds of Participants



High School and PSE

Participants' high school graduation year ranged from 2004 to 2016, and all participants reported having average high school grades of 70 and above, with 16 out of 20 reporting grades of 80 and above. Four participants reported being identified as having a Special Education Need. 15 participants completed high school in four years and then went straight into a full-time university program, while the remaining five either did a 'victory lap' year of high school or worked or both before starting university. The next section will discuss in more detail the participants' post-secondary pathways. Five of the participants had completed at least one college program at the time of the interview, one participant had completed a university degree[1], and the remaining 14 had not yet completed any post-secondary qualification.

At the time of the interviews, fourteen of the participants were full-time students and two were full-time students. Of the full-time students, ten had part-time employment, as did both of the part-time students, while four were full-time students only. Four participants were not in school at the time of the interview, three of whom were employed part-time and one employed full-time. There were ten 'origin' universities where participants attempted their first post-secondary program, and seven receiver colleges to which the participants transferred.

Table 2. Origin and Receiver Institutions

Sender Institutions	Receiver Institutions
Carleton University	**Sheridan College**
University of Ottawa	**Humber College**
McMaster University	**Mohawk College**
University of Waterloo	**Michener Institute**

[1] This participant completed a university degree after high school, but then started a second university degree that was not completed before transferring to a college program.

Guelph University	**George Brown College**
Ryerson University	**Conestoga College**
York University	**Seneca College**
University of Western Ontario	
University of Toronto	
Trent University	

Table 3. Pre- and Post-transfer Programs	
Pre-transfer program (University)	**Post-transfer program (College)**
General sciences	**Medical tech-related**
Social sciences	**Social services**
Computer science	**Computer programming**
Nursing	**Business Administration**
Math	**Office Administration**
Engineering	**Nursing**
Journalism	**Accounting**
Business	**Engineering or engineering-related**
Communications	**International development**
	Biotechnology

The participants came from a variety of university programs, both STEM and non-STEM, and transferred into a variety of college programs, both STEM and non-STEM. These are listed in Table 3, and the transfer pathway patterns will be discussed in more detail in the next section.

Participant Post-secondary Pathways

Because we focused on students who underwent a university-to-college transfer, we knew we would be dealing with non-linear or non-traditional post-secondary pathways, but we did not expect the variation we encountered among our participants. In fact, only two participants completed high school in four years, went into a full-time university program and stayed in that same program until they decided to transfer, then went straight into a college program and stayed in that same program. The remaining 18 participants had more steps -- often many more steps -- to their post-secondary education journey. In addition to UTC transfers, we had participants who did ‘victory lap’ years in high school, delayed entry to PSE and took gap years before starting university, transferred between different programs within university (sometimes by choice, sometimes because of academic probation requirements), took hiatuses during and after university but before college to work or deal with health or personal issues, took remedial courses in order to improve their chances of getting into certain programs, and attempted and sometimes completed multiple college programs. Some of them also had plans for further post-secondary education after completing the program they were in (or had recently finished) at the time of the interview. Table 4 lists the most common elements present in the participants’ PSE journeys, other than a simple UTC transfer, along with the number of participants who reported taking that step.

Table 4. Common Steps in Participants’ PSE Journeys	
High school victory lap	**3**

Within university program change	**8**
3+ years attempting same university program	**4**
Multiple university programs attempted[2]	**2**
Multiple college programs attempted	**5**
Multiple college programs completed	**4**
Remedial courses[3]	**2**
Hiatus (for health or personal circumstances)	**8**
Hiatus (work)	**6**
UTC transfer STEM to non-STEM (or vice versa)	**5**

Though transferring from a university program to a college program, the majority of our participants (15) remained within the same or a similar subject area pre- and post-transfer. For example, one participant transferred from a university engineering degree program to a college engineering degree program, and one transferred from a nursing degree to a nursing diploma. There were several instances of transfers from general sciences or computer science degree programs to computer or technology-related college diplomas, such as programming or medical equipment technicians. Three students who were in university social sciences transferred to social service work programs in college. We did have five participants who changed subjects completely from pre- to post-transfer, switching from STEM to non-STEM subjects or vice versa, for example, general sciences to accounting or business administration or social sciences to software development.

The amount of time participants spent attempting a university program before leaving ranged from one year to seven years, with an average between two and two and a half years. This does not necessarily mean that participants were in the same program, attending full-time, and successfully completing courses during their university period. Eight participants changed programs within university, sometimes by choice usually due to lack of subject interest, but for three participants, this program switch was forced by the university due to poor academic performance. A common condition of academic probation reported by the participants was to have students who were not achieving the grades required by their program to take courses in a different program for a semester in order to earn their way back into the original program. Two participants spent multiple years in this pattern of poor academic performance in their original program, followed by academic probation in another program, reentry back to the original program, poor academic performance, academic probation, and so on. Another participant was not forced to change programs because of their poor academic performance, but also fell into a pattern of failing and having to repeat courses, spending years in university while making little progress toward the completion of a degree. For many of our participants, the number of years spent in a university program cannot therefore be taken as a measure of progress towards completion.

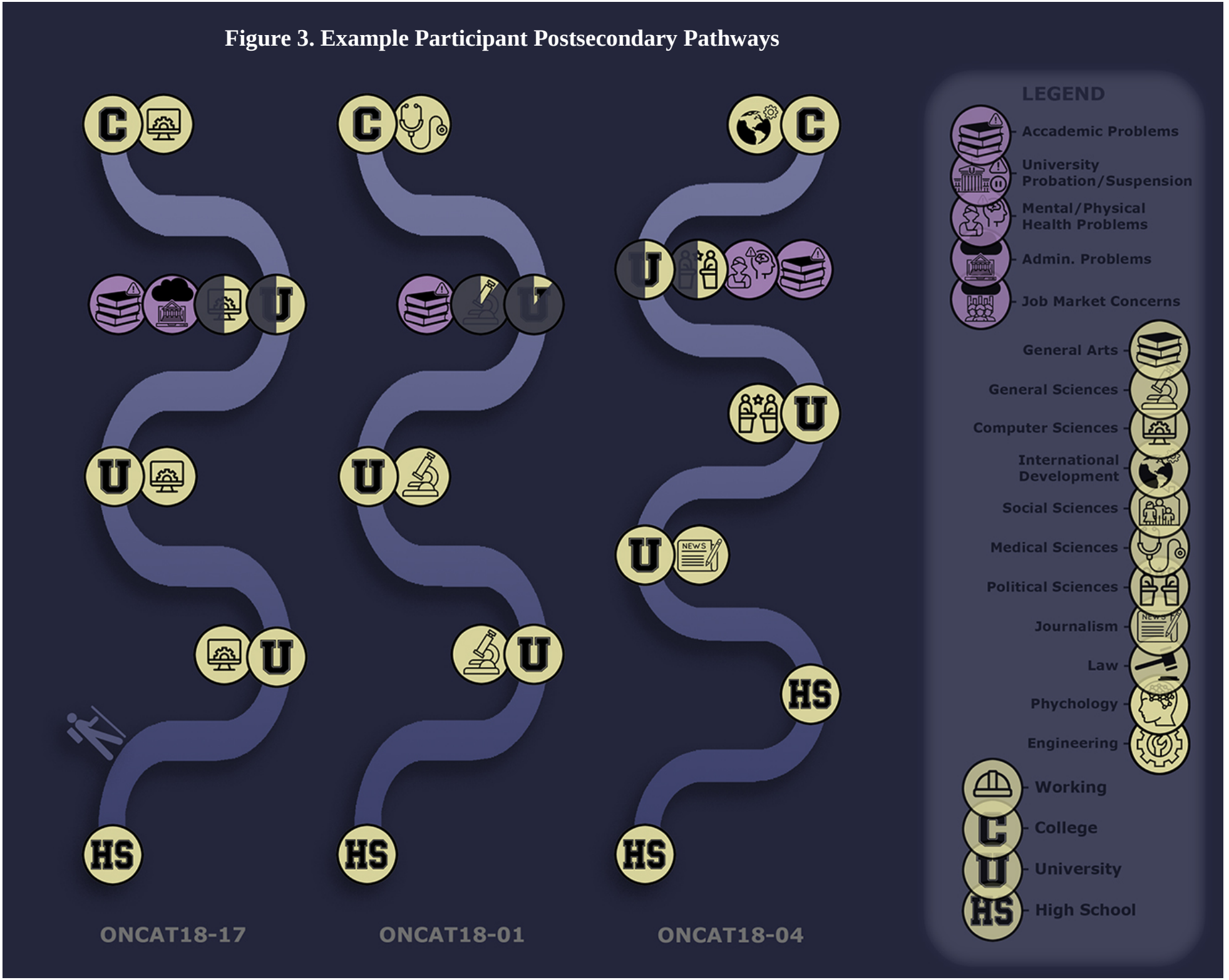
In Figure 3 on the next two pages, we have visual representations of six of our participants' PSE journeys, up to the time of the interview. We chose simple and complicated journeys to give an

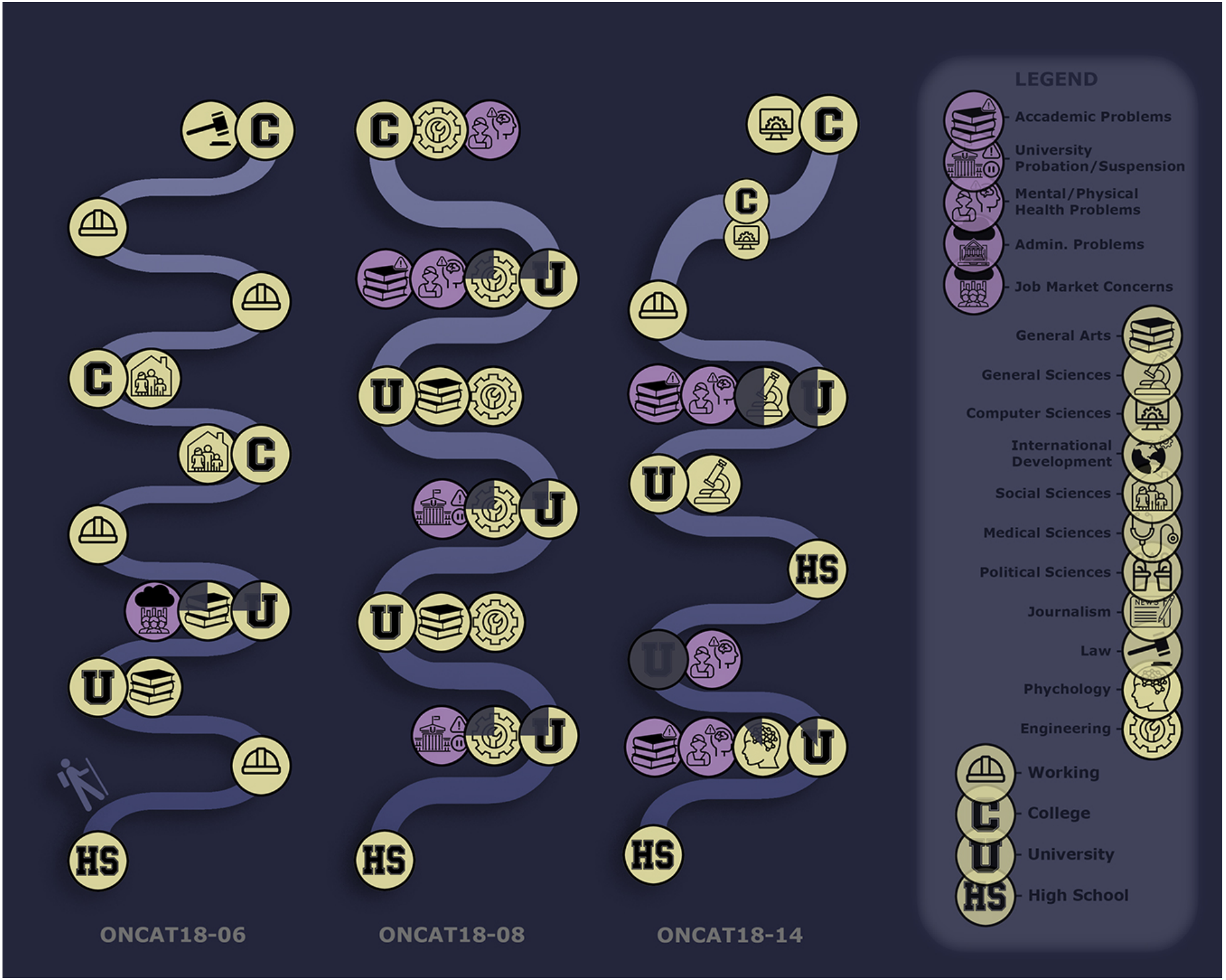
[2] By this, we mean that the participant attempted one university program, then had a hiatus, then attempted a new university program, different to the first.

[3] By this, we mean that the participant either went back to high school or similar after their attempt at a university program in order to improve their grades and further post-secondary opportunities.

idea of the range and variety present in the interviews. Our findings suggest that the metaphor of a linear pathway is generally incorrect for the vast majority of UTC students (Moodie 2004), with the likeness being more similar to that of a ‘swirl’ (de los Santos Jr. and Wright 1990) or a deck of cards being shuffled (Maxwell, Hagedorn, Brocato, Moon, and Perrakis 2002).

Figure 3. Example Participant Postsecondary Pathways




LEGEND
Accademic Problems
University Probation/Suspension
Mental/Physical Health Problems
Admin. Problems
Job Market Concerns
General Arts
General Sciences
Computer Sciences
International Development
Social Sciences
Medical Sciences
Political Sciences
Journalism
Law
Phychology
Engineering
Working
College
University
High School
ONCAT18-06
ONCAT18-08
ONCAT18-14

TRANSFER MOTIVATIONS

In coming to grips with our participants' motivations for transfer, we quickly realized that, while these motivations can be distilled down to a general list, the full picture was usually more complicated. Consistent with previous studies in the area, participants rarely had a single reason behind their decision to transfer. Far more often, there were multiple reasons having to do with their situations at the time (both personally and academically), future prospects, money, and parental and self-expectations. These multiple reasons also tended to be connected to each other, reinforcing (or exacerbating) each other, rather than representing entirely separate motivations (Hagedorn and Castro 1999; Mitra 2018).

We also quickly realized that, perhaps because we were dealing with transfers that took place before the participants had finished their original university program, we needed to make a distinction between reasons for leaving university and reasons for entering college. These reasons were also often connected, though we found that they only partially overlapped. Examining them first separately helped us to pinpoint what makes the mid-program UTC transfer unique in the transfer landscape – it happened almost exclusively in response to something not going according to plan. First, we will discuss motivations for leaving university, which we clustered around three main themes: academic struggles, physical/mental health struggles, and future concerns. Figure 4 (following page) maps the relationships between the various reasons our participants gave for leaving university. We will then discuss reasons for choosing to pursue college.

"I wasn't getting anywhere": Leaving University

Academic Struggles

There were a number of motivations for leaving university that we clustered around the theme of academic struggles. Several participants talked about how unprepared high school had left them for university study. The majority of our participants had been successful in high school, as far as normal secondary school indicators go, with all having graduated from high school, 16 out of 20 reporting average grades of 80 and above upon graduation, and all being accepted to university. However, participants also commented on the relatively low effort it took to achieve high marks in high school. They found university courses a struggle in comparison. As one participant put it, "With university, I can't coast like I could in high school. You have to actually do the work otherwise you're going to fall behind" (ONCAT18-13). This was echoed by other participants:

> I had mid to high 80s in grade 12 in pretty much everything. And then jump to university, and I remember my first mid-term for economics, I think I might've gotten a 50 on it. And that just kind of set the tone for how it is in university (ONCAT18-12).

> It was a hard transition from high school to university. From graduating with 90s, the first year I had like 60s, and I was like, 'Oh my god, I have never gotten a 60 in my life, and I have no idea how to study (ONCAT18-05).

> So when I went to university, those habits [getting work done at the last minute, which was enough to get by in high school] had been ingrained in me. And they did not serve me well. So I had to relearn how to learn, and I struggled a lot with that. And my sense of commitment was very difficult. I had no grounding because my only grounding was really what I was interested in (ONCAT18-10).

As this last quote indicates, the majority of our participants found that they were struggling with a combination of more difficult material, and also, perhaps more importantly, an environment in which self-motivation and self-discipline were required in order to be successful. Their courses were more intellectually challenging and the workload in most cases greater than what they had experienced in high school, and many of them were missing the skills that would have helped them cope with this increased demand. While a few participants listed their newfound autonomy as one of the positive aspects of university, others found that this led them into trouble when it came to time management and discovered that the last minute study and moderate effort that saw them through high school would not be sufficient in university. 12 participants reported significant academic struggles, including low grades, failing courses, being forced to change program, and, in two cases, one year academic suspensions from university. Even students who were not experiencing derailing academic struggles were concerned about workloads and 'fine' grades still not being enough to advance to further levels of study, like grad school or medical school. As we discussed in the Participant Pathways section, academic struggles resulted in some participants falling into a pattern of failing and re-attempting courses, sometimes for years, while making very little progress toward the completion of their degree.

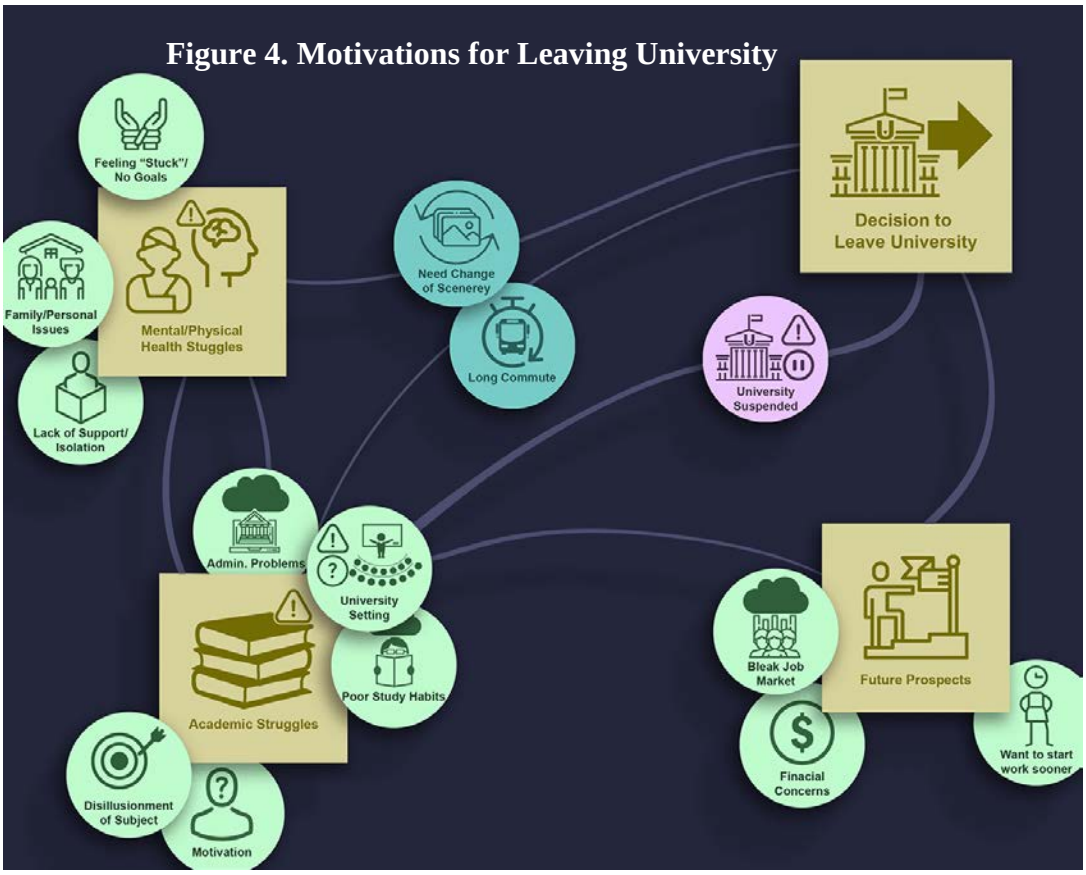


Figure 4. Motivations for Leaving University

These academic struggles were exacerbated by a lack of motivation, often fueled by disillusionment with their subject, and resulted in patterns of non-attendance. Because participants were now in an environment in which their attendance was largely unmonitored and grades based on infrequent testing rather than regular assignments, some began to lose motivation to attend class and keep up with readings, particularly if they found they were not particularly interested in the subject matter or enjoying their studies:

> I just wasn't enjoying it at all, and it was even difficult to go to class. I just felt no motivation . . . I need to be interested in what I'm studying (ONCAT18-01).

> I guess [I was] losing interest in my program . . . I was vaguely fascinated by some of the things I was learning in [my major], but the other courses that I was taking, the content just did not appeal to me. I guess academically, intellectually, or whatever. It never stimulated my interest (ONCAT18-14).

> I just didn't feel satisfied, I didn't feel happy. So yeah, I was kind of thinking about switching. So, it took me three semesters, you know, where my performance was basically a downward spiral. That's when I thought, 'Okay, that's it' (ONCAT18-15).

For about a quarter of our participants, disillusionment with their subject was partially caused by frustration with what they saw as the overly theoretical nature of university learning. Students in both arts programs and STEM programs expressed dissatisfaction with the lack of practical applications for the content they were learning in their courses: "Translating [theoretical knowledge] into application is a skill that is not being taught" (ONCAT18-10). One arts student was particularly exacerbated by the 'academic' nature of her major:

> Anthropology especially, it's so much navel-gazing. Like, it's so academic, it's so removed from, I don't know, anything hands-on. I mean there are people who do some hands-on [anthropological work], and then your professors go, 'Oh, but that's applied, that's applied anthropology,' and then this nose turning (ONCAT18-09).

Other participants were also disappointed with the lack of a 'hands-on' component to their university experience, and they often linked this directly to future potential work scenarios. One participant whose university program included a lab component felt that even this was still too theoretically oriented to be of use in a future job: "I felt like the lab was just too detached from people. And I just felt like it was, I don't know, I just couldn't imagine myself doing it" (ONCAT18-01). Future prospects as a motivation for leaving university will be discussed further below, and will be revisited in the next section on motivations for entering college.

Throughout these interconnecting issues related to academic struggles was a sense of the university as an indifferent place – indifferent to participants' problems, indifferent to their needs, indifferent to their success or failure. One participant said that this was made clear from the very beginning: "Orientation. The guy basically told us that this isn't high school, and if you fail, nobody cares. Those are almost the exact same words" (ONCAT18-13). Another participant felt that the university only cared about her money; "[I]t really felt like the university just doesn't care about you. They have your money, they get your money in, and that's how it is"

(ONCAT18-17). This was echoed by ONCAT18-08, who said that, “it felt like you were just thrown in there and if you can do it, great. If you can’t, well then, too bad. You’ve given us your money.” Participants felt that this sense of individuals, like themselves, as insignificant was reflected in many aspects of their university experience: class sizes in the hundreds, lack of academic and other kinds of support, professors difficult to reach or simply unavailable, administrative issues and the length of time it took to solve them (a particular program for two participants who had been in pilot programs at university that ended up being riddled with administrative problems for which no solutions were being offered), sometimes questionable quality of instruction, and lack of flexibility in scheduling.

This sense of the university as indifferent was problematic in a number of ways, not least because it appeared to be discouraging our participants from even attempting to seek help. When asked if there was support available to help them through their academic struggles, some participants spoke about the limited availability of help and the difficulty in obtaining it, such as tutoring: “Professors usually were doing their own research so it was hard to get a hold of them. If you were lucky you got the lab TA” (ONCAT18-18); “I would be waiting on answers when the answers no longer matter” (ONCAT18-12). However, some also admitted that they did not know if the university provided support because they did not look:

> I don’t know if there was [academic support services], I never heard of it, and I didn’t even bother to look (ONCAT18-13)
>
> I don’t think I really looked, to be honest. I don’t think I looked for any resources, but I don’t think I was really told about any either (ONCAT18-12).
>
> It was not made clear to me. I think that there probably was. I mean, I would hope. That’s maybe . . . just hopeful thinking because I don’t know for a fact. I was never approached or never got involved in any kind of support system (ONCAT18-10).

Physical/Mental Health/SEN Struggles

The lack of support and the university as an indifferent place carries through to our second prominent theme: physical/mental health and SEN struggles. While we have separated these from academic struggles for the purposes of this discussion, they were highly intertwined with academic struggles, with difficulties in one area spilling over into the other.

We had four participants who had been identified as having a special education need, and navigating their university’s accommodations services proved a tricky task. ONCAT18-03 was able to secure some accommodations at university in the form of extended deadlines, but found his experiences with that office were hit and miss in terms of the help they offered: “It’s really who you talk to. If I get somebody who’s sympathetic, then they might [be able to help], but if someone’s just really caught up in like the bureaucracy, then nope.” ONCAT18-04 was also able to secure some exam-related accommodations at university, but these were subsequently taken away when an incident at another university caused 18-04’s university to change their policy surrounding SEN accommodations. ONCAT18-07 felt that the university did not do enough to ensure that students knew what services were available, as she was not aware that she could get accommodations for SEN until after almost four years of struggling. The difficulty in securing accommodations and the inconsistency with which those accommodations were honoured

unsurprisingly caused these participants to struggle academically and added unnecessary stress to an already demanding environment.

Half of the participants reported mental health struggles that ended up playing a significant role in their decision to leave university. Some of these participants understandably did not want to discuss the nature of these struggles, referring to them in general terms ('mental health issues', 'personal issues', etc.), but some volunteered more detailed information about the toll university took on their mental health. These struggles took a number of forms and ranged from mild to severe, including anxiety, insecurity, inability to concentrate/work depression, hospitalization and suicidal thoughts. The scale of the university and, as discussed above, the participants' sense of the university as indifferent to them caused many to feel isolated and alienated from faculty, staff, and even their peers, another marked different from high school:

> It's a lot of people in one room. It's a little bit overwhelming if you're coming from high school setting of 30 students max to 500 or more students in one classroom . . . I remember sitting in the lecture halls and feeling very uncomfortable (ONCAT18-11).

> I felt like it wasn't for me . . . the [university] culture. I felt alone (ONCAT18-10).

> That was also a big change [from high school], because the classes were so big, it was hard to really make connections (ONCAT18-12).

> You make your own way and there's no real structure to it. You're not tethered to anything, which is supposed to be this great thing, and I'm sure it is for a lot of people, all this freedom. I think when I started unraveling and I wanted something to hold onto, there was nothing there (ONCAT18-09).

> [I]n university, I didn't really have a lot of friends in my program, so I felt isolated. So I think that was also a contributing factor . . . I found myself becoming more and more withdrawn. I stopped attending my classes (ONCAT18-06).

Mental health struggles had a significant negative effect on the participants' ability to cope with university workloads. Whether academic struggles were a cause or a consequence of mental health issues, they created a negative feedback loop that derailed progress through the participants' degree programs. Some expressed frustration with 'being stuck', 'not getting anywhere' or 'hitting a brick wall', particularly those who got into a pattern of failing and repeating courses.

Unlike those students who did not seek help for academic struggles, most of the participants who experienced mental health issues did attempt to seek help from the university, but largely found such supports lacking. Participants reported having to wait anywhere from a couple of weeks to six months to get an appointment with university counseling services, and they were very limited in the number of sessions allowed. Two participants also found the counselors unhelpful and dismissive of their concerns, telling them they 'just need to exercise' or were 'just homesick'. One participant described the labyrinthine bureaucratic process necessary to secure

documentation from university accommodations to withdraw from classes (rather than have a fail on his transcript) following a period of hospitalization, only to have a professor reject his request. Three participants ended up seeking help outside the university because the help available within the university was so inadequate.

For a smaller number of participants, physical health problems also played a factor in their decision to leave university. Mental health struggles led to physical health issues for some, including ONCAT18-08: "I think the point where it started, like, making me physically sick is when I was like, 'Okay, I've got to figure something else out.'" For two participants, commuting times began to take a significant toll on both health and academic performance:

> I had to wake up very, very early and then leave, get home, but didn't go to sleep until very, very late because I still had to do homework and stuff. And so that really took a toll on my health, like I got sick all the time, I was missing a lot of classes. I considered going into residence for my last year, but when I looked into it, I couldn't afford residence and tuition, so I ultimately decided to drop out (ONCAT 18-20).

ONCAT18-13 reported that the commute to university, which could be up to an hour and a half each way, contributed to his depression and poor physical health, but he also could not afford to live on campus.

Future Prospects

Though future prospects was a less prominent motivation for leaving university than the clusters discussed above, it was highly significant for the minority for whom it was a factor, and it linked strongly to a greater number of participants in their motivations for subsequently pursuing college. Participants' concerns about the future centered on job prospects and expected returns on their university degree. Essentially, they did not think that the university program they were pursuing would lead to a viable job. There were two key reasons for this: lack of practical experience in university programs and perceived bleak job markets in their chosen fields.

As discussed in the section on academic struggles, there were some participants who were frustrated with what they saw as the overly theoretical nature of university learning. At least part of this frustration stemmed from a desire to be employable once their degree finished, and they did not think their university programs were preparing them adequately for the workforce. ONCAT18-01 wanted to work with people in the medical field, but felt that even the lab component of her program was too far removed from that to be useful in a job. ONCAT18-17 felt that what employers were looking for was not theoretical knowledge, but work experience, so much so that, once you had completed a co-op program, there was often no need to go back and finish whatever program for which it had been an element. Though ONCAT18-09 had at one point considered going on to do a Master's degree after finishing her BA, she became disillusioned with her subject (anthropology) and felt that even with an MA, her job prospects were not promising, nor would she find that work particularly meaningful.

Other participants continued to enjoy their university subjects, but were concerned about the lack of jobs in their field. In particular, they began to doubt whether completing their degrees was worthwhile if there was little hope of getting a job in that same field once they were done:

> I learned more about how hard it was to get a job as a teacher in Ontario . . . There's a backlog, a lot of teachers aren't able to find full-time work. They're substituting. So that kind of, I guess, disillusioned me to that prospect (ONCAT18-06).
>
> I was also afraid that no matter how far I go, you know, I just had this fear of I would be able to find a job . . . I was just always told there's no jobs in this field . . . I'd rather go and do something where I have this pretty much guaranteed chance of finding a job (ONCAT18-14).
>
> I'm sure if I took some [more time] I could finish [my degree] but then why bother if the job market's looking bad. I'm paying a lot of money that may not lead me somewhere (ONCAT18-18).

Entering College

The participants' descriptions of their decision to transfer and the events surrounding it indicate that the majority made the decision to leave university first, prompting them to look for an alternative pathway. Only four participants were still considering staying in university when they came across the idea of college as an alternative. ONCAT18-01, who had gradually lost interest in her university program (general sciences) and did not see it as an appealing future career, decided to apply to college as an alternative while still at university and with the intention of finishing her university degree if she did not get into the college program she wanted. Similarly, ONCAT18-02 was considering an MA as her next step, but applied to college as a back-up plan. When she got into the college program, she decided not to pursue the MA. ONCAT18-12 and ONCAT18-05 wanted to leave the university program they were in, and in the course of looking for alternative university programs, found college programs that better suited their interests and circumstances. In 18-12's case, he was interested in architecture, but there were no university programs nearby that offered an architecture program, but a university academic advisor made him aware of a diploma course at a nearby college. 18-05 was interested in social work, but found the entry requirements for nearby university social work programs too competitive, so decided to try a similar college diploma course instead.

For the majority of the participants (16 out of 20), however, the decision to leave university came first and was largely separate from their decision to pursue college. These were divided between those who, upon deciding to leave university, decided quickly (within a few months) to pursue college, while others took much longer, anywhere from four months to a few years. For those participants who had experienced mental health or other personal difficulties, this time was often spent in recovery as they addressed the issues that had contributed to their struggles in university. Others spent time working, volunteering, traveling, or in leisure activities.

Only one participant, ONCAT18-15, first attempted to find work matching his interests (computer programming), but found that without post-secondary qualifications, he was not being hired, thus prompting him to pursue college. The remaining 19 out of 20 participants were committed to completing some form of post-secondary education on their way to a job or career, regardless of whether they pursued college almost immediately after leaving university or came to that decision later.

After the turmoil and struggle that characterized the participants' decisions to leave university, their reasons for pursuing college were much more positive and straightforward, coming under the general themes of subject interest, college learning environment, location, and future prospects. Table 5 lists these reasons and the number of participants who gave them, which are discussed further below. As with motivations for leaving university, most participants had multiple reasons for entering college, so the numbers in Table 5 add up to more than 20.

Table 5. Motivations for Choosing College

Subject Interest	
College offered program that suited interests	16
No universities offered program for specific field	2
College learning environment	
Short program length	6
Easier entry requirements than university	3
Cheaper than university	2
Smaller classes	2
Hands-on learning	2
Friendlier environment	1
Career/specific job oriented learning	2
Location	
Close to home	6
Minimal commute	6
Close to social support	3
Close to a university (for possible transfer in future)	1
Change of environment	2
Future Prospects	
Job placement/co-op	8
Easier to get a job after	3
More stable job opportunities after finishing	2

Subject interest

At the core of the participants' motivations for choosing college was that courses being offered suited their interests. This may seem like a very simple, even banal, observation, but considering the number of participants who reported losing interest in the subject they were studying in university, being interested and even excited about post-secondary education should not be underestimated. It was by far the most common reason for choosing to pursue college. Moreover, because they had spent time in university and, for some, working, they had a better developed sense of their interests and the kind of work they would like to do in the future, or, at least, what they were not interested in doing. As ONCAT18-15 put it when choosing a program to enter, "I was a little bit more decisive." In two cases, as mentioned above, participants chose to enter college programs because there were no university programs nearby for what they wanted to study, namely cosmetic science and architecture.

College Learning Environment

While subject interest was the most common motivation given for choosing a college program, it was never given as the sole reason. Interest in a particular course being offered was always accompanied by other reasons, and they often had to do with the college learning environment. After all, most of the subjects the participants were interested in studying were also offered at university. Given the negative experience many of them had at university, however, they were looking for a different learning environment. Participants were often drawn to what they saw as the advantages of college such as smaller class sizes, easier entry requirements, friendlier atmosphere, shorter program lengths, cheaper tuition, and hands-on learning:

> Part of it, I didn't want a super long program . . . I didn't want to be in school for another three years (ONCAT18-02).

> I was looking for a program that was a year. I could have done two years but I was just mainly looking for a year so I can graduate on time (ONCAT18-20).

> I decided not to enroll in university because of the university fees being so high. And I was scared that I would apply it to a program to which I turned out to hate in the end (ONCAT18-11).

> It's very hands-on. There's so much support, like everybody knows you by name. You're not afraid to ask for help. It's [a] very team-oriented environment. You get to know – the classes are a lot smaller (ONCAT18-07).

> I was pretty sure I could get into college . . . even if I did have a couple of Fs (ONCAT18-03).

These are in clear contrast to many of the complaints the participants had about the university learning environment: huge class sizes, the university as indifferent and impersonal, theoretically-oriented learning, and lack of support. Indeed, while many of the participants had spoken about university as shock compared to high school, many of them commented that college was much more like high school, which made it an easier transition:

> Another way I look at it, comparing it real quickly with a class here at [college], it feels like high school. The classes are much smaller. Obviously, enrolment is also much smaller, so a professor teaching me here can teach in a similar way as a high school teacher where if you have a question, they will stop the class to answer, whereas in a lecture hall, the professor doesn't see you, doesn't hear you, he's just reading lecture slides and that's it (ONCAT18-17).

It is also worth noting that, while not all participants listed aspects of the college learning environment as reasons for choosing college, they were discussed as positives later in the interview when asked what they liked about their college programs.

Location

Location was the second most cited reason for choosing to go to college. The participants were interested in studying particular subjects in a college learning environment, but they wanted to

do so close to home. This is another motive that should not be underestimated, considering how many of the participants struggled with mental health, isolation, and commuting while at university. Being able to live at or near home made sense financially, practically, and emotionally and psychologically. ONCAT18-03, who had struggled with serious mental health issues while at university, put it this way,

> So, the major draw about college for me was that I could essentially stay at home and come here [college at which he was enrolled]. It was low risk. I didn't have to look for an apartment away from home and get rid of all my social supports.

For ONCAT18-20, a college location close to home was so important that it was what she looked for first, before even deciding what program to take: "I was looking for colleges that were near my area . . . and then from there I kind of scrolled through the website [of the college nearest me] seeing what they had in store."

Future Prospects

Closely connected to the appeal of college learning as 'hands-on' and 'career-oriented' was the perception that college would be more beneficial to future prospects. Thirteen participants listed a job-related motivation as a reason for choosing college. They felt that a college diploma would make it either easier to get a job after graduating or would lead to more stable job opportunities in the future:

> I'm taking this course because I think that there's a lot of future potential with computer engineering technology (ONCAT18-10).

> It's a good career, you know? You go into [the college program you choose] – it's what you are. Like, it's not up in the air where you can get a job (ONCAT18-06).

> I ended up taking respiratory therapy just because it seemed like it had a lot of growth opportunity and a lot of diversity. You can work in a lot of places (ONCAT18-01).

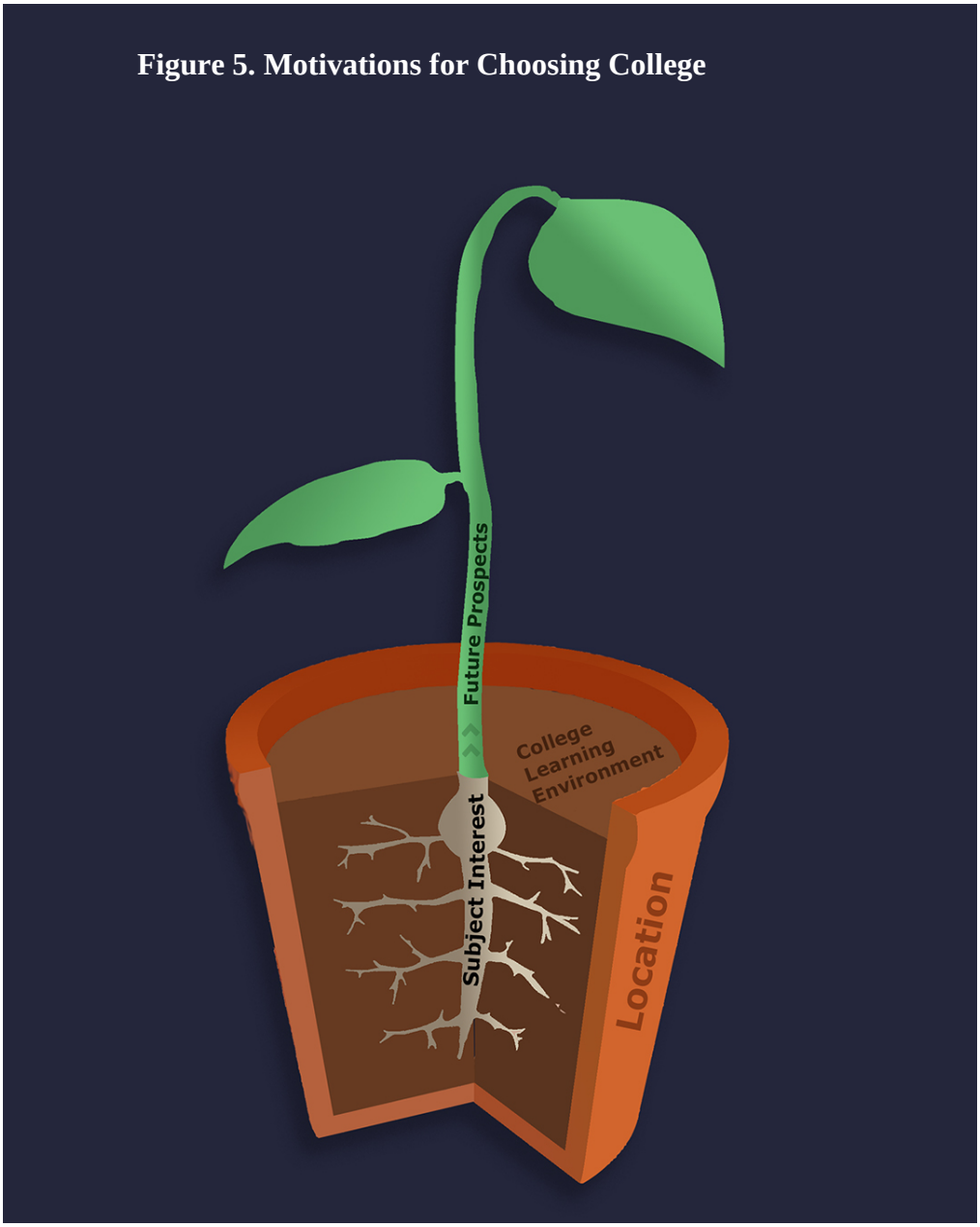
The opportunity for future work opportunities was, for 8 participants, concentrated in the inclusion of co-op or job placements in their programs. Several more participants also listed co-op or job placements as one of the positives of college education in a later section of the interview, though they did not initially cite it as a motivation for choosing college. Job placements would give them the work experience that, according to ONCAT18-17, employers were looking for, even more than a degree or a diploma:

> They want work experience . . . I know a lot of people who, whether here or at other universities, they do co-op, and their employers are just like, 'Work. We are giving you a full-time job now' . . . They don't need to go back school . . . So, yeah, the actual hands-on practical is the reason I wanted to do the program.

Figure 5 represents the relationship between the above motivations for choosing to enter college. Subject interest is at the core, but it is significant that it rests within a college learning environment, and that these together are situated in a desirable geographical location, i.e. one

that is close to home. Reaching through these layers from the core of subject interest and out beyond the edge are future prospects.

Figure 5. Motivations for Choosing College



Discussion

As was noted in the literature review, college-to-university transfers have been the more visible type of transfer between these two PSE systems, with college often seen as a stepping-stone to university. Transfer research shows that it is not uncommon for college students to have university in mind as a later step along their PSE journey. Indeed, there are programs that are designed with a transfer from college to university built in, known as ‘articulated agreements’ or

'bridging programs', and these transfers have been shown to be highly successful due to the careful integration and planning efforts of both institutions. We have found no evidence in this study or in the research literature, however, to suggest that mid-program UTC transfers are often planned in this way, either by individual students or as part of any institution's program design. As this section demonstrates, none of our participants began PSE with the intention, however vague, of taking a college program at some point, and a mid-program UTC transfer was certainly not part of any participant's short or long term education plans.

Usher and Jarvey's (2012) study of students who transfer into college (either from university or other colleges) found very few respondents who cited dissatisfaction or a negative experience as a reason for transferring, which they argue suggests that transfers have more to do with 'pull' factors than 'push' factors. However, they also stated that 18 respondents said they 'did not like the university learning style or environment' and that this was a factor in their decision to transfer. Moreover, they did not distinguish between reasons for leaving their initial program and reasons for pursuing another program, a distinction we found necessary to make in order to make sense of our participants' transfer motivations. Disaffection with university was a prominent theme amongst our participants in their decision to leave university, and, we would argue, should be counted as a 'push' factor. Indeed, our discussion of transfer motivations here shows that 'push' factors are highly relevant for UTC transfer students. Many of the participants had negative experiences at university and expressed a great deal of dissatisfaction with the university environment. As noted above, a UTC transfer is, as far as we can see, almost never something that is planned. It seems very unlikely that the participants would still have transferred to college if they had been coping well with their university studies, enjoying their programs, and were not hampered by personal circumstances, like mental health struggles. In other words, for many of our participants, while their reasons for leaving university were related to their reasons for pursuing college, the 'pull' factors of college became relevant only after the 'push' factors of negative university experiences and trying personal circumstances forced them to reevaluate their plans.

TRANSFER EXPERIENCES

Our participants' motivations for transfer provided some stark contrast with what appears in the research literature for other types of transfer, but was consistent with what little research is available on UTC transfer from the United States. The actual process involved in transferring, specifically applying for transfer credits, however, was substantially similar to what has been previously reported for almost all types of transfer in Ontario. In this section, we will first discuss the transfer process: how participants knew that transfer credits were a possibility, where they found information, what the transfer process involved, and whether they were able to successfully transfer credits and why. We will then discuss what the participants saw as transfer obstacles and facilitators, and finally, transfer recommendations and advice.

The Transfer Process

Finding Out about Credit Transfer

Thirteen of our participants knew before applying to college that transfer credits would be a possibility, though not all remembered precisely how they first found that information. Because

they were already aware of transfer credits, they sought out information from various sources, which will be discussed in the next section, about the process before or during application to college: “I always knew that U of T, for example, had their own transfer system. I assumed that all colleges had their own transfer system, so I just made an appointment with the college’s Career Services” (ONCAT18-18). Four other participants had not realized that credit transfer for courses taken in university might be a possibility, but found out from other people after starting college, three from college staff members and one from a friend on the same course:

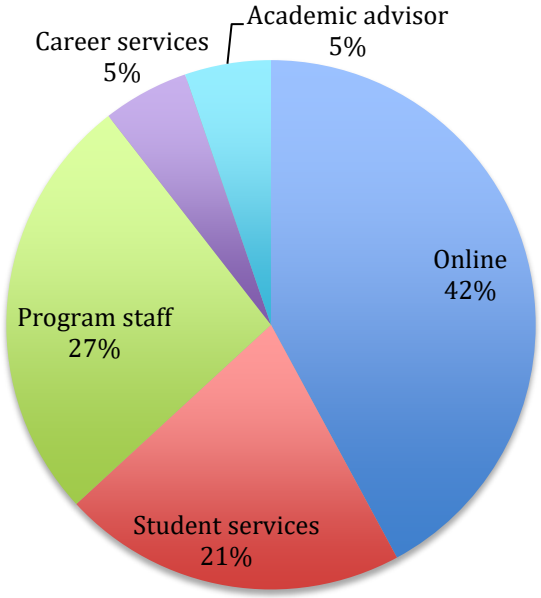
> I actually didn’t know until I think one of my friends was talking about transferring credits from her old university to here and how she was trying to go through that process, so I asked a little about the information and then she handed me an extra form she had.
>
> ONCAT18-11: I didn’t know . . . I think [I found out] based on a teacher referring to a different possibility of not doing a Microsoft class . . . to either transfer out of it if you have already completed one or if you are willing to take the challenge test and see if you know the material well enough.
> INTERVIEWER: So that gave you the idea that maybe . . .
> ONCAT18-11: Some other [courses] might count, too, exactly.

Three participants did not inquire about using any of their previous university credits toward their college program. Two had applied to college using only their high school transcript, and one of these was actually able to get an exemption for a math class based on that, but was told that nothing else from high school would be applicable for a credit. Because this participant had been in an arts program in university but was now in a primarily math-based program at college, he felt there was no point in giving the college his university transcript and applying for credits. Another participant knew that transferring credits between college programs could be done, but assumed that the same would not apply for university to college transfers: “I just thought universities and colleges are so different, you know, there is no way they will give me anything” (ONCAT18-15). Moreover, there was no mention during either the application process or orientation of transferring university credits, so he never considered applying for them. He did recently find out that it was a possibility and that his college program has elective courses toward which he might be able to use previous university credits and was planning to look into that for the next semester. The third participant seemed to know that transferring university credits to college was a possibility, but was not interested in finding out more: “I never tried. There might have been because we cover some of [the same] stuff, but basically, no” (ONCAT18-13).

Getting Information

Once our participants knew that they might be able to get transfer credits for their university courses, they sought information from a variety of sources on the procedures and process. Figure 6 shows the breakdown of sources pursued by our participants in their information search.

Figure 6. Information Sources about Transfer Credits



Online sources can be further broken down into college websites, student forums, Facebook groups, the Ontario Colleges website, and ONCAT's website, with college websites being by far the most commonly consulted information source. Student services, program staff, career services, and academic advisors were almost entirely those at the receiving institution. Only one participant consulted staff at both the origin and receiving institutions.

Steps in the Transfer Process

For all participants, applying for transfer credits was done after they had been accepted to their college program, but different colleges asked participants to apply at different times. For some, the college encouraged participants to apply for transfer credits as soon as they received their acceptance. Others were told to get their documentation together but not to apply until the semester had started. The majority of interactions involved in obtaining transfer credits were at the participants' receiving institution. Interactions with the sending institutions, i.e. universities, were limited to online requests for transcripts to be sent to the college, and occasionally tracking down previous professors or TAs in order to find course outlines/syllabi from university classes.

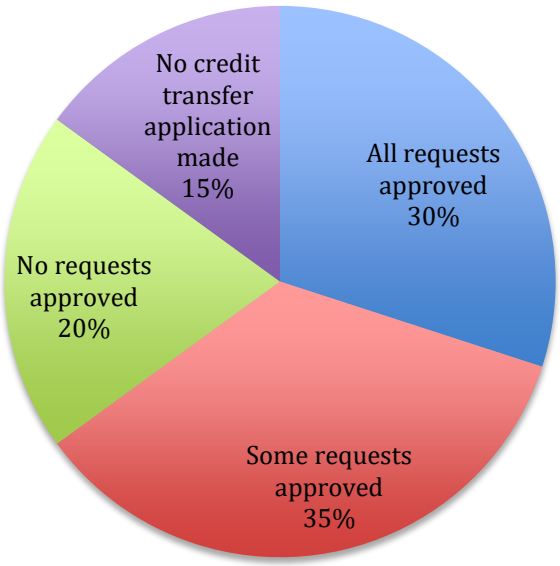
For the majority of our participants, applying for transfer credits consisted of three main steps: 1) filling out a form indicating the college courses they wanted to be exempt from and the university courses they thought would suffice as credit and sending it to the correct office at the college; 2) arranging for a university transcript to be sent to that same office; and 3) providing a course description/syllabus for the university courses they listed on the form in order for the college to determine that it was sufficiently similar to the college course to approve the exemption. Much of this was done online, but occasionally participants would bring hard copy paperwork into the relevant offices. Participants were informed usually within a few weeks whether their requests had been approved, via email or online student services portals.

For three participants, the process was slightly different, involving an extra step or even dropping a step from the usual process. One participant did not have to provide a course syllabus for one of her requests because the transfer credit, university English to exempt her from a college communications course, was very common and so was automatically approved without further documentation needed. For another participant, the transfer office was not certain whether the university course was enough of a match to the college course to grant exemption, and directed the participant to contact the professor teaching the college course, as the decision would then be at the professor's discretion. Another participant felt that one of his requests had been rejected unfairly. He contacted the office to appeal the decision and was told to resend the information for them to reconsider. The request was ultimately approved.

Transfer Credit Success

Figure 7 shows our participants' success in terms of credit transfer approval. Six out of 20 participants were able to get all of their of their transfer credit requests approved, seven were able to get some of their requests approved, and a further seven participants did not have any credits transferred. Of those seven, four did not have any of their requests approved, while three did not apply.

Figure 7. Transfer Credit Success



The most common courses that were approved for credit transfer were those that counted towards electives in the participants' college programs. There were very few instances of participants getting exemptions for core program courses. Relatedly, the most common reason reported for having a request rejected was that the university and college courses were not a close enough match in the college's assessment to warrant an exemption. Several participants commented on the highly specialized nature of their college courses, making transfer credits less of a possibility:

> It was really difficult to transfer credits just because it's such a unique program . . . I took a course in gender and gender politics [in university], and I tried to combine the two so I wouldn't have to take gender and development [at college], but they said no, it's too unique (ONCAT18-04).

> The [university] course has to be very specifically like what the course we're taking [in college] . . . There was an anthropology course I took at [university], but it wasn't close enough to one of the anthropology courses here. And so, they were just, they said no (ONCAT18-06).

One participant was able to get a transfer credit despite the courses not being a precise match. She was able to get an approval for a sociology elective in college because she had taken several anthropology courses in university, however, this case appears to be very much in the minority. The only other reason reported for having a request denied was because the participants' mark in the university course was too low.

It is worth noting that some participants were not very concerned with whether their transfer credits were approved or not. While some were hoping for more credits than what they eventually had approved, any disappointment or frustration expressed was mild. Two participants reported being so focused on a new beginning in college that the question of credit transfer was not of prime concern:

> It's something I wanted to kind of start fresh, I guess, so it didn't really bother me too much whether or not I would be able to transfer [credits] successfully (ONCAT18-14).

> For me, it wasn't even all that important. I was just, kind of, grateful to be out of [university] and, you know, feeling productive. I was like, 'I hope they give me the credit, but if they don't, it's okay' (ONCAT18-09).

One participant event went so far as to decline a transfer credit in her effort to get the most out of her college program: "They offered to let me off my electives, but I chose not to because . . . there was a couple of electives they were offering that I said, 'You know what, maybe it would be beneficial'" (ONCAT18-18).

Transfer Facilitators and Obstacles

Overwhelmingly, the participants reported finding the credit transfer process fairly simple, describing it variously as, "pretty seamless" (18-07), "very easy" (18-14 and 18-16), "not too bad" (18-01), "simple as that" (18-08), "not too stressful" (18-09), and "not too complicated" (18-18). As discussed above, those participants who sought information did so via online sources, primarily college websites, and through college staff, such as student services, department staff, and academic advisors. Participants listed these online and staff resources as the main transfer facilitators and found them, for the most part, very helpful:

> I was kind of intimidated by it in the beginning, but then when I read the steps on how to transfer credits [on the college website], I realized that it was actually pretty simple (ONCAT18-07).

> I went to [student services] here, and they ended up setting it all up and helping me out here . . . They were so helpful. They gave me a little sheet of paper that had step-by-step, first do this, and then do this, all that kind of stuff (ONCAT18-05).

> I did have to track down course outlines, I did have to make an appointment, get everything . . . but it wasn't too complicated. I got my answer within a couple of weeks (ONCAT18-18).

In terms of transfer obstacles, the two most commonly reported were the highly specialized nature of college courses and having to find outlines/syllabi from previous university courses. The former was the reason behind most of the transfer credit rejections reported by our participants, causing some frustration. For example, ONCAT18-19 had taken biology courses in university in sub-divisions, such as botany, but the college would not consider these in combination to exempt her from a general biology course in her college course. ONCAT18-17 felt that this reflected one of the key differences between university and college: "The big reason for [my credit transfer requests being rejected] was because there were no lab credits. There is no theory here . . . It's all practical, it's all hands-on."

Finding outlines or syllabi from previous university courses in order to show equivalency to college courses has been well established in the research literature as a source of frustration for CTU transferring students (Gerhardt, Arai, Carroll, and Ackerman, 2012; Fisher, Nay, Wilson, and Wood, 2012; Lakehead University 2012; Durham College 2016), and this appears to be no different for UTC students. In some cases, these outlines were easy to locate, but sometimes it proved more difficult, mainly due to the amount of time that had passed. The longer it had been since the participant took the course, the more of a challenge it became to find the right syllabus:

> It was kind of hard for me because . . . some courses were like two or three years old, and I had to go all the way back there trying to search for it (ONCAT18-16).

> It had to be specific, what was needed and for a lot of those I didn't actually have, so I had to go back to previous years . . . The professor doesn't even have my year online, so I had to get a previous year (ONCAT18-17).

Other obstacles were reported, but by only one or two participants each. These included: online information being confusing, having to go to individual professors for exemption permission, having to prove English competency (international student), not knowing where to go for information, conflicting and/or inaccurate information from college staff, and administrative errors at university causing delays to a student getting final transcripts. Three participants did not have any complaints to report for themselves, but did report frustrating transfer credit situations they had heard from other students: credit equivalency fluctuating because of the amount of time that had elapsed since the university course was taken, inefficient processing of paperwork, and incomplete or conflicting information from college staff.

Again, it is important to note that while our participants did report these frustrations, the overall impression left by the transfer process was that it was simple and straightforward.

Transfer Recommendations and Advice

Transfer Recommendations

Participants were asked if they would make any recommendations to post-secondary institutions to improve the transfer process. Because they had little trouble with the process overall, there were not many suggestions for its streamlining, but what suggestions were made are summarized below.

General recommendations

- Maintain a universal database of all university and college courses and their potential equivalencies, which would be available to both post-secondary institutions and transferring students to search.

Recommendations for receiving institutions

- More dedicated staff to process transfer credit requests, particularly at peak times like the fall
- Provide complete and detailed information to those inquiring about credit transfer, do not just answer the specific questions transferring students ask. Students do not always know what questions they *should* be asking and so end up with incomplete information.
- Make credit transfer more visible, particularly for UTC transfers. Mention it during orientation and during the first week of classes.
- Hold information sessions or provide a space where students transferring outside a bridging program can go for transfer guidance.
- Offer seminars for UTC transfer students to explore the issues that derailed them in university to ensure they do not happen in college, as well.

Recommendations for origin institutions

- Universities should make more of an effort to assess why people are leaving before completing their programs.

We will discuss these recommendations further in our final section on policy recommendations.

Transfer Advice

Participants were also asked what advice they would give for other students thinking about transferring from university to college. We grouped these into two categories: specific practical advice about the transfer process and more general advice about post-secondary pathways.

The most common piece of practical advice our participants would give is to, “do your research” (ONCAT18-16). Participants were very much in unison on this point. They felt that potential transfer students should be strongly encouraged to seek all the information they could about how different colleges deal with transfer credits, or, if the student has already decided on a college, to get as much detail as possible on that college’s transfer process. Participants suggested exploring college websites, contacting the registrar’s office, academic advisors, or student services for help or going on college tours. ONCAT18-05 emphasized seeking help from the receiving institution and not the origin institution:

> Talk to where you want to go, not where you're coming from . . . I found that [the university] didn't want to give me information about [college] because they obviously want you to stay, they want your money, they want you as a student. Whereas [the college] was over-the-moon willing to help you because they want the student.

Participants would also encourage UTC transfer students to take careful stock of what they did in university and how it might be applicable to their new college program, because the college will only consider those transfer credits the student requests, rather than looking at an entire university transcript to see what might be eligible.

Our participants had a great deal more to say in the vein of general advice about post-secondary pathways. Echoing their advice to "do your research" when investigating transfer processes, they strongly encouraged students to think about what they want, now and for the future, discuss things with friends and family, seek out information, and explore all their post-secondary options before making a choice:

> I would advise them to plan out ahead and see what their actual goals after school are. And then see whichever path works best for them (ONCAT18-13).

> Figure out what you want before you apply. Yeah, because school's an investment, and I know a lot of people who have gone to school just for the sake of going to school, but I know from my experience if I wasn't engaged in what I was learning, I wasn't actually learning anything (ONCAT18-03).

> I would say don't go to school unless you know exactly what you want to take. You're just wasting your time [otherwise], wasting your time and money. Just wait a bit and then decide (ONCAT18-06).

> Make sure you're doing it for the right reasons (ONCAT18-17).

Relatedly, ONCAT18-04 encouraged students to be advocates for themselves on their post-secondary journey, to take responsibility for their path, rather than letting the institutions look after their best interests. For ONCAT18-19 and 18-20, this meant making a decision that was right for them, rather than doing what their parents or others thought they should: "If you don't think [university] is going to take you where you want to [be], then you shouldn't go, and you shouldn't listen to your parents, because it's going to be your life in the end, it's not theirs" (ONCAT18-19). Indeed, several participants expressed some regret over not taking the time to explore different options after high school and assuming, often under the influence of parents, that university was the only path, as will be discussed in the next section on transfer reflections. They were eager to let students struggling at university know that university is not the only option, that college education was just as legitimate a path and might suit them much better:

> I guess not to let your biases that university is superior prevent you from going to college. I feel like way too many people go to university now just because it's expected of them

> and them they end up graduating with these essentially useless degrees, because everyone has an undergraduate degree now (ONCAT18-02).
>
> Just really think about it, and if you feel like [college] is the right decision for you, if you feel like you can't handle university, honestly, there's no shame. Leave it. It's still going to be there [later] (ONCAT18-09).
>
> Cut your losses . . . And other people who are similar, where your mental health is degrading, your grades over are degrading, and financially or in any kind of way it's hard for you to reach that goal, university, you don't have to stay (ONCAT18-16).

ONCAT18-07 and 18-08 warned, however, that a change of direction and institution was not a guaranteed remedy for the struggles and hardships of university. It was therefore important to consider the nature of the problems that underlay the negative experiences of so many UTC transfer students and to make sure these were being addressed:

> It can be a bit intimidating to go from one post-secondary institution where you didn't have a necessarily great experience right into another one, but I think the biggest thing is to just keep an open mind and know that your new experience isn't necessarily going to be just like your old one, [but] it's also not going to fix all your problems . . . You still have to work away at certain things in yourself and figure out, like, what you can do to make your experience better there, which is what I'm trying to do right now (ONCAT18-08).

TRANSFER REFLECTIONS

Positive Reflections

Participants were asked to reflect on their decision to leave university and go to college, and how they felt about it now, looking back. On the whole, they reflected very positively on their transfer, with 18 out of 20 explicitly stating that it was a good decision, and they were happy with it. ONCAT18-01 summed up the feelings of the majority of the participants when she said, "I think it was a good decision to come here, and I think it was kind of nice to get a fresh start." Like several of the others, she was enjoying her college program much more than she had enjoyed university and felt she had been able to re-establish her work ethic. ONCAT18-05 expressed similar sentiments in that she was not repeating the procrastination and dread of study that plagued her university experience. ONCAT18-05's long commute was also gone, something that was a relief to ONCAT18-20, as well. Six other participants commented on their improved academic performance since beginning their college programs, which was cause for celebration given the academic struggles that characterized many of their university experiences:

> I really see myself completing this, which is thrilling for me because of everything I've, I guess, experienced academically so far (ONCAT18-14).
>
> I've always worked hard, but now it's showing (ONCAT18-04).

> I felt like I was doing something real, and then I actually started to do well in it, because I got that continuous feedback . . . positive feedback (ONCAT18-03).

For ONCAT18-03 and three other participants, their time in college had not only seen academic improvement, it was also helpful in terms of recovering from some of the mental and physical health struggles they experienced in university. ONCAT18-19 felt that being closer to home, renewed interest in her studies, and the smaller and more personal college learning environment made going to college, "the best decision for me and my health." ONCAT18-20 felt that staying in university would have meant worsening health and increasing stress, but going to college instead has allowed her to recover. ONCAT18-03's turnaround since leaving university, where he experienced severe mental health struggles, was significantly boosted by his college experience, which he felt had given him purpose:

> [This college program] is probably the best that could have happened to me because there was a time when I even questioned if I could work again because of my diagnosis. And to be able to see myself gradually inch forward and get to a point where I'm now working in a field that's not food service, like I actually have qualifications now, it's incredible. I feel immensely proud.

Only two of our participants seemed to be experiencing some of the same problems in college (mental health struggles and academic struggles) that had been significant factors in their decision to leave university, but both these participants maintained that the decision to transfer was a good one. The improved performance of our participants supports the (albeit scant) evidence in the research literature that UTC transfer students tend to fare well post-transfer. Nine participants were not only happy with their decision to leave university and go to college, but they expressed a wish to have transferred earlier, or even to have skipped university altogether and gone to college straight out of high school:

> Interviewer: If you had known about [your current college program] before, do you think you might have just started with that?
> ONCAT18-01: Yeah, I think I probably would have just started with this. And then if I wanted to do more schooling afterwards, there are a lot of different bridging programs . . . So I kind of wish I had started with this first and then afterwards, if I wanted to get that bachelor's, [go to university].
>
> I think I should have just gone straight into college from high school. If I could talk to myself back then, that's what I would say (ONCAT18-13).
>
> My only regret is that I didn't do it sooner (ONCAT18-15).
>
> Admittedly, I wish I had made it sooner [the decision to transfer] . . . In terms of overall money, I would have saved a lot, and I would have saved myself a lot of time (ONCAT18-18).

Unsurprisingly, a number of participants felt that their future job prospects were improved by the decision to go to college, providing another reason for positive reflection on their transfer.

ONCAT18-07 thought that university education did not necessarily provide students with a career direction and left them with a great deal of uncertainty over finding a job after degree completion. Indeed, she wondered whether graduate school was now necessary in order to find a job in your degree field because so many people have undergraduate degrees. College, on the other hand, focused students in a very specific direction, and, "gets results much faster." ONCAT18-18 reported seeing friends graduate from university with top marks, still have trouble finding work, and end up working in an unrelated field. ONCAT 18-20 did not think she would have gotten a job right away if she had finished her university degree, but already has a job lined up for when she finishes her college diploma, largely thanks to the job placement that was part of the program.

Getting results faster was especially important for two of our participants because they reported being impatient to move on from education. This was not because they did not like school or learning, though there was an element of being tired of it, but because they felt that being in school at their age meant they were behind where they should be on their life pathways or behind where others their age were on their life pathways. Having to continue their education was delaying other important activities or milestones, such as working, earning money, buying a house, and having a family:

> I'm 25, I want to start working. I'm tired of being in school, and I want to have money and a house and get my life together . . . I could have been 22 and working, and now I'll be 25 and working (ONCAT18-02).

This sense of being behind, or being left behind, was particularly acute for ONCAT18-08, who compared his own position with that of peers and of his parents when they were his age, and found his position wanting:

> I wish I had just found a way to keep my head down and powered through [my degree] because right now, I'm 27, I'm still not done my education, you know? I work at a [retail store] . . . [Former classmates] are finished the diploma program, and they're working, and they're moving on with their lives. At the end of the day, they're making money, and I'm not.
>
> My parents had me when they were 20, right, and they were both done university and everything . . . They were ready to go out into the world.

Ambivalent and Negative Reflections

Despite the overall positive nature of our participants' reflections, there were some lingering regrets and doubts expressed by many, though they did not cause any of them to regret wholesale the decision to leave university and go to college. Three participants had only a year left on their university degrees when they decided to leave, and while they were happy in their college programs, there was some part of them that wished they had stayed to complete it. As ONCAT18-01 put it, "I kind of wish I had just stuck out the year to complete it." This was echoed by ONCAT18-20, who said, "I do regret just leaving during third year because I did have one year left, and I have a lot of people telling me you could have just finished it and then went to college." She went on to say, however, that this regret was small and did not make her

question her decision to transfer, because she did not feel she would have been able to handle another year in university.

For two other participants, it was not so much not finishing the degree they regretted as the missed opportunities they might otherwise have had if they did finish it. ONCAT18-10 thought that a university degree would not necessarily make him a better or more qualified potential employee, but that having a degree would make him more likely to get interviews at certain places. ONCAT18-02, who, as quoted above, was tired of school and wanted to move into work, felt that college was, for her, a compromise, a way to move on with life more quickly, though maybe not in her first choice career:

> Honestly, I still think I would have rather gone into research if that would have been a possibility [which would have necessitated graduate school], but I think given my circumstances and everything that's happened, I'm happy with where it's going towards, I guess.

ONCAT18-18 said that he did not regret not finishing his university degree, but, "wouldn't mind still having a science degree to [his] name," because others recognize it as an accomplishment.

More often, though, participants reported regrets over not finishing their university degrees and going to college instead for two other reasons: a sense of personal failure and disappointing others. Six participants felt that leaving university before graduating reflected badly on them and left them with a sense of failure, especially in the period leading up to and immediately after their departure from university.

> I started to think about what made me feel bad for not finishing that program, and it was essentially that I felt like I had failed. I felt like I had just, I reached my limit, I tried to push against it, and I couldn't do it (ONCAT18-03).

> Oh, yeah, there are still parts of me that feel like I failed just because I didn't finish what I started. I always pictured graduating [from university], so that's kind of gone now . . . I was really devastated because I felt like I was a failure for not being able to complete [my degree] (ONCAT18-04).

> It's important to me as a person just to finish what I started. It's a little bit like something that you kind of just think, 'What if?' And putting your mind to it and saying, 'Yeah, I can finish that (ONCAT18-11).

> I don't think I should feel regret, but I do. I guess I feel like sometimes . . . that I might have wasted time, you know, with my life trying to pursue things that didn't end up going through (ONCAT18-14).

The other prominent source of regret or ambivalence came from the reactions of others to their decision to transfer. 18 out of 20 participants reported that, at the time of the interview, their family and friends were supportive of the participants' choices and were happy to see them succeeding in college. 13 participants also reported, however, that approval of their decision was

not universal, that some significant people in their lives did not support transfer, at least initially. This appears to be largely due to cultural and societal expectations surrounding high achievement, particularly as enforced by parents, and perceptions of college education versus university education, with university education seen as being superior. Indeed, participants spoke at length in this section and other sections of the interview about their own and others' biases in favour of university over college. Four participants linked this bias toward university to race, culture, and immigrant status:

> A lot of children of immigrants, they kind of push their kids to go to university, and it's kind of unrealistic sometimes when . . . that's not what they want to do (ONCAT18-01).

> My parents, being Eastern European parents, thought that, obviously, a university is the only want to get my degree and everything . . . there was a lot of, I guess, stigma around colleges in my family, probably just due to lack of information. My parents just didn't' know enough about what colleges offer to have a better judgment about it (ONCAT18-08).

> It's just in our brown culture. I think in Asian culture in general, that's the thing, you're supposed to aim high . . . doing something in engineering or something medical. Whatever it is, do it in a university, that's where you get a better job (ONCAT18-12).

> Especially I think in South Asian communities, when they immigrated over here, they worked tough jobs, and I know all my cousins, they kind of have the same experience where they . . . don't even talk about college. College is kind of looked down upon. So, it's university, that's the just the natural progression (ONCAT18-12).

> It's just since [my parents] are from the Philippines, they're kind of old school, and they're like, 'Oh, no, you need a university degree' (ONCAT18-19).

Of the 13 participants who reported disapproval from family or friends, 10 identified as either visible minority or first or second generation immigrants or both. These participants' experiences support other Canadian education research, showing that recent immigrants tend to have higher expectations for their lives and of their children (Kaushik and Drolet 2018; Areepattamannil and Lee 2014), and that certain ethno-racial groups, particularly Asian groups, have higher academic achievements than peers from other groups (Robson, Anisef, and Brown 2016), which some researchers have linked to high parental expectations (Yau, O'Reilly, Rosolen, and Archer 2011; Yau, Rosolen, and Archer 2015). It is perhaps not surprising, then, that some participants from met with resistance when they decided to leave university and pursue college instead:

> I was kind of seen as a failure [by my mom] (ONCAT18-11).

> At first, [my mom] was like, 'Why are you dropping out? You have one year left, you wasted all these years now, and you wasted all this money. Why don't you just finish it?' (ONCAT18-20).

> It caused a lot of issues between me and my dad, to be honest, because he was very, 'You need to go to university. You are not going to college' (ONCAT18-05).
>
> Even though my dad is the one that I called [for approval to transfer], and he was the one that said, you know, if that's what you choose, that's fine, we'll support you, it's still there in the back of his head, and he'll still mention it. So, that kind of keeps it in my head, too, unfortunately, but it is what it is (ONCAT18-12).

The perception of university education as superior to college education is even reflected in the language often used to describe university-to-college mobility, i.e. 'reverse transfer'. This term reflects ideas about the usual or 'normal' direction of transfer between universities and colleges, which, historically, has been from college-to-university. The phrase 'reverse transfer' means a UTC transfer in a literal sense, but the word 'reverse' rather negatively implies that the student is going backward or in the wrong direction. None of our participants reported being aware of this phrase, but many were on the receiving end of comments that made them feel as though they were somehow moving backward:

> I have had some people tell me that typically college is a step down from university . . . Or they'd get really confused because I would tell them I was in university and all of a sudden, I'm in college, and they're like, 'What happened?' (ONCAT18-20).
>
> My friend sometimes would say something like, 'Those who cannot do science, do business' (ONCAT18-11).
>
> It's so weird to tell people that I went to [university] and now I'm here. They look at it like, 'Oh, okay, so you weren't good enough to go to university, so you came here' (ONCAT18-12).
>
> One of my friends was like, 'Okay, people transfer from college to university. You are doing it the other way around' (ONCAT18-15).

Fortunately for our participants, the vast majority who reported initially negative reactions from family and/or friends found that these reactions became tempered over time and turned positive once family and friends saw either the toll university was taking on the participant or the improvement the participants experienced in their personal and academic circumstances once at college: "Once it got to a point where they clearly saw that I was struggling and not getting anywhere, they did then support the decision" (ONCAT18-08). For some, the eventual support stemmed from their parents' relief that the participant was 'just doing something', as it was for ONCAT18-07: "[My family] are just happy I'm in school, because I've been out of school. Like, there's that gap. And they're like, 'We don't care what you do, just be going to school.'" This was echoed by ONCAT18-09, who said, "Honestly, I think everybody was probably just grateful that I was doing something at all."

CONCLUSION AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

This project sheds light on a largely unstudied phenomenon in the Ontario post-secondary landscape: university-to-college transfer. The in-depth qualitative data we gathered from our participants on motivations for, experiences of, and reflections on transfer help to enlarge and clarify our understanding of UTC transfer in particular and post-secondary mobility more generally.

In order to get a clearer picture of participants' motivations for transfer, we departed from much of the previous research on transfer and separated their reasons for leaving university from their reasons for choosing college. This lead to two of our most important findings: 1) UTC transfers appeared to happen only in response to plans going awry. They were never planned; and 2) the 'pull factors' of college only became relevant after the 'push factors' of university experience forced participants to reevaluate their plans. Leaving university was motivated by academic struggles, mental/physical health and SEN struggles, and concerns over future prospects. These three themes were highly interconnected, particularly academic and mental health struggles, creating negative feedback loops that derailed university study. Despite these struggles, some participants still spent prolonged periods of time in university attempting to complete their degrees. Once the decision to leave university was made, participants then turned to alternative options, one of which was college. Their reasons for entering college were practical and straightforward, relating to four main elements: subject interest, college learning environment, location, and future prospects.

Participants' experience of the transfer process was substantially similar to what has been previously documented in the literature. On the whole, participants described it as 'simple', though they did find the highly specialized nature of some college courses and finding syllabi for old university courses frustrating. Specialized college courses meant that university courses were sometimes not equivalent enough to warrant an exemption, which was the most common reason for having a transfer credit request rejected. College websites and college staff were listed as the most common sources of information on credit transfer and the best facilitators of the process. Participants would encourage other potential UTC transfer students to do their research, explore all post-secondary options, and not to let biases in favour of university over college hold them back.

Overall, participants reflected very positively on their decision to leave university and go to college. Several wished they had left university earlier or even gone to college straight out of high school and not gone to university at all. Negative or ambivalent reflections most often related to a sense of personal failure for not having finished what they started and/or the negative reactions of others, particularly parents. For some, negative reflections on leaving university were tied to cultural and societal expectations about high achievement and perceptions of university education as superior to college education as reflected in the phrase 'reverse transfer.' However, participants found that such negative reflections from family and friends were tempered over time when their health, state of mind, motivation, and academics improved while at college.

Policy Recommendations

Making policy recommendations around UTC transfer is a somewhat tricky proposition in Ontario, because each institution has jurisdiction over its own policy and practices. Without an overarching transfer system in which all post-secondary institutions participate, mobility between institutions will always be more difficult than within-institution mobility. Recommendations that are not institution specific, that would require coordinated participation from multiple institutions, therefore often run the risk of proving ineffectual. Likewise, recommendations that would require significant expenditures on the part of institutions or overhauls of existing transfer infrastructure also run the risk of simply being ignored because they are too costly or complicated. We also realize that several universities and colleges (particularly those in close proximity to each other) have their own articulation agreements in place already. With that in mind, we have tried to make our recommendations moderate in scope.

1. **Make credit transfer part of the application process.**
   Non-linear pathways are an established feature of the post-secondary landscape, however, this project and other transfer research shows that students can be unaware of the potential for transfer credits when moving from institution to institution. We think this is a particular hazard for UTC transfer students, because, as ONCAT18-15 put it, "I just thought universities and colleges are so different, you know, there is no way they will give me anything." For this reason, we recommend that transfer, or at least the awareness of transfer, become integrated into the application process for both universities and colleges. When students apply to Ontario universities and colleges through OUAS or OCAS, they can indicate that they have previous post-secondary experience, and this would be an ideal place to inform them that, if they do have previous post-secondary, they may be eligible for transfer credits and to contact their receiving institution for more details. Even this bare minimum of information would help prevent transferring students from missing out on the opportunity of transfer credits because they simply did not know it was possible.

2. **Information sessions aimed specifically at UTC transfer students once they are accepted to college.**
   Combining several of the transfer recommendations made by our participants, we recommend information sessions, or perhaps information packets, specifically aimed at UTC transfer students to be held or given out once the student has been accepted to the college or during the first weeks of classes. Such sessions could address transfer credits and the transfer process, as well as making the students aware of the various support services the college offers, academic and personal. We feel a rundown of support services is particularly important for UTC transfer students given the sometimes intense struggles our participants related during their time at university. We feel that it would be in the best interests of both the UTC students and the college to provide an opportunity for the students to reflect on their university experiences and any struggles they had during that time, if they have not done so already, in order to ensure that these problems are not repeated in college.

3. **Universities should conduct exit surveys with students who leave before completing their degree in order to evaluate programs and support services.**
   Exit interviews are common in the world of employment, but have not yet, to our knowledge, been widely implemented to students leaving post-secondary institutions. Following the suggestion of one of our participants, we recommend that universities conduct exit surveys with leaving students (interviews may be too cumbersome due to the number of students who drop out), with especial attention to those who leave before completing their program. These surveys can be used to evaluate programs and support services and identify problem areas. It would also be beneficial if some of the data from these surveys, properly anonymized, could be made available to post-secondary education scholars for further study.

4. **Ontario post-secondary institutions should build and maintain a database of courses and transfer equivalents.**
   The idea of a universal database was taken up by ONCAT, and they maintain one on the ontransfer.ca website, but this is not an official guide. In order for this to be a more useful resource, it must be taken further with the co-operation of all Ontario post-secondary institutions. To represent a true and reliable guide to transfer credit possibilities, such a database would need to be updated (at least annually) with course descriptions and transfer equivalents by each institution and be available to all other institutions and Ontario students.

5. **Wider data availability on post-secondary pathways and post-secondary success.**
   In order to better track and study post-secondary pathways, researchers need access to data on enrollment, persistence, academic performance, and completion. Without this, it is difficult if not impossible to get a complete picture of mobility in the post-secondary landscape and to gauge how successful UTC transfer students are in their new programs.

6. **More information about non-linear post-secondary pathways and transfer should be aimed at high school students.**
   Our study shows that high school students in Ontario can be better informed about their post-secondary options and, moreover, should be made aware of the potential for non-linear pathways and post-secondary mobility. Transfer is an option of which they should be aware at the outset, as it may well be a feature of their post-secondary journey.

7. **'Reverse transfer' should no longer be used as a descriptor for university-to-college mobility.**
   The phrase 'reverse transfer' has negative connotations because it implies that college-to-university transfer is normal and correct, and university-to-college transfer is abnormal and incorrect, that UTC transfer students are going the wrong way, as it were. The perception of university education as superior to college education was strongly noted by our participants, both in their own thinking and in the thinking of those around them. This contributed to some of the resistance many encountered (again, both within themselves and from others) in even contemplating a move out of university, despite the intense and prolonged nature of the struggles they experienced there. As mobility in all directions in the post-secondary landscape becomes more common, we believe it is important to

describe such movement with neutral language or even language that recognizes the resilience and grit of students who persist in this manner (Mitra 2018).

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APPENDIX A

PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHIC FORM

A Study of University-to-College Transfers in Southern Ontario

INSTRUCTIONS: Please fill in some basic background information about yourself. You may skip any questions you do not wish to answer.

1. Year of birth: _____

2. Sex: Male _____ Female_____ Intersex: _____ Prefer not to say _____

3. With which gender do you most identify:
   Male ___
   Female___
   Transgender___
   Other (please specify)_____
   Prefer not to say___

4. Where were you born? (top 10 countries of birth after Canada are listed)

   Afghanistan___ Bangladesh___
   Canada___ China___
   India___ Iran___
   Pakistan___ Philippines___
   South Korea___ Sri Lanka___
   United States___ Other (specify)_____

   4b. If you were born outside of Canada, in what year did you immigrate? _____

5. Where were your parents born? (pick two if your parents were born in different countries)

   Afghanistan___ Bangladesh___
   Canada___ China___
   India___ Iran___
   Pakistan___ Philippines___
   South Korea___ Sri Lanka___
   United States___ Other (specify)_____

6. Which of the following best describes your racial background? (pick only one)
   Aboriginal___
   Asian – East (e.g. China, Japan, Korea)___
   Asian – South (e.g. India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka)___
   Asian – Southeast (e.g. Malaysia, Philippines, Vietnam)____
   Black – Africa (e.g. Ghana, Kenya, Somalia)___
   Black – Canada
   Black – Caribbean region (e.g. Jamaica, Barbados)___
   Latin America (e.g. Argentina, Chile, El Salvador)___
   Indian-Caribbean (e.g. Guyana with origins in India)___
   Middle Eastern (e.g. Egypt, Iran, Lebanon)___
   White – Canada___
   White – Europe (e.g. England, Italy, Portugal, Russia)___
   Other (please specify)_____

7. What levels of education have you completed (in Canada or in any other country)?
   I have completed: secondary school _____ college _____ university _____

8. What is your employment status?
   I am: employed full-time ____ employed part-time ____ unemployed ____
   a full-time student ____ a part-time student ____ a stay-at-home parent ____

9. What is your approximate income?
   under $10,000___
   $20,000 and under___
   $30,000 and under___
   $40,000 and under___
   $50,000 and over___

10. What levels of education have your parents completed (in Canada or in any other country)?
    My mother has completed: secondary___ college___ university___ don't know___
    My father has completed: secondary___ college___ university___ don't know___
    My caregiver has completed: secondary___ college___ university___ don't know___

11. What is your parents' employment status? (pick only one for each parent)
    My mother is: employed full-time___ employed part-time___ unemployed__
    a stay-at-home parent___ retired___ don't know___
    My father is: employed full-time___ employed part-time___ unemployed__
    a stay-at-home parent___ retired___ don't know___
    My caregiver is: employed full-time___ employed part-time___ unemployed__
    a stay-at-home parent___ retired___ don't know___

12. If your parents work, what are their jobs/occupations? (Write what they do, such as cashier, teacher, truck driver, computer technician, restaurant owner, accountant, bookkeeper, nurse, office manager, auto mechanic, lawyer, etc.)
    My mother's job is: _____ Don't know___
    My father's job is: _____ Don't know___
    My caregiver's job is: _____ Don't know___

13. In what year did you graduate from high school? _____

14. What were your average grades in high school?
    90-100____
    80-89____
    70-79____
    60-69____
    50-59____
    Below 50____

15. Have you ever been identified as having a special education need or accommodation, including and Individual Education Plan?
    No_____ Yes (please specify)_____

APPENDIX B

Interview Schedule
University-to-College Transfers

Information about these interview questions: I am going to ask you questins about your experience of university-to-college transfers. This interview will be one-to-one and will be open-ended (not just 'yes' or 'no' answers). Sometimes I will use short questions to make sure I understand what you told me (*So, you are saying that . . .*), to get more information (*Please tell me more.*), or to learn what you think or feel about something (*Why do you think that is?*). Please feel free to bring in any information you feel is relevant, even if I haven't asked about it specifically. You do not have to answer any question if you don't wish to. I will make every effort to protect your anonymity, however, we are sometimes identifiable through the stories we tell, so please keep this in mind when providing your answer. You can leave out certain information or ask that it not be sued if you feel it would compromise your privacy.

1. Information about your life currently: age, main activities – school, work, family, and other commitments. No detailed information necessary, just an idea of how majority of time is spent and commitment load. For example, can ask what kind of work they do and if full or part-time, but don't need to know where or specific duties
2. Tell me about yourself in secondary school – what kind of student? Enjoyable time or not? Plans and ambitions for the future, i.e. what decisions did you make about what you would do after high school?
3. Tell me about the university program in which you enrolled and why you chose that program. Describe the schedule and course demands. What did you like about it? What did you dislike about it?
4. What led to your decision to transfer out of that program?
5. What about the university program would have needed to change in order for your to have remained in it?
6. Why did you choose the college program in which you're enrolled now?
7. Describe the transfer process. How did you find out what you needed to do to transfer? What were the steps you had to go through?
8. How would you characterize the transfer process? Easy or difficult? Straightforward or complicated? Were there obstacles? If yes, please describe them.
9. Is there anything that could have been done to make the transfer process easier?
10. Tell me about the college program in which you're enrolled now. Describe the schedule and course demands. What do you like about it? What do you dislike about it?
11. Looking back, what do you think about your decision to transfer?
12. What were the perceptions of others in terms of your decision to transfer?
13. What advice would you give someone who was thinking about transferring from university to college?
14. Is there anything else you'd like to add, anything you feel is important for us to know but that I didn't ask about?