College Transition Experiences of Students with Mental Illness

Martha Glass

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Joan B. Hirt, Chair

Susan Angle

Penny Burge

Steven M. Janosik

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Martha Glass

Abstract

Retention of college students has continued to be a concern for many people connected with higher education (Baum & Ma, 2007; Day & Newburger, 2002; Habley & McClanahan, 2004). The high school to college transition experience has been identified as a key factor in students' decision to remain in college and persist to graduation (Hunter, 2006; Levitz & Noel, 1989; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Roe Clark, 2005). More students than ever are coming to higher education with mental health challenges (Kadison & DiGeronimo, 2004; Soet & Sevig, 2006) but a thorough review of the literature reveals no literature on the transition experience of students that have been diagnosed with psychiatric illness.

The purpose of this study was to understand and describe how students diagnosed with a mental illness experience the college transition. In addition, the study provided an understanding of the transition experience for these students at three different types of institutions. The theoretical framework for this study was Schlossberg's (1984) transition theory. The individuals in the sample included 18-19 year old traditional first year college students diagnosed with mental illness.

Interviews were conducted with 21 respondents during their second semester of college. Data analysis revealed themes under the topics of individual characteristics, academic and social transition, and institutional differences. Findings revealed that these first year students with mental illness had many of the same developmental and transition experiences and challenges as their peers. However, their transition experiences were complicated by the daily tasks of managing medications, symptoms, counseling appointments, academic support services, and involvement of parents. Participants were learning to take responsibility for their own well-being but still needed a safety-net. In addition, respondents described resources and strategies that they used to adjust academically and socially, such as receiving academic accommodations and disclosing their diagnosis to faculty and friends. The students described their campuses in similar ways, as friendly and supportive, with few institutional differences. In general, the participants confronted challenges early during their transition but at the time of the interviews they seemed to be experiencing a successful transition.

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Chapter One

Introduction

Retention of college students is a concern for college and university administrators, faculty, parents, students, taxpayers and policy makers. Retention is defined as the percentage of entering students who stay enrolled at the same institution for two years (Nettles, Wagener, Millett, & Killenbeck, 1999), or the number of first time, first year students who return to the same institution for a second term or year (Levitz, Noel, & Richter, 1999). Each year, millions of students enter higher education but many do not graduate. Tinto wrote in 1993 that of the 2.4 million students entering college, 1.5 million would leave their first institution without receiving a degree, and 1.1 million would leave higher education altogether (Tinto, 1993). This pattern still holds true today.

Despite increased attention to retention and more awareness of attrition rates, little has changed during the past 20 years in five-year graduation rates. For Bachelor's, Master's, and Ph.D. granting institutions, rates range from a high of 54.6% to a low of 50.9% (Habley & McClanahan, 2004). The five-year graduation rate is currently 52.3% (American College Testing [ACT], Inc., 2008). According to the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education (2002), the average rate at which first time freshmen return to the same college or university for second year is 73.6%. A 2008 ACT study indicates an even lower statistic of 65.7% for first year to second year retention. The first year retention rate is very important because it sets the pace for attrition in subsequent years. Second year attrition is usually half that of the first year, and the third year rate is half of that of the second year (Levitz et al., 1999). If institutions can retain more students from the first to second year, they will have lower attrition rates in subsequent years.

In 1981, Noel and Levitz established a national retention and graduation database at ACT. For more than 25 years, ACT data have provided a benchmark for institutions to measure their retention and graduation rates. ACT provides institutional data on first to second year attrition (drop-out) as well as graduation rates. Administrators can compare their institutional rates to those of similar institutions as well as to different institutional types.

Several trends have emerged since data collection began in 1981. For example, more selective institutions generally have higher persistence and retention rates and students with successful high school records are generally more successful in college (Levitz et al., 1999).

Another trend reveals that private schools have higher retention rates than public institutions (Levitz, et al., 1999; Seidman, 2006). Retention rates can vary widely based on selectivity, as well. Between 1991 and 2001 a study of freshman to sophomore persistence rates revealed that highly selective institutions averaged 91.6% while open admission institutions had a rate of only 60.6% (Seidman, 2006).

Although certain types of institutions attract and admit specific types of students, some of whom are better prepared for college than others, campus environments are designed to meet the needs of the students they enroll (Seidman, 2006). There can be great variation in attrition rates among similar types of institutions. That is, institutions with the same level of selectivity can have different rates of retention. Levitz, Noel, and Richter (1999) assert that this is proof that institutions can control their attrition, retention, and graduation rates by managing their environments.

Retention is a topic that deserves continued attention and research. Institutions, individuals, and society benefit when students are retained and persist to graduation. Additionally, as the business of higher education has become an increasingly competitive marketplace, retention rates are one indicator of success (Levitz et al., 1999; Seidman, 2006). As policy makers, taxpayers, parents and students raise questions about affordability, funding, and accountability, institutions have to prove their market value through increased enrollment and retention rates. Retention rates also reflect academic success and satisfaction with the institution among students (Levitz et al., 1999). Additionally, a low retention rate creates a negative image for the institution. Institutions suffer deficits when students drop out, including loss of future tuition and fees, loss of faculty lines, and increased recruitment costs (Habley & McClanahan, 2004; Levitz et al., 1999).

Individuals who graduate garner many benefits when compared to those who do not graduate from college. College graduates earn higher wages and are more likely to have employer-provided health insurance and pension benefits (Baum & Ma, 2007). College graduates earn an average of $1 million more in their lifetime than high school graduates (Day & Newburger, 2002). College graduates also have a better overall quality of life, as do their children. They experience better health and engage in more hobbies and leisure activities (Baum & Ma, 2007; Institute for Higher Education Policy, 1998).

In addition to individual benefits, there are public benefits associated with college success. Societal benefits include increased tax revenue and greater consumption (Baum & Ma, 2007) As education levels increase, unemployment and poverty rates decrease. College graduates contribute to greater workplace productivity (Institute for Higher Education Policy, 1998) and are less likely to depend on social safety-net programs (Baum & Ma, 2007). Civic participation, volunteer work, and voting all increase as levels of education increase (Baum & Ma, 2007).

The benefits of retention are well documented and college administrators have responded by adopting a variety of approaches to increase retention. Retention efforts may vary depending on the institutional environment (Seidman, 2006). An ACT (Habley & McClanahan, 2004) survey of retention efforts completed at more than 1,000 institutions revealed the following as the programs with the greatest impact on retention: freshman seminars, tutoring programs, advising intervention with selected student populations, course placement testing, comprehensive learning assistance centers, remedial/development coursework, and pre-enrollment orientation.

Efforts to increase retention often begin with the recruitment and admissions process (Tinto, 1993). Admissions officers must be clear about expectations of new students (Tinto, 1993). Students are more likely to be disappointed and withdraw if they have unrealistic or misguided expectations about the social and academic life of an institution (Stodt & Klepper, 1987, Tinto, 1993). Retention efforts continue with orientation, bridge programs, and first-year seminars. These programs provide information for new students and allow them an opportunity to make connections with current students, faculty, and staff (Tinto, 1993). These early connections begin the process of academic and social integration, as well as institutional commitment (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005, Pascarella, Terenzini, & Wolfe 1986; Tinto, 1993) which are directly related to retention.

Academic readiness is another factor important to retention (Tinto, 1993). By identifying students who need assistance and providing the necessary support, the institution can promote student success. Developmental education programs, an umbrella term for services that include placement testing, advising, workshops on study skills and test taking, tutoring, and remedial education (Boylan, Bonham, & White, 1999) assist students in gaining the skills needed for full academic participation (Tinto, 1993).

Many institutional efforts to increase retention focus on the first year because many factors that contribute to retention are related to how well students transition to college. Levitz

and Noel (1989) note that "fostering student success in the freshmen year is the most significant intervention an institution can make in the name of student persistence" (p. 63). For the past 30 years, faculty and staff at institutions of all types have attempted to improve the transition experiences of students (Hunter, 2006). Most students that drop out do so in the first year, making the college transition and first year experience extremely important (National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, 2002).

The transition experience is a complex phenomenon in which students in their first year of college need to become integrated both socially and academically if they are to persist to the second year (Roe Clark, 2005; Terenzini, Rendon, Upcraft, Millar, Allison, Gregg, & Jalomo, 1994; Tinto, 1987 & 1993). Terenzini (1994) wrote "if the transition from high school or work to college can be negotiated successfully, the likelihood of student change, educational growth, and persistence are significantly increased" (p.18). Tinto (1993) encouraged higher education administrators to focus their retention efforts on the first year of college because the first year "represents a strategic leverage point where the investment of scarce resources can yield a substantial future in benefits in both learning and persistence" (p. 152).

Because the transition experience is related to retention, it is important to understand how students experience transition and what makes for a successful transition. Attempting to understand students in transition can be complicated (Laanan, 2006). Hunter (2006) explains that "student attitudes, behaviors, and experiences are not static. With each entering class the world events and culture that shape their growth and development differ" (p. 9). Each student brings his or her own personal life experience to campus. In addition, once students arrive on campus their transition experience will be shaped by the campus environment (Tinto, 1993). To better understand transition, it is important to recognize the experiences of diverse groups of students.

Researchers have examined the ways that different subpopulations of students experience transition including; traditional students (Terenzini et al., 1994), first-generation students (Nunez, 2005; Terenzini, et al., 1994), transfer students (Flaga, 2006; Laanan, 2006; Lester, 2006; Townsend, 1995) and adult students (Compton, Cox, & Laanan, 2006). Other populations of students include former high school athletes (Lubker & Etzel, 2007) and homeschooled students (Bolle, Wessel, & Mulvihill, 2007). Ethnic minority students have been another focus of transition research including the experience of Mexican Americans (Attinasi, 1989), Hispanic

students (Yazedijian & Toews, 2006), and minority students majoring in science (Hurtado, Han, Saenz, Espinosa, Cabrera, & Cerna, 2007).

There are groups of students that have been overlooked in retention and transition research. One such group includes students with mental illness. In the past decade, mental health among college students has gained increased attention in the higher education environment. Most major mental illness is diagnosed between the ages of 18-25, when many young adults are pursuing postsecondary education (Sharpe, Bruininks, Blacklock, Benson, & Johnson, 2004). Consequently, more students are coming to campus with mental illness or are diagnosed with a mental illness during their college years. A study by psychologists at Kansas State University examined trends among students seeking psychological help in three time periods between 1988 and 2001 and found that the percentage of counseling clients with depression (one form of mental illness) doubled from the first to the third time period, the proportion of students taking psychiatric medication rose from 10% to 25%, and the number of suicidal students tripled (Patterson, 2003).

Mood disorders, including depression and anxiety disorders are the most common mental illnesses. Both are on the rise among college students. Depression is ranked fourth in a list of health problems that students experience (American College Health Association, 2006). In 2002, 11.7% of students indicated they had been diagnosed with depression. By 2006 that number had climbed to 14.5% of students (American College Health Association, 2006). The National Institute of Mental Health has reported that 9.1% of college students have been diagnosed with anxiety (Kadison & DiGeronimo, 2004). It is ranked sixth on the list of health problems for college students (American College Health Association, 2006).

In addition to depression and anxiety, students suffer from bi-polar disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder, eating disorders, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), substance abuse, attention deficit disorder (ADHD) and other psychiatric disorders. At one institution, the top five diagnoses among students were depression (14.9%), eating disorders (6.1%), anxiety (5.9%), ADHD (4.2%), and PTSD (3.4%) (Soet & Sevig, 2006). Arguably, the numbers of students with some form of diagnosed mental illness are sufficiently large to warrant attention from campus administrators.

Approximately 86% of students with a diagnosed mental illness withdraw from college prior to graduation (Kessler, Foster, Saunders, & Stang, 1995). It is estimated that there are 4.3

million individuals who would have completed a degree if not for mental illness (Kessler et al., 1995). In a study of barriers to higher education experienced by people with mental illness or psychiatric disabilities, 40% cited mental health symptoms or financial troubles as major challenges, whereas only 14% indicated academic difficulties (Mowbray, 1999). To put it another way, colleges and universities are not retaining students with mental illnesses who could potentially be academically successful (Mowbray, 1999).

Many students who suffer from mental illness can be treated with medication, psychotherapy or both (Mowbray, 1999). However, students may face barriers that are associated with being mentally ill, such as lack of awareness and understanding among their peers, faculty, and staff (Collins & Mowbray, 2005). Since the transition to college is so important in retaining students, it is vital to understand how students with mental illness experience that transition. A better understanding of these students' experiences would allow administrators to provide necessary support and resources for a more successful transition that would retain students with mental illness and move them toward graduation.

Traditional theories that have been used to understand the transition experience of students from high school to college include Tinto (1987, 1993) and Astin (1984). Tinto's integrated model of student departure is not directly related to transition, but provides a framework for understanding retention and why students leave an institution. As students become socially and academically integrated into campus life, and experience more success, they become more committed to their personal and academic goals, thus leading to a stronger commitment to graduation (Tinto, 1993). The transition from high school to college is identified as an important time for students as they either become integrated into the college environment or fail to become integrated. This period of transition and integration accounts for most cases of early student departure (Tinto, 1993).

Astin's (1984) theory of involvement focuses on how students become involved in the campus environment. Astin (1993) identified three important areas of student involvement; academic involvement, involvement with faculty, and involvement with student peer groups. Students who are more involved in these areas are more likely to persist to graduation (Astin, 1993).

While Tinto (1987, 1993) and Astin (1984, 1993) offer reasonable models to explain retention and attrition, there are other theories that might also apply but have not been used as

extensively in research on student transition. For example, Schlossberg's (1984) transition theory provides a yet another theoretical framework through which to view the college transition experience. Transition is defined by Schlossberg as "any event or nonevent that results in change in relationships, routines, assumptions, and/or roles within the settings of self, work, family, health and or economics" (Schlossberg, 1984, p. 43). Schlossberg's model provides a framework to better understand how some people grow and adapt through transitions while others experience stress and strain.

The model she developed has three major variables; (a) the transition itself, (b) the individual and (c) the environment. Each variable has its own set of assets and liabilities. The balance of assets and liabilities defines the coping process during the transition (Schlossberg, 1984). An individual with more liabilities may have a more difficult time with a transition and an individual with greater assets may have a smoother transition (Schlossberg, 1984).

The *transition* variable encompasses all the characteristics that define the particular transition, the event or non-event. The first characteristic is the "trigger", what led up to the transition or initiated the transition. The second characteristic is "timing." This relates to how the transition is defined by a social clock, what society has deemed appropriate in relation to the transition. The next characteristic is "source." This characteristic is defined by control, who or what controls the transition. "Role change" is another characteristic. Most transitions involve taking on a new role and/or giving up an old role. "Duration" defines the transition as something that is permanent or temporary. Another characteristic is the individual's previous experience with a similar transition. An individual may have more assets than liabilities for coping with a new transition if he or she has had experience with a similar transition. The final characteristic is "concurrent stress" (Schlossberg, 1984, p. 72). The ratio of assets and liabilities will be influenced by other stressors, both physical and emotional, that are present during the transition (Schlossberg, 1984). In addition to the characteristics of the transition, a second major aspect of the transition is the "assessment" of the transition, how the individual defines, understands, or makes meaning of the transition.

The second variable in Schlossberg's (1984) model is the *individual* variable. This variable includes personal and demographic characteristics, psychological resources, and coping responses. Personal and demographic characteristics include: socioeconomic status, gender roles, age, and state of health (Schlossberg, 1984). Psychological resources include: ego development,

personality, outlook, commitment, and values. Coping responses has two categories. The first is "functions", how the individual controls the situation, makes meaning of the situation and the amount of stress experienced by the individual. The second category related to coping is "strategies." These are strategies that the person in transition uses to navigate the transition, including: information seeking, direct action, and inhibition of action (Schlossberg, 1984). Information seeking may be seeking advice or searching for resources. Direct action may include behaviors such as negotiation, self-assertion and stress management. Inhibition of action may include denial, controlled reflection of substitution of rewards (Schlossberg, 1984).

The third variable, the *environment,* is based in the ecological perspective that examines the interaction of the person and his or her environment. The environment can have a positive or negative effect on how the person experiences a particular transition. Two sub-variables important to the environment variable are "social support" and "options." Social support has three elements: types, functions, and measurement. Types of support include support of family, friends, intimate relationships, and institutions or communities. Functions of support involve how a person receives support, and whether support provides affirmation, feedback, or assistance. The final element of support, the convoy or measurement, deals with the degree of support that is given by those associated with the person in transition, which can change during different phases of the transition (Schlossberg, 1984). The convoy is those people that surround the person in transition and are related to that person by the giving and receiving of support. This convoy can change over a person's lifespan. The second environmental variable is options. The number of options available to a person and the risk and benefits associated with the options can impact how individuals cope with a transition.

The transition experience is equally impacted by the balance of assets and liabilities in these three areas: the transition, the individual and the environment (Schlossberg, 1984). The transition is also influenced by how the individual views each of these areas, thus rendering transition a very individualized process (Schlossberg, 1984).

This theory is useful for examining the college transition experiences of students with mental illness because it provides a multidimensional lens through which to view how students cope as individuals and how the environment of the institution can impact the transition experience. In addition, Schlossberg's theory focuses on how the individual defines the experience of transition. Schlossberg (1984) stressed the role of perception in transitions, noting

that a transition exists only if it is so defined by the individual experiencing it. The focus of the framework is on the lived experience, and how it is perceived by the individual. This model lends itself well to a qualitative study.

Statement of the Problem

In summary, retention continues to be a concern for a wide variety of people connected with higher education. Retention impacts individuals, society, and institutions (Baum & Ma, 2007; Day & Newburger, 2002; Habley & McClanahan, 2004; Institute for Higher Education Policy, 1998; Levitz et al., 1999). Despite efforts by institutions of higher education, the national retention average for first to second year is less than 75% (National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, 2002). This first year attrition rate sets the pace for subsequent years (Levitz et al., 1999).

The high school to college transition experience has been identified as a significant experience that impacts retention (Astin, 1984 & 1993; Hunter, 2006; Levitz & Noel, 1989; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 1993; Roe Clark, 2005). This experience is different for different types of students (Attinasi, 1989; Cabrera et al., 1999; Compton et al., 2006; Fischer, 2007; Hunter, 2006; Terenzini et al., 1994) at different types of institutions (Terenzini et al., 1994 and Tinto, 1993).

Various models have been used to understand the transition to college, most notably Astin (1984) and Tinto (1987, 1993). A framework that has not been used is Schlossberg's (1984) theory of adults in transition. This framework provides a useful model for understanding the lived experience of students in transition and takes into account equally the transition, the individual, and the environment. All three of these elements have specific characteristics that contribute to assets and liabilities that, in turn, impact how the individual experiences transition experience.

Students with mental illness have become a population of interest for researchers, administrators, faculty and parents. Increased use of pharmaceuticals, availability of therapy and other support services has allowed access to higher education for individuals with mental illnesses who may not have otherwise been able to attend college. Still, 86% that enter college are not retained (Collins & Mowbry, 2005).

Despite the increased attention to mental health issues, the literature has overlooked the transition experience of students with mental illness. The transition experience can be very

stressful and stress can be particularly challenging for students that are coping with a mental illness. This is a concern for students with mental illness, the parents of such students, faculty, and administrators. My study was designed to shed light on how students with a diagnosed mental illness at different institutions experience the transition to college. This study filled a void in the literature related to students with mental illness and transition.

<div align="center">Purpose of the Study</div>

The intent of this study was to understand and describe the college transition experience of first-year college students with a diagnosed mental illness. The conceptual framework for this study was Schlossberg's (1984) transition theory. Schlossberg's (1984) theory focuses on how individuals cope with transitions. Coping is influenced by a ratio of assets and liabilities related to the transition, the individual, and the environment. This theory provided a framework to study how students with mental illness experience the transition to college and how this transition experience was impacted by a particular campus environment.

There were three variables associated with this framework: the transition, the individual and the environment (see Table 1). For purposes of this study, transition was defined as the experience of leaving high school and entering college. The individual variable in this study was the sample: traditional aged college students, 18-19 years old, in their first year of college. Participants in the study had received a psychiatric diagnosis prior to matriculating or during their first semester at college. For purposes of this study, mental illness was used as an umbrella term to define any psychiatric diagnosis or neurobiological disorder as identified in the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual. This includes, but is not limited to, eating disorders, anxiety disorders, ADHD, and mood disorders. Schlossberg's environmental variable focuses on forms of support. For purposes of this study, the focus was to understand how the students in the sample perceive the social and academic environments at three different types of campuses.

To understand environmental influences more fully, I identified three institutions at which to conduct the study. One was a large public research institution with more than 30,000 students. The second was a public comprehensive university with a population of around 9,000 students. This university offers bachelor's and master's degrees. The final campus environment was a small private liberal arts university with a population of just over 2,000 students.

Table 1

Schlossberg's Individual in Transition and Coping Resources (1984)

The Transition	The Individual	The Environment
Event or Nonevent	Personal Characteristics	Social Support
Characteristics	Psychological Resources	Types: intimate, family,
Trigger	Coping Response	unit, friendship,
Timing	Functions	network, institution
Source	Strategies:	Convoy (Measurement)
Role Change	information seeking	Functions
Duration	direct action	Options
Previous Experience	inhibition of action	Actual
Concurrent Stress		Perceived
Assessment		Utilized
		Created

Note: Adapted from Schlossberg, N. K. (1984). *Counseling adults in transition: Linking practice with theory.* New York: Spring Publishing Company.

A qualitative study provided an in-depth exploration into the transition experience of students with mental illness at the three campuses. Students described their experiences in their own voice during interviews that took place during the first year of college. Themes emerged from the data that provided an understanding of the transition experience of students with mental illness in general, and transition to different campus environments.

Research Questions

The central research questions guiding this study were:

1. How do first year, traditional aged, college students with a diagnosed mental illness experience the transition process to college?

   a. How do individual characteristics, shape this transition experience (individual variable)?

   b. How do students perceive the influence of institutional environment as part of their transition experience (environmental variable)?

2. How is the transition experience similar or different for students with mental illness in different campus environments?

Significance of the Study

The present study was significant for several populations including campus orientation staff, students with mental illness and their parents, and mental health providers. Staff that work with orientation may be familiar with the transition experiences of many subpopulations of students, but this research focused on the experience of students with mental illness, an increasing population on campuses and one that has not been studied. The findings shed light on how students with mental illness experience the high school to college transition. Orientation staff might use the results to develop transition programs for this unique population of students.

Students with a mental illness and their parents may find the information presented in this study useful when deciding what to look for and what questions to ask when making decisions about college. This study described the transition experience for students at three different institutional types. Parents and students might use the findings to consider what type of institution might be best for students. The findings may also be useful to new students with mental illness. By understanding the experiences of the participants in this study, students with mental illness may gain a glimpse of some of the issues they could experience during their own transition to college.

Mental health providers may have a better understanding of the barriers that students experience in the broader campus environment based on my findings. This study shed light on the assets and liabilities that students with mental illness experience during their first year on campus. Knowing the types of assets and liabilities these students experience might enable mental health providers to more readily facilitate the transition of students with mental illness.

This study also had significance for future research. I explored only the first year experience, specifically the high school to college transition experience of students with mental illness. Future studies might examine the same population, but other experiences they encounter during college, for example student engagement. Such a study would expand what is known about how students with mental illness experience college.

Other possible studies may disaggregate the findings of this study and more closely examine the experiences of individuals based on gender, race, or socio-economic status. It would be interesting to understand how these demographic variables combined with a mental illness diagnosis impact the transition experience.

Additionally, this study examined three different institutional types; a large public research institution, a state comprehensive institution, and a small private college. There are other types of institutions that future studies could examine including community colleges, single-sex institutions, or historically Black colleges and universities, among others.

Finally, policymakers may be influenced by the findings of this study. It provided policy makers with information about the transition experiences of students with mental illness, a population of students that are not being retained. Policymakers may consider these findings when making decisions about funding for campus mental health services and services for students with disabilities.

In addition, the findings provided information about the larger campus environment and the transition experience at different types of institutions. This may offer some campus administrators information about how to adapt the campus policies to better meet the transitional needs of these students.

Additionally, policy related to how new students share information with campus officials about mental health needs may be influenced by these findings. The students in this study had already disclosed their diagnosis in order to receive support from disability support services.

Delimitations

As with any research project, this study had several delimitations. The first related to the sample. Students from three different types of institutions were studied, but all those institutions were located in the same state. In fact they were in the same geographic region. It is possible that students in other parts of the country or at other campuses may have different experiences. If such students had been included in the study, the findings might have been different.

Another delimitation was that the samples on two of the three campuses were obtained from staff in the campus offices that provide academic support services to students with mental illnesses. These offices require registered students to provide evidence of a documented mental illness. There may be students with mental illness that are not registered with these support offices. If these individuals had been included in the study it might have altered the findings.

A third delimitation was the timing of the interviews. Students were interviewed during the beginning of their second semester and were asked to reflect on their first semester. In other words, I relied on the recall of participants. Interviewing students during their first semester may have provided a clearer picture of how students were experiencing the early part of their transition.

Despite these delimitations it was a worthwhile study. There is a gap in the literature related to how students with mental illness experience the transition to college. This study examined the lived experience of such students and in addition examined the experiences of such students at different institutional types.

Organization of the Study

This study is organized in eight chapters. Chapter One introduced the topic and the broader issues around the topic, the purpose statement, and the significance of the study. Chapter Two reviews the literature relevant to the study. The third chapter describes the methodology, including sampling, data collection, and data analysis procedures. Chapter Four introduces the findings. Chapters 5-7 describes the findings. Chapter 5 reviews the findings related to how individual characteristics influence transition. Chapter 6 includes the findings related to the influence of the academic and social environment on transition. Chapter 7 reviews the findings about institutional differences in transition. Chapter 8 discusses the findings and offers implications for practice, research and policy.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Introduction

There were three bodies of literature that were relevant to this study. The first included studies on the role of individuals in the college transition process. Two subsets of studies were revealed in the literature; those that look at transition among subpopulations of students and those that look at individual factors that influence transition including; student expectations and strategies used by students to manage the college transition.

The second group of studies examined environmental factors associated with transition. One subcategory included studies on environmental influences including institutional efforts to socialize students to campus environments. A second subcategory included studies about the role of support provided by family, friends, and the institution/community. A third subcategory of research related to campus climate and transition, with a focus on issues of race.

Finally, it was important to review the literature on the sample included in this study, college students diagnosed with mental illness. This chapter is organized around these three major bodies of literature and their respective subcategories.

The Role of Individuals in the College Transition Process

"In the 'typical' institution, one would expect persons of minority backgrounds and/or from very poor families, older adults, and persons from very small rural communities to be more likely to experience (transition) problems than other students" (Tinto, 1988, p. 445). Given these anticipated differences, researchers have examined the ways that different subpopulations of students experience the transition from high school to college.

Transitions among Subpopulations of Students

One of the first studies to examine how different populations of students experience the transition to college involved focus groups with 132 diverse students at four different types of institutions (urban community college, residential liberal arts college, urban commuter state university, and residential research university) (Terenzini, Rendon, Upcaft, Millar, Allison, Gregg, & Jalomo, 1994). Students experience the transition process, including academic and social integration, in very different ways. Notably different are the experiences of traditional students and first-generation students.

Traditional students are those aged 18-19 years old who enter college directly after high school. Most traditional students are Caucasian and have family members that attended college.

The transition to college is somewhat easier for these students because it is an expected transition, the next step after high school. For many traditional students *not* attending college was never an option. Most traditional students are concerned with integrating into the social environment and making friends (Terenzini et al., 1994).

First-generation students typically have a more difficult transition to college than their peers. These students come from a variety of ethnic and cultural backgrounds. They have to manage all the stresses related to the academic and social transitions that other students experience and first-generation students also usually have to deal with a substantial cultural transition (Terenzini, et al., 1994). They have to adapt to new cultural, academic, and social systems (Terenzini et al., 1994). First-generation students feel they have to gain control of their academics before focusing on the social aspects of college (Nunez, 2005; Terenzini et al., 1994). But first-generation students who are more focused on academics and avoid becoming involved in campus social life are not as likely to have a successful social transition (Terenzini, 1994).

Family dynamics can change because first generation students are beginning a new family tradition. Those with younger siblings have the added pressure to serve as a role model for brothers and sisters (Nunez, 2005). For first-generation women, parents are generally very supportive, but the students also feel some pressure since they are the first in their family to attend college. Students do not see their relationship with their parents as one of separation but rather a "renegotiation" (Nunez, 2005, p. 99) in which some of the family roles they have fulfilled are dropped but new roles are adopted. For example, Nunez (2005) suggested that first-generation women may not need to fully separate from past ties as Tinto (1993) suggested, but may be able to renegotiate ties with family to incorporate themselves into the college community.

One concern of first-generation women is managing the size of the campus. Finding campus buildings, attending large classes, managing time, distant relationships with faculty, and academic rigor are challenges for many first-generation women (Nunez, 2005). They have to gain knowledge of how to navigate the bureaucracy associated with course enrollment, selection of classes and majors, information on campus resources, and understanding course material. Students gain this information from their peer counselors, staff counselors, tutors, and in transition classes. Meeting people, making friends, living with roommates, and trusting others are some of the social challenges for first generation women (Nunez, 2005). Once they become

more involved and integrated, they begin to view college as a second home. Friends, extended family members, and local communities offer support and role modeling to first-generation women.

With the increase in students transferring from community colleges to 4-year institutions, researchers have started to examine the unique transition experiences of transfer students (Flaga, 2006, Townsend, 1995; Laanan, 2006). Most two-year to four-year transfer students are older, female, and Caucasian, but this can vary by geographic region (Lester, 2006). Like first generation students, transfer students also typically have more external demands such as work or family responsibilities. Specific transitional needs of this transfer population include academic concerns, financial concerns, grades, and ethnic differences (Lester, 2006).

Transfer students recognize that the campus environment is different (Flaga, 2006) and academic standards are higher (Townsend, 1995) at a 4-year institution than it had been at their community college (Flaga, 2006). They know that the teachers are more focused on research rather than on teaching, as faculty at the community college had been (Flaga, 2006). Similar to first-generation students (Nunez, 2005 & Terenzini, et al., 1994), transfer students tend to be more concerned about academics than their social life (Townsend, 1995). They use formal (orientation, faculty, student affairs professionals, and advisors) (Flaga, 2006) and informal (family, friends, and alumni) learning resources to gain information about the campus environment and academic system (Flaga, 2006 & Townsend, 1995). Academic connections are made through group projects, visiting faculty during office hours, getting to know instructors in class, and by participating in class discussions. Transfer students connect socially with current students that they already knew prior to transfer and by becoming more involved in activities. They connect to the physical environment by spending time on campus before and after class (Flaga, 2006). As transfer students become better adjusted to the differences in class size, the research focus of the faculty, and as they develop strategies to be successful in the academic, social, and physical environment (Flaga, 2006), they become integrated to the campus environment, and consider themselves students, not transfer students (Flaga, 2006).

The term 'nontraditional student' has included adult students, but generally adult students are not only nontraditional age students, but are usually pursuing a program leading to a vocational degree, have focused educational goals, and consider themselves workers first, not students (Compton, Cox, & Laanan, 2006). They also experience an additional transition because

adult students typically return to college as a result of another major life transition, such as a divorce, widowhood, or a career change (Compton et. al., 2006).

Another group of students, former high school athletes, have a unique transition experience. Disengaged athletes with a moderate level of athletic identity have a more difficult adjustment to college than non-athletes or students involved in varsity athletics. Female former athletes report higher levels of academic adjustment and higher levels of institutional attachment than males. In addition, females with high levels of perceived social support adjust better socially and feel more attached. Former high school athletes who had control over deciding to disengage from athletics fared better than students who were forced to disengage (Lubker & Etzel, 2007).

First-year college students who were homeschooled prior to matriculating present an interesting population in terms of transition (Bolle, Wessel, & Mulvihill, 2007). Similar to other students from homogenous backgrounds, homeschooled students have not been exposed to many people who are different than themselves. At college, they are exposed to students who have different worldviews and values than they had been exposed to while being homeschooled (Bolle et al., 2007). Like many first-year students, homeschoolers suffer from loneliness and some have a difficult time leaving home. They also experience positive effects of having greater independence (Bolle et al., 2007). As homeschooled students become involved in a variety of co-curricular activities, they begin to develop a greater sense of confidence. Some homeschooled students find it easy to make friends, connecting with peers in their residence halls or during orientation. Others report that it takes initiative to make friends (Bolle, et al., 2007). Homeschooled students have difficulty explaining homeschooling to other students and some encounter negative stereotypes. Academically, homeschooled students report feeling prepared for college work, however (Bolle, et al., 2007).

Ethnic minority students also experience the transition to college in different ways than other groups of students (Attinasi, 1989; Cabrera, Nora, Terenzini, & Hagedorn, 1999; & Fischer, 2007). The transition is not the same for all minority students because, like all students, they come from diverse cultures, educational backgrounds, and life experiences. The research has generally concluded that minority students may experience a more difficult transition as they try to become socially and academically integrated (Cabrera, et al.,1 999). This difficult transition means that ethnic minority students are more likely to have problems and dropout prior to graduation (Fisher, 2007).

One of the early studies of ethnic minority students and transition was conducted by Attinasi (1989). She looked at Mexican American students at a large public southwestern university. The Mexican American students referred to the campus as "big." This was not just in relation to physical geography, but included the social geography and academic geography of the campus. Students not able to deal with these new and different geographies often feel lost (Attinasi, 1989).

Another group of minority students that has been studied in relation to transition is the Hispanic student population. Self –esteem, acculturation, and ethnic identity are the strongest predictors of adjustment for Hispanic students (Yazedijian & Toews, 2006). Hispanics that are both acculturated and have a strong sense of their ethnic group membership are better adjusted to college. Those with a strong sense of ethnic identity have a psychological resource that helps them adjust to the demands of college. Interpersonal factors do not have a significant impact on adjustment but are related to Hispanic students' self-esteem, which does help with adjustment (Yazedijian & Toews, 2006).

Family and finances are two key transition factors for underrepresented minority students aspiring to careers in biomedical and behavioral science. (Hurtado, Han, Saenz, Espinosa, Cabrera, & Cerna, 2007). Family support is important in developing students' sense of belonging, particularly for minority non-science majors and White and Asian science majors. Families can have a negative impact on the students' academic adjustment and sense of belonging when family responsibilities interfered with college. Paying for college and finances in general are another distraction for underrepresented minority science students. Students with high self-esteem, an ability to communicate with faculty, and strong time management skills are more likely to successively manage the academic environment in the first year. These same students take advantage of the academic and social systems of the college. For example, non-science students who utilize teaching assistants, academic advising, and seek advice from junior and senior students have greater first-year success (Hurtado et al., 2007).

A second area of research related to the individual is factors that influence how individuals experience the college transition. This body of work includes studies about students' expectations and how those expectations impact transition, as well as strategies students develop to manage the transition to college.

Expectations and Strategies

When first year students' expectations of college match the reality of college life, they are more likely to have a successful transition experience. Students' expectations focus on interpersonal interactions and relationships; living in the residence hall, studying, and partying. They expect high school relationships to fade as they develop new more meaningful college relationships. Most expect to have to limit their extracurricular involvement and focus on adjusting to their new environment. Students also anticipate that college will be a time of exploration and personal development including much more independence. They also expect more freedom in relation to personal choices and social relationships and not in relation to academics (Keup, 2007).

Most students experience a change in their relationship with family. Relationships with parents move from one that was authoritarian to one that is more egalitarian (Keup, 2007). Students usually develop more meaningful friendships, but the process takes longer than they had expected. Once they develop a "meaningful network of friends on campus" they consider it one of their greatest transition successes (Keup, 2007, p. 19). As their new relationships form, they end relationships with high-school friends. Roommates are often disappointments for students. They expect that roommates will serve as a support system during their transition, but negative experiences with their roommate have a negative impact on the level of satisfaction with their first-year (Keup, 2007).

Students' expectations about personal growth and achieving greater independence are generally met. They learn that their new freedom means more responsibility for their academics than they experienced in high school (Keup, 2007). Balancing social life and academics is an ongoing adjustment. Students are less involved in co-curricular activities than they had been in high school. Most do not commit to specific clubs, but are involved in general campus events, expressing that they need to concentrate on their academics. Even though some expectations are not met, most students usually feel well-adjusted at college (Keup, 2007).

The college transition generates many challenges that students must learn to manage. Students often have to develop new strategies to adjust to college life. They have to modify their understanding of what it will take to be successful in college (Yazedijian, Toews, Sevin, & Purswell, 2008) and develop strategies to overcome personal and academic obstacles to their goals. For example, to overcome shyness (a personal obstacle) a student may decide to receive

training to be a peer mentor (a strategy). Likewise a student who is having trouble in math (an academic obstacle) may seek out a tutor (a strategy) (Roe Clark, 2005). Students also develop strategies to seize opportunities presented to them. For example, some students see extracurricular activities, such as becoming a peer mentor, as an opportunity to reach a desired goal. Students have to evaluate their courses and schedule to make sure they can accommodate involvement in these activities (Roe Clark, 2005).

Students also develop new strategies because college is so different than high school. These include dealing with professors' expectations, having a flexible class schedule, and commuting. One of the major changes is how students study in college as compared to when they were in high school. Students develop different techniques depending on the class or the type of work they have to do (Roe Clark, 2005). Setting and achieving goals involves different approaches than high school. Students have different strategies to obtain good grades, from listening and using good grammar, to saying what they think the professor wants to hear. Overall, students learn that what worked in high school does not work in college (Roe Clark, 2005).

Minority students must develop strategies to become integrated into college because often they do not share the same values as majority students (Attinasi, 1989). Mexican American students, as noted above, develop strategies to navigate the physical, social, and academic environments. Two categories describe the strategies developed by Mexican American students, "getting to know" and "scaling down" (Attinasi, 1989). One aspect of "getting to know" is mentoring, finding other students already at the university to serve as guides. A second strategy related to "getting to know" is "peer knowledge sharing." This strategy involves sharing information with other new students to navigate the different geographies. "Scaling down" are tactics that students use to make the campus seem smaller, to create their own physical, social, or academic circles that help them manage the larger majority campus environment. Attinasi (1989) noted that there was an organization for Hispanic business majors. This group "scaled down" their environment and provided students ways to "get to know" their academic environment. Mexican American students who are able to develop strategies have a better transition experience and persist to the sophomore year (Attinasi, 1989).

Just as students have unique experiences based on demographic factors and individual characteristics, the campus environment influences the transition. Different institutions and environmental factors impact the first-year transition experience.

<div align="center">Research on the College Environment and Transition</div>

Tinto's (1993) model of college student departure posits that once students matriculate it is the social and academic environment of the institution that shape their commitment to that institution. If students are not integrated and do not adopt the values of the environment they will not develop the commitment needed to persist to graduation (Tinto, 1993).

Most new students "enter into a campus environment quite unknowingly; they have little idea what to expect, and little understanding of how the collegiate environment can affect their lives" (Banning, 1989, p. 53). An ecological transition can be very stressful. The greater the "ecological fit", the more similar the old environment is to the new environment, the increased likelihood of student success" (Banning, p. 57).

Studies about campus environments fall into three categories. The first set of studies looks at institutional efforts to create environments that assist in the transition process. The second group of studies looks at support provided by family, friends and the institution. Finally, there is research on the ways in which the campus environment, or perceived campus environment, affects the transition of ethnic minority students.

Institutional Efforts

Administrators have created institutional programs and policies to increase the likelihood that students will adapt to the campus environment. Efforts include early socialization, bridge programs, living environments, and co-curricular opportunities.

Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, and Whitt (2005) studied the successful transition programs at DEEP (Documenting Effective Educational Practices project) institutions. These institutions emphasize the importance of socializing students early on by creating a formalized way to incorporate students into their new environment. Successful transition programs introduce new students to the campus culture, institutional values, and educational and social environments of the institution. The socialization process begins with summer bridge and first-year experience programs. Minority students that participate in summer bridge programs have greater academic and social engagement over the first two years and higher rates of retention (Walpole, Simmerman, Mack, Mills, Scales, & Albano, 2008).

Comprehensive socialization programs work with advising, residence halls, faculty, and campus resources. DEEP programs also work with support programs for historically underserved students, commuter, adult, and transfer students, international students, and women and men at single-sex institutions. Other DEEP institution transition programs include early-warning systems to identify students at risk of dropping out, advising networks, mentoring, increasing accessibility of faculty, and creating networks for peers and residential environments to provide academic and social support (Kuh, et al. 2005).

Different campus living environments can impact how students transition to college. Living-learning programs influence first-generation college students' academic and social transition to college. First-generation students who participate in living-learning communities have statistically higher estimates of ease with the academic and social transition to college when compared to first-generation students who do not participate in living-learning programs (Inkelas, Daver, Vogt, & Leonard, 2007). The nature of living-learning communities increases social opportunities which may assist first-generation students with their social transition. The frequency of peer interactions is not as important as is the perception that the peers are supportive (Inkelas et al., 2007).

Students do not have to participate in a living-learning program; simply living on-campus provides an environment that increases students' likelihood of a successful transition. Living in residence halls and participating in extracurricular activities have positive effects on social integration. For students that live on-campus, there are increased opportunities for integration including; "a) meeting other students, b) developing student friendships, c) gaining information about social opportunities on campus and d) shifting away from high-school friends" (Christie & Dinham, 1991, p. 419). Whether students live on campus or off campus, involvement in co-curricular activities establishes social connections and creates a sense of attachment to the university (Yazedijian, Toews, Sevin, & Purswell, 2008). Social engagement through extracurricular activities is just as important to personal development and academic persistence as activities in the classroom (Kuh, 2005). However, at large campuses where there are many possibilities for engagement, students sometimes find it difficult to make the decision about what to do (Yazedijian et al., 2008)

Many of the institutional efforts to facilitate transition share a common thread: they increase the amount of support experienced by students during their transition. There are other

forms of support for students in transition, however, including family, peers, and institutional personnel.

Support and the Transition Experience

One source of support is parents. Parental support is often provided in the form of financial and emotional support. Students especially appreciate when their parents send letters and packages because they feel that this gesture indicates that parents are thinking of students while they are away at school (Yazedijian, et al., 2007). Students who have limited access to parents move toward independence more quickly. Parents promote students' integration by encouraging their children to live on campus, get involved, and stay in school (Christie & Dinham, 1991). For some, parental involvement hinders students' social integration. For example, some parents who live close to the university that the student is attending require their student to live at home. Other parents want their children to transfer to an institution closer to home. Students who plan to transfer to be closer to home decrease their motivation to engage in the activities that increase social integration (Christie & Dinham, 1991).

Peers provide both social and academic support (Yazedijian, et al., 2007). The social support increases students' sense of attachment to the institution and helps with their adjustment to the university. Peers provide academic support by sharing the same academic mindset and by supporting and encouraging one another's academic achievements. Lack of connections makes the adjustment more difficult. This is most evident with students who do not have peers from high school at their college. High school peers provide early support and students who do not have these connections experience more loneliness and isolation during the early stages of the college transition. Some of this isolation is alleviated by making early connections with others in the residence hall. Early on these social connections at least provide someone for students to study with. They also lay the foundation for new friendships. For some students, high school peers were a constraint when trying to develop new friendships (Yazedijian, et. al., 2007). Likewise, positive changes in friendship quality are linked with lower problem behaviors (stress, depression, anxiety) (Pittman & Richmond, 2008).

Support from institutional personnel is also a factor in the transition to college. Supportive relationships with university personnel (professors, teaching assistants, advisors) as well as a generally supportive campus atmosphere assist transition. Even on a large campus

students feel that a friendly atmosphere makes the campus feel much smaller (Yazedijian et al., 2007).

Racial Climate and the Transition Experience

Another area of research that examines transition and environment focuses on the racial climate of a campus. Perceptions of a negative racial climate has a negative impact on the academic, social, personal-emotional adjustment to college, as well as a sense of attachment to the institution (Hurtado, Carter, & Spuler, 1996). For example, Latino students who report experiences with discrimination are less attached to the institution. (Hurtado, et al., 1996). Additionally, perceptions of a hostile campus racial climate can have a negative impact on the sense of belonging for both White and African American students (Mounts, 2004).

College size is significant for social adjustment and attachment among minority students. Students at large institutions report high social adjustment and attachment when other measures are controlled for (Hurtado, et al., 1996). For Latino students, in fact, the college environment influences transition to college more than students' background characteristics (gender, academic ability). Selectivity of the college has a direct negative impact on the transition; the more selective the institution the more difficulty Latino students experience with their transition (Hurtado, et al., 1996). Latino students at private colleges report a greater ease with transition, and those attending campuses with higher populations of Hispanic students also have an easier time making the academic adjustment. If students have a difficult transition, they are more likely to report a perception of a hostile campus climate (Hurtado & Carter, 1997).

There are four key features of African-American students' social adjustment to college that fall under two broad categories of institutional climate and relationships with faculty. In relation to institutional climate African-American students have a sense of "underrepresentedness" and "direct perceptions of racism" (Schwitzer, Griffin, Ancis, & Thomas, 1999, p. 77). Students report isolation and alienation, feeling less supported than they did in high school. They also report segregation among racial groups. They describe their campus as less friendly and warm than they had expected and report they had experienced situations, statements, or actions that were perceived as racist (Schwitzer, et al., 1999). Problems with relationships with faculty include the "hurdle of approaching faculty", what students describe as their hesitation to take the initiative to interact with faculty. Some students express concern that if they ask for help, faculty will think they needed help because they are African-

American. The final factor is "effects of faculty familiarity"; students are more likely to approach faculty who seem more familiar to them, either by race or gender, or who were familiar with them through their major or previous classes (the effect of familiarity) (Schwitzer, et al., 1999).

<div align="center">Students with Mental Illness</div>

The rise of mental health issues has been well documented (ACHA, 2006; Kadison & DiGeronimo, 2004; Kessler, et al., 1995; Sharpe, et al., 2003; Patterson, 2004; Soet & Sevig 2006). Relevant to this study are studies that examine how students diagnosed with mental illness experience college.

Most of the research on students diagnosed with mental illness focuses on students who seek out assistance at college counseling centers. There are some significant differences between different groups of students with mental illness. Some of these differences are related to gender. Females are most likely to be dealing with depression and eating disorders and twice as likely as men to be taking medication. Other differences are driven by academic status. Graduate students are twice as likely to be dealing with depression as undergraduates; however undergraduates rate their level of distress higher then graduate students. Undergraduates experience depression, academic difficulties, and substance abuse symptoms at higher levels than graduate students. Still other differences are driven by ethnicity and race. For example, international students report mental health distress at the same level as domestic students but are significantly less likely to have sought or currently be seeking mental health services. African-Americans report less mental health distress and academic stress when compared to White and Asian-Americans. Sexual orientation is also a factor. LGB (lesbian, gay, bisexual) students are three times as likely to report depression (Soet & Sevig, 2006) and are more likely to take medication than other demographic groups. (Soet & Sevig, 2006).

Students with mental illness often experience social and academic barriers in college. Five factors pose barriers to their educational experience. The first includes negative stereotypes and stigma that create a negative environment and negative consequences when students disclose their diagnosis. The second barrier is the complex nature of the psychiatric disability. It is a challenge for students to manage both their mental health and the demands of academic life. A third barrier is problems with access to resources. Students often struggle with the educational and governmental bureaucracies that are unclear and uncoordinated. Many students also struggle

with the fourth barrier, access to information and services. The final barrier includes organizational and institutional issues. There is a lack of coordination and communication within campus departments and between on and off campus service providers (Sharpe, et al, 2004).

Students are aware of the stigma related to mental illness. This makes them very cautious about sharing their diagnosis. Some feel that their campus culture does not allow for differences or for students to admit that they are experiencing difficulties. The academic environment can exacerbate students' challenges. For example, the flexible schedule creates more stress for students that need stability. Additionally, some faculty and staff are perceived as unsupportive. They lack a basic understanding of the mental health difficulties that students are experiencing. Staff members sometimes dismiss students' experiences as simple stress that all students experience (Tinklin, Riddell, & Wilson, 2005).

Asian American students are more likely than any other group of students, to experience feelings of depression and perceive a negative campus climate. This is true not just given Asian American students' perceptions, but also when other students perceived a negative campus climate. Moreover, rates of depression are higher for Asian American men than for Asian American women. Students with a strong self-concept entering in their freshmen year are less likely to experience depression even if they perceive a negative campus climate. Finally, Asian American English majors are more depressed than those in other majors. This may be due to a lack of role models in this major, struggles with English as non-native language, and a smaller support system among English majors, given that many Asian American students are in science and business majors (Cress & Ikeda, 2003). Although there are few studies about the experiences of students diagnosed with mental illness, there is evidence that their experiences are different from students that are not suffering from mental illness.

In summary, there is extensive research about how members of different demographic groups (Bolle et al, 2007; Compton et al., 2006; Flaga, 2006; Laanan, 2006; Lester, 2006; Lubker & Etzel, 2007; Nunez, 2005; Terenzini, et al., 1994; Townsend, 1995; Tinto, 1988 & 1993) and ethnic minority students (Attinasi, 1989; Cabrera et. al., 1999; Fischer, 2007; Hurtado et. al., 2007; Yazedijian & Toews, 2006) transition to college. There is also research that examines how other personal characteristics including expectations (Keup, 2007; Yazedijian et al., 2008) and strategies developed by individuals (Attinasi, 1989; Roe Clark, 2005) experience the transition to college.

There is also a body of work about how the environment impacts the college transition (Banning, 1989; Tinto, 1993). These environmental factor studies include institutional efforts (Banning, 1989; Christie & Dinham, 1991; Inkelas et al., 2007, Kuh et al., 2005; Walpole et al., 2008; Yazedijian et al., 2008), and the support family, friends, faculty, and administrators (Christie & Dinham, 1991; Pittman & Richmond, 2008; Yazedijian et al, 2007) offer to students in transition. Researchers have also explored how the perceived racial climate of a campus can impact first-year transition (Cabrera et al., 1999; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Hurtado et al., 1996; Mounts, 2004; Schwitzer et al., 1999).

Finally, the research related to students with mental illness is limited. There are studies that examine how students with mental illness experience college (Sharpe et al. 2004; Cress & Ikeda, 2003; Soet & Sevig, 2006; Tinklin et al., 2005), but not how they transition to college. This study seeks to fill that gap in the literature by exploring how students with a diagnosed mental illness transition to college.

Chapter Three

Methodology

This study was designed to understand and describe how students diagnosed with mental illness and how they experience the transition from high school to college. I explored the individual and environmental factors that influenced the transition and sought to understand how transition differed for students with mental illness at different types of institutions. The central research questions guiding this study were:

1. How do first year, traditionally aged, college students with a diagnosed mental illness experience the transition process to college?

   a. How do individual characteristics, shape this transition experience (individual variable)?

   b. How do students perceive the influence of institutional environment as part of their transition experience (environmental variable)?

2. How is the transition experience similar or different for students with mental illness in different campus environments?

In this chapter, I describe the design of the study. I explain the sample selection, instrumentation, steps taken to enhance authenticity and trustworthiness, and the data collection and analysis procedures.

Sample Selection

Qualitative research calls for samples to be purposefully selected to identify sites and participants that would most be able to provide data to answer the research questions posed in the study (Creswell, 2003). Two sample selections were conducted to collect data for this study, an institutional sample and participants at each institution. First, I identified three different institutions from which the samples of individual participants were drawn. This institutional sample was important when addressing the research question related to different campus environments.

The three institutions were selected for two reasons. First, they were chosen for convenience. All three institutions were located in the same geographic region, in the same mid-Atlantic state; within a 90-minute drive from each other. This made it feasible for me to interview respondents in a face-to-face context at all three participating institutions. It also controlled for geographic or state differences that might have influenced the environment if

campuses were more distant from each other or located in different states. Second, the campus environments were quite different so each may impact students' transition experiences in different ways.

One institution was a large public research institution with more than 30,000 students. I will identify this institution as "Big University." There are 9 colleges and a graduate school at Big University that offer 60 bachelor's degree programs and 140 master's and doctoral degree programs. The student to faculty ratio is 16:1. The main campus houses more than 100 buildings and is located on more than 2,600 acres. More than 9,000 students live on campus (information on BU website).

At Big University, students diagnosed with mental illness receive services primarily from the counseling center and the office for services for students with disabilities. The process to select individual participants from this campus was conducted through this office. This office is part of the division of student affairs. Students who provide documentation of a physical or mental impairment may be eligible for services from this office, though registration with the office is voluntary. Available services include: academic accommodations, academic coaching, special housing accommodations, intake for suspected disability, campus accessibility, consultation, and course substitutions. In the 2005-2006 academic year, 507 students received services. Of those, 336 were male and 218 female. Seventy-six students received services for a documented psychiatric disability.

The second campus was a public comprehensive university with a population of around 9,000 students. This university will be called "State University." State University has seven colleges including a graduate school. The university offers 153 undergraduate and graduate program options. The student to faculty ratio is 19:1. The average freshman class size is 30-40 students. The main campus is 177 acres. Thirty-five percent of students live on-campus (information from SU website).

State University students receive services through the disability resource office. This office is similar to the one at Big University. It is part of the division of student affairs. Students must provide current documentation for services that include academic accommodations and accommodations beyond the classroom including housing and parking.

The final campus environment was a small private liberal arts university with a population of about 2,000 students. This institution, that I will call "Small College", is highly

selective and has a high residential population. Small College offers 47 undergraduate majors and has a top-ranked law school. The student to faculty ratio is 9:1 (information from SC website).

Small College has a combined health and counseling center that is housed within the division of student affairs. The process for obtaining accommodation is similar to Big University and State College, however the process is managed through three different offices: the dean of the college, the dean of students, and counseling staff. Generally, students with physical disabilities work with the dean of students office and students with learning concerns work with the dean of the college. Students with psychological concerns are managed by the counseling staff. Counselors partner with faculty and others to assist these students. Academic adjustments for psychiatric concerns are requested by the counseling team and are approved by the dean of students and personnel in the office of the dean of the college. All students are supported through health and counseling services. The Small College sample selection was conducted by working with the dean of freshman who manages the first-year program. The first-year program provides new students with resources, information, mentoring, programming, and advising.

The second sample identified individual participants at each of the three selected institutions. There were four main criteria that had to be met by the participants. First, students had to have graduated from high school in spring 2008. The second criterion was that students had to be enrolled in college in fall 2008. These two criteria would eliminate transfer students and first time non-traditional aged (18-19 year old) students. This was important because I wanted to study traditional aged college students in their first year of postsecondary education. The third criterion was that students had to be at least 18 years old to participate in the study. This avoided any need to obtain parental permission. The fourth criterion was that students in the study had to have received a psychiatric diagnosis prior to matriculating or during their first semester at college. For purposes of this study, mental illness was defined as any psychiatric diagnosis identified in the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual.

Three sample selections were conducted, one at each institution. The approach varied slightly at each campus. At Big University and State University I made contact with the director of the office that manages support services for students with disabilities. The directors served as 'gatekeepers' in that they were able to provide access to the site and the student participants. These two people served as my contacts for the duration of the study. Students with a diagnosed

mental illness register with their offices thus they could ensure that all potential respondents met the selection criteria. It is important in qualitative research to select a sample that meets the criteria and is most likely to help the researcher gain insight into the phenomena being studied (Whitt, 1991).

These two directors identified first year students who were 18 years of age or older, were in their first year immediately following high school, and who had a documented psychiatric disorder. During the first week of the spring semester, the director at each campus sent an email on my behalf to all students registered with their respective offices who met the selection criteria and asked for their participation in this study (see Appendix A). The message outlined the purpose of the study and what the participants would be expected to do (participate in one 60-90 minute interview, review a transcript of the interview) and told them that they would receive $10 as a token of appreciation at the end of their interview. It included my contact information so that potential respondents could contact me directly. This approach allowed potential participants to remain anonymous to me unless they decided they were interested in participating in the study.

Potential participants contacted me first by email to arrange a phone call. During the phone call, I conducted a pre-screening interview to verify that potential participants met the criteria and would be good informants to answer my research questions (see Appendix B). The pre-screening protocol also asked for demographic information about participants, including age, gender, and major, among other items. The pre-screening process allowed me to not only verify that potential respondents met the research criteria, but also to ask if they were comfortable talking with me about their mental illness and transition experience.

A second approach to sample selection was taken at Small College. At this campus, I contacted the vice president for students affairs (VPSA). The VPSA was able to give me access to the students at this campus. She assigned one of her staff, the dean of freshman, to work with me to develop a sampling protocol. The approach was modified because there is not one specific office at Small College for students with disabilities. A message similar to the one inviting Big University and State University respondents to participate was used at Small College. The dean of freshman emailed a message (Appendix A) to the entire first-year class during the second week of the spring semester. Additionally, to assist in reaching students that would meet my research criteria, a flyer was displayed on a bulletin board in the counseling center at Small College (Appendix C). The flyer explained the basic criteria to participate in the research. When

students at Small College contacted me I followed the same pre-screening protocol that I used with students at Big University and State University.

Additional sampling methods were used to increase the sample size. A snowball technique was used when several of the participants at both Big University and State College told friends and classmates about my study. At Big University, an email was also sent to first year students that were participating in a leadership seminar series, at State University an email was sent to first year students enrolled in an academic support services. These students were not registered with the support office, rather they self disclosed their psychiatric disorder

At the end of the pre-screening phone call, assuming the potential respondent met the selection criteria and was willing to participate, I scheduled an interview. At Big University and State University, interviews were held in the office for students with disabilities. At Small College, interviews were held in the student center in close proximity to the dean of students office. This location allowed for access to support staff if participants felt that they needed to seek support during or after the interview. The locations also allowed for a private meeting place. Students entered the office and were instructed to ask for me and did not have to provide their name. I sought 6-8 students from each campus and continued the prescreening process until I had recruited the appropriate number. Once selected, I emailed participants a confirmation about the date, time, and location of the interview. The confirmation email also included an attachment with the informed consent form (Appendix D), so that the participant could review the consent form prior to the first interview.

<center>Instrumentation</center>

One interview protocol was developed for data collection at all three campuses (Appendix E). The protocol was semi-structured and included 12 questions, along with some prompt questions that I could use if appropriate. The first two questions were designed to put respondents at ease and get to know them a bit. I asked the participant to tell me about themselves and their decision to attend their institution. The remaining 10 questions included questions that would elicit responses related to my research questions about the individual and environmental factors that influenced their transition. Each of these questions had two prompts. The interview protocol was reviewed by an expert review panel. It was also piloted on a small sample of students with a mental illness who were not eligible to participate in the full study but who offered feedback on the clarity of the questions.

Questions 3, 5, 6, 7, and 8 focused on the individual in transition. The variables that characterize the individual are personal characteristics, coping responses, and psychological resources. For example, I asked participants to tell me what it was like leaving high school and coming to college. This question would elicit responses about the participants' transition experience. The prompts followed up by asking how they coped with the experience and how they felt about it. This would elicit responses that would provide information about their coping and psychological resources.

Questions 8, 9, and 10, sought data about the respondent's social and academic environment. Schlossberg's environment variable includes social support and options. For example, I asked participants to tell me about their relationships at college. This question was asked to elicit data about participants' social support. I also asked questions about what aspects of their academic life were most supportive and what aspects were most challenging. These responses provided data related to options. Question 11 asked participants to compare a typical day early in their college experience to a typical day now. The final question asked participants to share their most memorable moment about their transition experience.

<div align="center">Data Collection</div>

Prior to collecting any data, I received approval from the Institutional Review Board at my home institution, as well as approval from the IRB at the private liberal arts institutions (as required by that campus). Copies of my IRB approval were shared with my contacts at each institution. Copies of the IRB approval are included in Appendix F.

Data were collected through individual interviews. The questions in the protocol were open-ended and based on the theoretical framework. This allowed some standardization in the questions that were asked of each participant at each site, but still allowed the participants to respond freely about their transition experience (Rossman & Rallis, 2003). This type of interview was likely to provide data that would inform me about the participants' perspectives of their transition experiences.

All the interviews were conducted during the spring semester 2009. Each interview lasted between 60-90 minutes. The interviews took place in a campus location. The location was selected for both convenience and comfort; a quiet, private location, but also a place that was comfortable for the respondent.

Prior to beginning each interview, I had a casual conversation with each respondent to begin building rapport. I briefly reviewed and confirmed relevant information obtained in the pre-screening that was conducted by telephone. I then reviewed the consent form (see Appendix D) that had been sent by email, obtained each participant's signature on one copy of that form and gave them another copy of it for their records. Each interview was recorded by a digital recorder with permission of the respondent.

After each interview I transcribed the recorded interview. A copy of the transcript was sent via email to the participant. In the email (see Appendix G) I asked for the participant to review the transcript and provide any changes to me within seven days. This step was taken to insure accuracy of the data.

<div align="center">Data Analysis</div>

Data analysis was driven by the research questions and the theoretical framework. I used the constant comparative method of data analysis (Creswell, 2003). This approach calls for the researcher to constantly be analyzing data at every stage of data collection. Early analysis began during the organization and preparation of the data for analysis. During the transcription phase of data collection, I made some initial notes in a journal about my thoughts, reactions, and reflections on the overall meaning of each interview. This also allowed an opportunity for reflexivity. When transcriptions were complete, I assigned each transcript a code and a number. Each transcript was assigned a BU for Big University, SU for State University, or SC for Small College. I also numbered each one to differentiate between the participants. For example, if the seventh person I interviewed attended Small College, I would assign SC-7 to this transcript. I read each transcript at least twice prior to beginning the coding process. This allowed me to gain a general sense of the overall meaning of the data.

I conducted two iterations of coding per transcript. Coding is a process in qualitative research where the researcher uses a word or short phrase to capture what the data represent in relation to the more general analysis. I used two levels of coding: open coding and axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Open coding involves breaking the data down into discrete parts and examining the parts for similarities and differences (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The goal was to begin to recognize the underlying meaning reflected by the participants. During the open coding phase I examined the transcripts line by line. The unit of analysis was the comment; a phrase, sentence, or series of

phrases or sentences that reflect the same topic. When the topic being discussed changed, that marked the start of a new comment. My research questions guided this first iteration of coding. During the line by line analysis I identified comments that could be identified as individual factors, environmental factors, or miscellaneous. The miscellaneous category was for comments that could not be assigned to either the individual or environmental categories. During the initial sorting process, analytical memos were also made in the margins of the transcripts. The analytical memos were used to explore connections between categories.

Next, I transferred the comments into one of three new documents; individual comments, environment comments, and miscellaneous comments. I used the transcript campus code (BU, SU, and SC) and the participant number at the end of each statement to associate the comment with the correct participant. In addition, all comments from students at Big University were changed to blue font, all those from State University were changed to red font, and comments from Small College to green font. This made it easier to identify which campus the participant making each comment attended and was useful in answering the second research question about differences in transition by institutional type.

For the next iteration, I organized the comments from the individual and environment categories into larger themes, through the process of axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Within each of the two categories, I compared comments with one another and identified relationships among comments. The data were reassembled as themes. A theme was identified when similar data were evident at least three times across transcripts. I then reviewed each theme to identify any sub-themes that might emerge within the themes. Finally, I analyzed the comments in the miscellaneous category to see if there were themes that emerged from those data that might inform my study.

Direct quotes from the participants were used to illustrate their transition experience. For example, I asked participants to tell me about how they managed stress. Responses might have included: "called my mom", "went for a run", "read a book", and "I complained to my roommate." I would have assigned all these comments to the category "individual" because they all related to the individual variable in the Schlossberg model. Next, they would have been assigned to a theme called "stress" since they all reflected ways respondents coped with stress. Subsequently, the comments, might develop as a subtheme. This process allowed me to address my first research question and its two sub-questions.

To assist with answering the second research question related to how students experience transition in different campus environments, I retained the data in each category, theme and sub-theme, but I sorted the data into three groups: blue comments from Big University respondents, red comments from State University participants, and green comments from Small College respondents. This allowed me to scan the categories and see what types of codes and themes were more or less prevalent in relation to the three different institutions. For example, if there was a theme related to support from faculty, but all comments assigned to this theme came from participants at Small College, this may have suggested a difference in transition based on campus environment.

Before drawing conclusions, I reviewed the codes and themes with a faculty member familiar with this study to discuss differences and similarities related to my initial coding and categorizing of data. After all the coding was complete, and themes and categories were created, I was able to answer the research questions posed in the study. The findings produced from the data analysis process were developed into a narrative that provided a description of the overall experiences of transition for students with a diagnosed mental illness. The findings were explained in relation to the literature and theoretical framework.

<center>Authenticity and Trustworthiness</center>

A qualitative study has authenticity if the data collected are relevant to the research questions (Creswell, 2003). To establish authenticity, I had four faculty members with experience in qualitative research review the interview protocol to make sure that the questions asked would elicit data relevant to the research questions and theoretical framework. Additionally, I completed a pilot study of my interview protocol with a small sample of students diagnosed with mental illness. Finally, I identified the variables that corresponded with my interview protocol questions. These steps enhanced the authenticity of the data I collected.

Trustworthiness is the term used in qualitative research to describe confirmability, credibility and validity (Creswell, 2003). I established trustworthiness in four ways using member checks, peer debriefing, rich description, and reflexivity. First, as each transcript was developed, I sent a copy via email to the student participant, asking each to make any corrections, additions, or changes to ensure that the transcript accurately reflected his/her comments. This member-checking step established validity of the results by allowing the participants to verify accuracy of the findings from their standpoint. A second form of

verification was peer debriefing. The coding scheme was shared with faculty members who reviewed it for accuracy and to make sure that the information would resonate with other readers (Creswell, 2003). Additionally, I used rich, thick descriptions to convey the findings. The participants' own words were used to describe how they viewed their lived experience in their transition experience. Finally, I also conducted reflexivity throughout the entire research process. Reflexivity is a process that researchers conducts to reflect on how their own worldview and experiences can influence the findings (Creswell, 2003). By being aware of these views, the researcher can be more objective. For example, during the transcription phase I wrote about my own recollections, thoughts, and feelings, about my experience with transitions.

In summary, this study was designed to gain an understanding of how students diagnosed with mental illness experience the transition from high school to college and how this experience is similar or different when compared to three types of institutions. The methodology, interviews, of this study provided data relevant to the research questions.

Chapter Four

Introduction to Findings

The findings from my study were sufficiently complex that I have elected to report them in four chapters plus this overview. In this chapter I provide the profiles of the participants at each of the three campuses and provide an overview of the findings and how the findings will be reported.

Participant Profiles

All the participants in this study were in their second semester at a four-year institution and were at least 18 years old at the time of data collection. They were all enrolled full time and were enrolled full time during their first semester as well. Most of the students received their diagnosis of mental illness by a mental health professional or family physician prior to coming to college, some as early as middle school but most during their junior or senior year in high school. Some of the students were taking medication to manage their symptoms. About half of the students were receiving some kind of on-going therapy. Some were seeing professionals on campus, but most remained in contact with their therapist or physician at home, whom they saw during school breaks. Table 2 provides a basic description of each participant by campus.

Small College

Five of the six participants at Small College were 18 years old at the time of the interview while one was 19. There were 4 female participants and 2 male participants. All of the participants had been diagnosed with depression, 3 also had anxiety, and Kelly and Sophie had struggled with eating disorders. Four of the students said they were undecided about their major, one was a biology major and one was a triple major in archeology, geology, and sociology.

State University

At State University, eight students were interviewed, six were 18 years old and two were 19 years old. There were three male and five female participants. Dave is the one exception to the sample: directly after high school he spent part of one semester at community college but dropped out and waited until the following fall to enter State University. Holly had an ADD diagnosis, Dave reported obsessive compulsive disorder, was bipolar and had depression. The other participants had depression and/or anxiety disorders. In terms of academic major, three participants were undecided, two were education majors, two were in psychology, and one was a nursing major.

Table 2

Demographic Characteristics of Participants by Campus (N=21)

Participant	Age	Gender	Diagnosis	Major	Participant Code
Small College (SC)					
Kelly	18	Female	depression/bulimia	biology	SC-1
Sophie	19	Female	social anxiety/depression/anorexia	undecided	SC-2
Gus	18	Male	depression	undecided	SC-3
Ellen	18	Female	anxiety/depression	undecided	SC-4
Elizabeth	18	Female	depression	arch/geology/soc	SC-5
Jackie	18	Female	depression/anxiety	undecided	SC-6
State University (SU)					
Holly	18	Female	ADD	psychology	SU-1
Dave	19	Male	OCD/bipolar/depression	undecided	SU-2
Carrie	18	Female	anxiety/depression	psychology	SU-3
Melanie	18	Female	anxiety/depression	education	SU-4
Charlotte	18	Female	anxiety	education	SU-5

Table 2

Demographic Characteristics of Participants by Campus (N=21)

Participant	Age	Gender	Diagnosis	Major	Participant Code
Nick	18	Male	depression	undecided	SU-6
Katie	19	Female	depression	nursing	SU-7
Patrick	18	Male	anxiety	undecided	SU-8
Big University (BU)					
Maria	18	Female	depression/anxiety	psychology	BU-1
Liz	19	Female	depression	sociology	BU-2
Howard	18	Male	ADHD/depression	engineering	BU-3
John	18	Male	depression	engineering	BU-4
Mark	19	Male	depression	engineering	BU-5
Racheal	19	Female	depression	engineering	BU-6
Tom	18	Male	depression/ADD	engineering	BU-7
Patti	18	Female	depression	engineering	BU-8

Note. The names are pseudonyms selected by the participant.

Big University

At Big University, eight students were interviewed. At the time of the interview, five were 18 years old and three were 19 years old. There were 4 females and 4 males. All Big University students reported having depression. One had ADD, another ADHD, and Maria reported having anxiety as well. Six of the students were engineering majors, one was studying psychology, and one was a sociology major.

Findings

The findings are presented as themes that emerged during analysis. An explanation of each theme is provided using comments from the participants as evidence. Table 3 reports which participants at each institution talked about the topics associated with each theme. The numbers in the matrix correspond with the participant numbers for respondents from each of the three institutions. When at least three different participants at each institution addressed a particular topic I identified that as a theme at that institution. The findings are somewhat complex, therefore I present them in three separate chapters, each associated with one of my research questions. Institutional differences associated with the research questions are also discussed in each chapter.

The main research question that guided the study looked at how first year, traditional aged college students with a diagnosed mental illness experience the transition to college. I posed two sub-questions about the role of the individual and the role of the environment in that transition. In Chapter 5, I present the findings related to how individual characteristics and experiences shape the college transition process. Six themes emerged under the theme of the individual; (a) gaining independence and responsibility, (b) balancing act, (c) stress, (d) living with mental illness, (e) gaining confidence, and (f) a new me.

In Chapter 6, I present the findings about how the institutional environment influences transition. When analyzing data about how students perceive the influence of their institutional environment on their transition, two major themes emerged, the academic environment and the social environment. The academic environment has three themes; (a) experiences with faculty, (b) making comparisons, and (c) academic support. The social environment has three themes; (a) social challenges, (b) developing meaningful friendships, and (c) strategies for making friends.

Table 3

Summary of Themes by Campus and Participant Code (N=21)

Themes	Small College (SC)	State University (SU)	Big University (BU)
Individual			
Independence and responsibility	1, 2, 4, 5, 6	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 7, 8	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 8
Balancing act	1, 5, 6	3, 4, 6, 7	1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8
Stress	2, 4, 5, 6	2, 3, 5, 7	1, 6, 8
Living with mental illness	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8
Gaining confidence	1, 4, 6	3, 4, 7	2, 4, 6, 8
A new me	5	3, 6, 7, 8	1, 6
Academic			
Making comparisons	1, 2, 4, 5, 6	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8
Faculty (+/-)	2, 4, 5, 6	1, 3, 4, 6, 7, 8	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8
Support	3	1, 4, 5	2, 3, 4, 5, 6
Social			
Social challenges	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6	4, 6, 7, 8	2, 6, 8
Developing meaningful friendships	1, 3, 4, 5, 6	1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8
Strategies for making friends	4, 6	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 8	1, 2, 3, 4, 7, 8
Institution			
Strong Academics	1, 2, 5, 6		

Table 3 (continued)

Summary of Themes by Campus and Participant Code

Themes	Small College (SC)	State University (SU)	Big University (BU)
Small "tight" community	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6		
Social/parties	1, 2, 4, 5	1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 7	
Big friendly			1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 7

Note. The number listed under each campus corresponds with the participant code, indicating that that participant provided comments related to the theme.

The second research question, "how is the transition experience similar or different in different campus environments" is addressed in Chapter 7. Although few institutional differences emerged in the themes, I did collect data on how the participants described their institutions as unique campuses. In Chapter 7, I review these descriptions and the few differences that did emerge. After presenting all the findings in Chapters 5-7, I conclude with Chapter 8 that discusses the findings and describes their implications for future practice, research, and policy.

Chapter 5

Results about Individual Characteristics that Influence Transition

In this chapter I present the findings related to how individual characteristics and experiences shape the college transition process for students with mental illness. Six themes emerged under the theme of individual characteristics: (a) gaining independence and responsibility, (b) balancing act, (c) stress, (d) living with mental illness, (e) gaining confidence, and (f) a new me. Table 4 summarizes the data analysis iterations that culminated in these six themes.

Gaining Independence and Responsibility

The first individual theme, *gaining independence and responsibility*, emerged at all three institutions. This developmental task is common for new college students. Upon arriving on campus, participants discussed how they soon learned that they had more independence. Some were anxious about this and others were relieved to finally be on their own. Students talked about how they were redefining their relationship with their parents, noting that their parents saw them as adults once they were ensconced on campus. However, parents still played an active role in the lives of their students. Students expressed that they had more freedom to make decisions but also had to take on more responsibility, from laundry to managing their medication.

The day that students moved to campus was a very significant first step in the transition process. Many students told stories of tearful goodbyes:

> It [move in] was good. Like my mom, she cried a lot, and my dad actually started crying too. I have like rarely seen him cry, he's not very emotional. It was kind of tough separating, but it was good. (Patti, Big University)

Students could describe this specific event in great detail, expressing conflicting feelings of sadness, anxiety, and excitement about starting college. Maria's description captures many of the emotions of move-in day:

> I was extremely anxious. The day for move-in…my family was like okay, because we're all really close. Like me and my mom are extremely close and I just …not having my mom around was just like –I can't even imagine that. I don't want to go; I'm not ready. I'm not mature enough. I can't do this. But they were all fine. I was so mad. I was like, "Why aren't you guys crying yet?" It's like, God, I was so anxious because I felt I don't know if I can graduate, if I can pass my classes. So the whole car ride there was underneath my jacket or sweatshirt of whatever, just crying and listening to music. My mom was rubbing my back, "It's going to be okay." And unloading the car with all my junk into my dorm, it was horrible. I was just like crying. And then we had lunch in

Table 4
Code Mapping for Individual Factors that Influence Transition

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RQ1a. How do individual characteristics shape this transition experience?

Third Iteration: Data Application

First year traditional aged (18-20 year old) students with a diagnosed mental illness experience the transition to college in ways that are similar to other student populations. They confront the common developmental tasks of gaining independence and assuming self-responsibility. They also struggle to balance active social lives with academics. Students also describe the stress that comes with being a new college student. Unlike other student groups, however, the transition for these students is influenced in some unique ways because of their mental illness. There are also differences by institutional type. Students at State University feel that they have a new opportunity to develop their identity.

Second Iteration: Themes

A. Gaining independence and
   responsibility
B. Balancing Act
C. Stress

D. Living with mental illness
E. Gaining confidence
F. A new me

First Iteration: Initial Codes/Surface Content Analysis

A1. On my own
A2. New relationship with parents
A3. Do my own thing
A4. I'm responsible
A5. Help myself

B1. Time management
B2. School vs. fun
B3. Making a schedule
B4. Setting priorities

C1. Physical response
C2. Coping techniques
C3. Talking to someone supportive

D1. Maintain medication
D2. "home" or "campus"
doctor/therapist
D3. Plan, no plan, failed plan
D4. Handle on my own
D5. Need support, safety net

E1. Know the ropes
E2. More comfortable
E3. Feels like home

F1. Finding out new things about myself
F2. I used to be ____, now I'm___
F3. A new me

drive away—so dramatic! But it was very hard that first day. But after the first day, I had… I'm a school person; I like to learn. And so I was prepared at 6:30a.m. to go to class.   (Maria, Big University)

They recognized that they now had more independence and they repeated the phrase "on my own" often. Some students expressed anxiety about this new independence:

Leaving high school was weird, I feel like in high school I had everything I needed, and I had a little secure bubble that I was in, and I felt like my parents lived right across from my high school, so it was like get up, go to school, go do everything, go to cheerleading, and [I] had all my friends there and go see my boyfriend, go home and everything was like perfect. I was in a four year relationship with him and everything, so I was really dependent on him and I was really dependent upon my parents and when I came to college I had to become independent and it was weird. (Carrie, State University)

Many students described coming to college as a signal that they were moving toward adulthood. They were beginning to see themselves as adults, more mature, even older:

It was just sort of like freaking out. Like not only are we at college, but this means we're getting older, we have all this responsibility and we have all these things are in our hands. We are in completely in control right now. Our parents are so far away. Like it just happened way too fast. I can't believe I'm in my second semester. We're almost at the halfway point of second semester, and I'm like, "Where did my freshman year of college go?! I don't understand." It's just sort of .. I don't know—we [roommate] both were just scared. Had no idea what in the world we were going to do, sort of thing. (Liz, Big University)

Some students expressed a sense of feeling alone, particularly in dealing with their mental illness:

Well, it was just weird not having her [mom] there. Even having the option. I mean I was never home when I lived at home just because I worked two jobs and I had all kinds of other things going on, but just like the fact that I could have gone home whenever I wanted to was just really comforting. And then just knowing that I couldn't. I didn't have a car. I didn't know anyone who had a car, so it was just like this nerve-wracking lack of comfort. She [mom] just wasn't there. And then another thing, I guess, was towards the end of the summer I starting to get sort of depressed again, sort of having just depressive symptoms, which I take medication for depression, but I still sort of go through phases. And so I started seeing my psychologist like one a week before leaving, so I started having anxiety about leaving. So then I got here and I didn't know anyone yet. I didn't have a psychologist here. I didn't …I knew there were resources, I talked to people about it, but I hadn't actually set up an appointment to go and see someone. It was just kinda like "Oh my god, I really don't have anyone here to talk to." So that was just really scary. (Howard, Big University)

Most students, however, were happy to finally have more independence and liked the way it made them feel:

> I really enjoy the independence. Just like living on my own, and even though I love my parents and I love being with them, just the idea of living on my own and having my own thing that I do and my own little routine—it's just really something that I enjoy and makes me feel good about myself. (Sophie, Small College)

> I don't like dealing with problems and having to ask people for help. It's weird. But I've done a lot more. I'm way more independent and my mom can see that, which is a good thing that college does do to you. (Maria, Big University)

Part of gaining independence, is that students began to redefine their relationships with their parents. Some students reported that they felt their parents were still very involved, sometimes too involved in their day-to-day lives. Some tried to create distance from their parents as a way to establish their independence:

> I did talk to my parents, at least my mom, every other day for a while, at the beginning of the school year. That's kind of tapered off in terms of now it's more, "Hey how are you" every once [in a while] on the weekend and "Hey, Mom can you send me this document, I left it home on my desk over the last break." I feel like the transition going to college, it's an intermediate step between being with your parents and then being on your own, because you have everybody going through it together. (John, Big University)

> But the most difficult thing has been trying to wean off my mom and weaning my mom off of me. She calls… we talk at least once a day. And like I remember we would have an argument every now and then in the summer. Like, "You know, I'm not going to be able to talk as often." I was like…"I'm going to be really busy." Kind of "hint, hint— leave me alone a little bit. Let me do my own thing." And I really don't need to talk to her as often as we do. (Kelly, Small College)

Students began to make their own decisions and assert their independence. An interesting story was shared by Holly at Small College:

> A couple of weeks into school, I rearranged my room. Because my room is pretty narrow so I was trying to figure out the whole strategy of having more floor space thing. For most of my life my mom has … she's really good at graphic design and interior design and everything. So she'd always have control over the house. She decides what the rooms are decorated like and how they're arranged. So I never really had control over my bedroom at home. And the ability to just say, "You know what, I want to change things around." I moved all my furniture around and Alex [boyfriend] came up and helped me. Like I actually had to stand my bed up on its side and slide it over and then put it back down because my room is so narrow. But by the end of that, I was so happy that it was decision I made completely on my own. And I had this done before Parents Weekend, so when they came down my parents are like "What did you do?" It's like… "Oh I just

decided I liked this better." I didn't' really figure out the plugs yet, so I didn't really have my TV plugged in. So they're like "did you think about that?" No. So my parents did help me with that. I was so … I was just glowing and I remember that was one of the first days I've sat down at my desk and I did my homework, because liked where my desk was. It was a good feeling. (Holly, Small College)

Other students felt that they were developing closer relationships with their parents because their parents were beginning to see them as more independent, as adults:

Yeah, before in high school like, um, I felt like I was like the little kid, you know – be home by this time, do this, do that. And now since coming to college I'm a lot closer to them, just being able to tell them everything, like – so this is what I did last night – or – this is how my grades are. You know just being we're more friends now than parent child. (Charlotte, State University)

Students also discussed how this new independence came with new responsibilities. They noted that their parents were not there to tell them when to eat, sleep, go to class, do laundry, and turn off the Internet, so they had to be more responsible:

It's changed a little bit. Like in high school and stuff like I was always having them [parents] telling me what to do and how to deal with certain situations. But now, coming to college, I feel like I'm on my own and I'm responsible to make sure that I get things done, from like laundry, to medical issues, to making sure that I eat. But they still feel like they have to call me all the time and make sure that I'm doing certain things and such, so there's like a little bit of struggle there. It's not bad. (Patti, Big University)

I do feel like a lot more mature, I'd say, and I take a lot more responsibility. There have been times where I stepped up to do things that I wouldn't have done back in high school. (Patrick, State University)

Much of this commentary could have come from any first year college study and in many senses, the respondents were like other students. However, independence and responsibility for these participants included managing aspects of their mental illness. Without the safety net of their parents' involvement, or having others to hold them accountable, some struggled. Kelly talked about taking care of herself and how she could turn to bulimia:

Like I have kinda acted on it [bulimia] every now and then when I've been here. It's a lot easier to do that when you're on your own and there's nobody…really everybody is watching out for themselves. So like you can take care of yourself the way you want to take care of yourself. I mean I've been making a solid effort to like exercise and everything and choose wisely with my meals and everything and not drink too much. Like I remember back when it was a big problem for me and how much it was a sense of relief almost. I mean every now and then I feel like I want to revert to that. I can't tell my mom that. She already worries enough about what I'm doing here. If she knew that,

it would make it that much worse. It's just… I mean I know that that kind of stuff is never going to go away. It takes a while to bounce back from, it's just the pressure of trying to keep everything together so my parents can feel better about what I'm doing, and I can feel better about what I'm doing. (Kelly, Small College)

Dave talked about how when he was depressed he would draw the shades in his room and listen to music that made him more depressed, he reflected on his request for a single room:

….at first I thought I'd be living with two other roommates 'cause that's what I got assigned to, but then I got a medical room like a week before classes got started, I was like okay that's cool, but I'm not going to have any accountability for my actions or for getting out and socializing. (Dave, State University)

Elizabeth shared how she felt she had to "deal with" a time during the fall semester when she felt suicidal, that is was just her responsibility:

It was hard because when you don't feel good and you're in your life and you just want it to end its kind of hard to care about a test that's due, you know what I mean. It affected my grades. I can tell you that. They [professors] would have understood and I'm sure it would have helped [to talk to them]. But at the same time it was a consequence of my actions whether it was intentional or not and I just need to deal with it. So I didn't want to use that as an excuse. (Elizabeth, Small College)

Carrie expressed similar feelings of responsibility:

I think my greatest challenge would just be getting over the fact that my parents aren't here and my ex-boyfriend Chris isn't here, I mean I still talk to him every day and I pretty much talk to my parents every day, and just dealing with anxiety and not having them here is like the hardest part probably, because I just had to realize that they weren't going to be able to help me through panic attacks anymore and you know they might have caused some in the past because of stress, but the stress here is just totally different than home. At home, it was more personal, and here it's more academics and I had to transition and realize that I'm going to have to help myself through panic attacks. (Carrie, State University)

In many ways the students in this study experienced the developmental task of gaining independence and responsibility in ways similar to other populations of traditional aged students. They provided vivid stories of their emotional move-in day experiences. Students learned early on that college provided new opportunities for developing their independence. They also learned to take on new responsibilities and recognized that their entry into college was a step toward adulthood. They talked about how their relationships with their parents were beginning to change as parents now saw them as young adults. However, these students also had to learn to be independent and take on new responsibilities with the added challenges that come with having a

mental illness. For example, students wanted to be independent, but parents still played a strong role in helping them cope. Students took on new responsibilities that other students do but in addition had to be responsible for medication and counseling. They also felt a sense of responsibility for their mental health and dealing with the negative aspects that they experienced when they were not able to maintain a healthy status. These students struggled with establishing their independence and the need to have parents provide a safety net.

Balancing Act

The theme *balancing act* included the issues of time management, getting organized, self discipline, and setting priorities. These issues are associated with symptoms of ADHD, but were also manifested in participants who did not have ADHD. This theme was discussed by participants at all three institutions. Many students talked about how they had to learn to manage their time for the first time in their lives. They never had to do this in high school; either their parents kept them on track or they simply were not as busy. Respondents shared how they had more opportunities and distractions at college. Many now had to balance academics with a busier social life, work, clubs, and athletic activities.

> Let's see… I mean I would probably go back to schoolwork and trying to keep the balance and that I'm here to do schoolwork and not here to just have fun all the time, so it's definitely that has been my biggest challenge, and with my parents, they ask me about classes. Like the balance, especially with swimming when we started going into conference champs and umm, that was hard the balance of staying healthy, maintaining schoolwork, swimming, social life, all at the same time. So then I just didn't really have the social life, I just did schoolwork, and I had my swimming friends and that was enough. It is a balance and you just have to figure it out and prioritize. (Jackie, Small College)

They talked about how they learned from their first semester that they had to manage their time better:

> Greatest challenge…time management. I think every student would say that. Time management. I'm getting better I think this semester because I know what to expect. But time management, definitely, is a big challenge. The time dedicated going into work. Because I thought I could handle spending three hours with my friends and doing like an hour's worth of work for all my classes would justify… No. No, can't do that. (Maria, Big University)

> Everything just seems to go into place a lot easier… I think in the beginning of the semester, I had so much time that I was doing stupid stuff that was a waste of time. But I think over the past few months I've just, everything falls into place now, like time management isn't really a problem. Like the most I have to worry about now is when am

I going to get up [laughs]. That's it, but during the day everything just works. (Carrie, State University)

Other students shared that their time management challenges might be related to their mental illness:

> Time management. I'm a really, really bad procrastinator. I was actually talking to my psychiatrist about this and she was telling me that people with depression, they're much more prone to it than other people. So I've been trying really hard to battle that. Procrastination is my middle name. (Ellen, Small College)

Many students had to develop new time management skills such as creating a schedule in an academic planner or making a list of what needed to be accomplished and then sticking with their self imposed consequences:

> Honestly, it's the last couple of weeks that I've really had to sit down and schedule out my days and everything. (Kelly, Small College)

> I'll tell myself, I can't go out this weekend until I get all of this done this week. I'll have little note cards with what day I'm going to do what on. And by the end of the week, whatever is not crossed off on my note card, I can't go out until all of this is done. So, I'm getting better at disciplining myself. Because if I don't, I'm just going to go crazy. (Liz, Big University)

Some students sought assistance in developing new skills to manage time:

> I spent a lot of time socializing and that was a big problem for me, the first term, I went out way too much, and I didn't really know how to control myself because I wasn't managing my time at all. So that's something that has changed drastically this term. I guess I feel more like an engineer now, and I don't go out ever, and I just sit and do work all the time....I've been trying to work on it, through meeting with people here [disability support office], well lately working with [academic coach] here. (Mark, Big University)

In addition to learning new skills to manage time, they had to learn to make decisions and set priorities in balancing academic life and social life. Most students stated that academics were their number one priority, but they felt it was important to be able to balance their activities.

> I first came, when I first started off I was like "academics only, friends don't matter", but you can't do that, as much as you try you can't do that. It's not just, like college is not just school, it's not, it's outside activities, your friends, going to the gym, all that stuff, so probably, I guess when I wrote that, and realizing that that's what it's all about. (Racheal, Big University)

Even though academics were important to the students, they still struggled with telling their friends "no" if they needed to do school work instead of socializing:

My greatest challenge? Balancing my priorities, finding out, that I know my number one priority is why I'm here and that I need to be doing well and getting my grades. But, um, I am very mature, but at the same time, I'll admit I am immature with some things, like I'm immature with priorities and my mom gets on me all the time about it. When people are like "hey, you wanna go do this, do that?" I don't know how to say no a lot of the time. I'm always like "yeah, sure", or if I have something to do and someone's like "want to come hang out", I'm like "yeah sure, I'll do this later" you know what I mean. I think that was my biggest issue, I need to prioritize a lot better. (Melanie, State University)

College offers a variety of opportunities and distractions for students. Respondents had to learn to balance their academic and social life. Many had to develop new skills related to time management, organization, self-discipline, and setting and committing to priorities. Some students learned through trial and error and some sought assistance from campus resources to develop these skills. Students also recognized that some of the challenges they were experiencing may have been related to their mental illness.

Stress

Stress is a common experience for college students. It was a topic that came up with almost every participant at all three campuses. The students in this study talked about different triggers that caused them negative stress; academics, roommates, parents, significant others, and money, to name a few. Sophie and Maria explain how stress impacted their lives:

It (orientation) was so stressful. Like it was so scary, it was surreal. Like when I think back on it, it's almost like I was kind of numb to the whole thing. Because there were so many activities and so much of that forced mandatory socialization and fun. I guess they meant well by it, but it was really scary…. This is the kind of thing that like when I think about it, I want to throw up or cry. But somehow I just got into this zone where I just wasn't thinking about it or feeling it… I managed to get through it. It was so weird. (Sophie, Small College)

I don't take stress very well. It was one of my mom's worries about me going to college. I tend to just…when I have too much on my mind…I have a problem with putting things in perspective. I can't do that very well. And things are just so intense, so all at once. And she'd call like once a week when I first came just to make sure that "Are you doing OK? Are you talking to your friends? Are you hanging out with people to keep your mind off of work?" Because school was stressing me out—not my friends, not mostly anything else. My grades mostly. And towards the end of the first semester, I was just extremely stressed out. I was just like shaking, wouldn't eat. But once the final exams were over, I was fine mentally. But yeah, that was mostly… the stress was more intense I think considering high school to college. That was basically one of the main things that I found. (Maria, Big University)

These students also talked about ways they tried to manage stress with specific techniques they used such as reading, swimming, dancing, being outdoors, listening to music, and other forms of exercise. Some of these activities were built into their regular schedule and other activities were used as a response to stress.

Elizabeth reads:

> I take 25 minutes out of every day to read a book. Not a text book, just a book. Yes, it does [help]. Because I get really, really stressed out and when I do that my depression gets worse. And that can get very bad, like it has this year. So that 25 minutes a day is actually really helpful. (Elizabeth, Small College)

Katie knits:

> I knit, I make scarves. So, I just sit there because it takes my mind off of everything, keeps my hands busy, because I like pick at myself a lot and so it will like keep my hands busy and I won't think about anything but the scarf, and it's really nice, it's just one step at a time, and I do my scarf and so it just feels better. Last semester I made about 20 scarves, probably, and this semester I've only made 2, so that's really good. (Katie, State University)

These participants often supplemented stress management techniques by finding supportive people to turn to including friends, family, or other supportive people in their lives.

> Um, usually like I call my mom, if I'm like really stressed out, or I call my sister, and I just talk to them. Usually they're probably not even listening to me, but usually just talking it out just helps me to like think about and make my judgments and stuff and what I need to do and um, sometimes I like, I don't know, sometimes I'll do something about it, and sometimes and I'll say this doesn't matter, and I want to move on, I'm going to try and forget it, and just move on. (Racheal, Big University)

Yet another approach was to turn to a professional to assist in dealing with stress. Ellen shared how her therapist helped her deal with stress:

> Yeah, I think it's just been nice to, like when sorority stuff was getting stressful. She [campus therapist] could just explain it to me, like this is what's going to happen and it was nice to have someone who I could just like, there was a class that I wasn't sure if I should just drop. She could just be like you don't need to take that class right now, you can get a different professor, decide it's too stressful. It's been more like practical advice than just like her just telling me this is, how to just like cope with things. Which has just been, just coping strategies is just something that I never thought that would be actually helpful, but they have been. That's been nice. (Ellen, Small College)

The theme *stress*, was one that almost every student talked about. Students shared stories about the variety of people, things, or situations that caused stress. Fortunately, many students

had developed coping mechanisms to deal with stress; from exercising, having a hobby, or talking with a supportive person.

Living with Mental Illness

"Living with mental illness" is the fourth theme related to individual that was present at all three institutions. The comments in this theme focused on what it is like to be a first year student with mental illness, the day-to-day challenges. Almost all of the students talked about how their transition experience had been impacted by their mental illness. As Elizabeth said, "just because you're somewhere else does not mean that it [depression] has gone away." From reading the quotes in this section, it will be evident that the role of parents was a very strong thread in this theme. Parents helped students from a distance by making arrangements for medication refills or contacting the counseling center on campus and arranging appointments. Parents often could recognize symptoms in their student before the student did.

Beyond maintaining medication, very few students had planned for how they would successfully cope with their mental illness at college. Below are a few examples of what students and parents did think about in advance of coming to college. Some students and parents made decisions early on. For Jackie, her diagnosis influenced her decision to attend Small College, the small number of students on campus and proximity to supportive family members helped make her decision:

> …I think that's definitely why I chose a smaller school. I didn't just want to be like a number. And my parents were much more comfortable with it, because they knew there was a counseling center, and they knew my grandparents are 45 minutes away, my other set [of grandparents are] an hour away. So they knew, well I think it was more comfortable for everyone to be in a smaller place with a counseling center that would be accessible. (Jackie, Small College)

Some students planned to stay in contact with their physician or therapist at home, usually seeing them during school breaks:

> Um, not really, no [hasn't used counseling center]. I talk to, like I go to my doctor at home pretty much every break, and just like check up with him, and it's going okay. (Charlotte, State University)

> Because this is a stable diagnosis that doesn't really have any major symptoms. And because the [medication] that I take, the time release, works extremely well for any symptoms that I do have. It's basically when I go home on break I go and see my psychiatrist and we talk. And then the way we have it set up because of insurance and everything the prescription is sent [to my mom]. I talk with her [psychiatrist] on the

phone sometimes. She'll release the script to my mom who will then mail me the script and then I'll get it filled. Because it's at a stable state I don't have to see her very often and because I don't have any side effects of the drug there's no need for me to have a local psychiatrist. It works out really well. (John, Big University)

Well right before I came to school, like over the summer, I'd been seeing the same psychiatrist for like a year. And after I came to school, we would like have maybe a half-hour phone conversation every month or so. I haven't talked to him in the last few months, but that's okay because I don't really feel like I was really getting anywhere with that. I used to kind of hope that they would be able to change my personality, but I've just kind of given up on that. I'm kind of accepting the way I am. I'm still taking my prescriptions and everything just because it keeps me out of the down and dumps place. (Sophie, Small College)

Liz worked with both her doctor at home and a counselor on campus:

It's really good. I really like him (counselor in campus counseling center). He's a really nice guy. So I've only seen him twice now, but I'll probably see him once a week or once every two weeks. So it'll be really helpful. He's sort of helping me figure out if I have anxiety issues, ADD issues, that sort of thing. Just help monitoring and he's talking with my psychologist from home. So they're sort of trying to figure out what's going on, because I really am having concentration issues that have to be fixed for sure. So it's very definitely comforting to know he's there. I can call him, and I have his number now and he's closer. (Liz, Big University)

Katie's home therapist suggested she see a counselor on campus:

Yeah, the counseling center, and she [therapist at home] directed me there and I guess she had a briefing with the guy that I was speaking with and she told him a little bit about my life before that. But then I just felt so uncomfortable with him, and I told her that, and she said 'well, maybe it would be best if you saw a female as opposed to a male' and I said 'yeah', but then I had Christmas break and so I didn't see anybody and I've been doing really well ever since. (Katie, State University)

It seemed that often, plans made in advance of coming to school, how to refill medication or see their therapist at home on breaks, fell through and there were negative consequences:

I talked to my psychiatrist. I saw her about a week before I left. And I was going to try to come back the week of Thanksgiving but that fell through and I couldn't see her. So it ended up being a long time. It ended up being until a month ago. And at Christmas I was running around like crazy and I never had a chance to go then either. So a lot of the things we had planned for didn't occur. Which wasn't good. I think that's good advice. It's part of something that you're dealing with you just have to plan. Just because you're somewhere else does not mean that it's gone away. (Elizabeth, Small College)

Tom said his parents had set up a way for him to get his prescription filled at a pharmacy but that the pharmacy is several miles from campus and he did not pick it up.

I already have trouble sleeping. I'm supposed to be taking [medication] to put me to sleep, but I just don't go for the prescription because I have to go all the way to [town]. I have to go to Walgreens 'cause that's where my credit card is set up, otherwise I'd have to pay for it, and I don't have the money in my account right now. (Tom, Big University)

Most students recognized that they needed to have some type of support system in place, talking with friends, family members, and counselors. For example, Patrick describes how he felt at orientation:

Well, believe it or not, during [orientation] I had a panic attack. I was with two of my best friends, one of my roommates and one of my best friends, the other one I've known since I was 2 years old. And I was with my mom and all of a sudden I just felt it hit me and I went back to my room and took my prescription [medication] and I just laid down and went to sleep for a couple hours. Then I woke up feeling better. I don't know why it happened, it just did. I think it is a lack of feeling secure. Like I didn't really know the area too well, I didn't have much [sic] things that I could fall back on. Not enough support system I guess. (Patrick, State University)

Although students usually recognized that they needed it, they only took steps to find support if their parents pushed them or if they had a negative experience that prompted them to do so:

It's [counseling] been going really well. I just started seeing him in the past month, month and a half. I got really, really suicidal one weekend and the red light kind of hit and so my mom called [campus counselor] and I was in the next day. It was right after we got back from fall [break]. But there were some episodes in the fall semester that were just as bad I just didn't tell anybody just 'cause I was being the dumb teenager that was trying to control it on her own. Probably not the smartest idea. (Elizabeth, Small College)

I think it helps that I'm still on medication. I mean I've been on medication since freshman year of high school. So that really, really helps. Because I know – even if there's two days when I don't have my medication, if I talk to my mom on the phone she'll ask me "You didn't take your medicine today, did you?" She knows. It's just really weird. Because sometimes I don't know but she'll be able to tell. That's been really, really helpful. And then … I don't know, I guess just sort of realizing that I was here and if I needed help I had resources. It was just about me actually taking the initiative to do it. Which whenever I initially needed help, it took my actions to get me help. It wasn't me seeking help. So it was just sort of scary that if I needed help there wasn't going to be someone there to realize "she needs help," because no one really knew me. (Liz, Big University)

Um, [pause] I guess dealing with depression [was my biggest challenge]. I was forced out of it, more or less. I was doing some destructive habits and um, I can't remember how my parents found out about it, but yeah, and um, that kinda… it kept on a little after, but it's hard to be hurting yourself when you know your parents care about you. I mean there's

always someone that cares about you, so that's one thing to keep in mind. I'm not trying to preach about it, but there's always, even if it's just God. If you're atheist, I don't know what to tell you. (Dave, State University)

Mark had a very difficult transition in his first semester but talked about how he learned to ask for help and began using a variety of resources at Big University.

I mean I think going to [counseling] and coming here [disability services] is helping, but it's usually a new problem every week, but we can usually deal with it. Talking with [academic coach in disability services], one of the big things we've been working on is accepting that I'm not exactly the same as everyone else, like working with my disabilities, 'cause I have a problem asking people for help. It's not something I like to do, and being able to accept that and actually go see my teachers for help. I think it's [academic strategies class] useful because it gives me the chance to relate to other people in my situation, and just to talk about how I'm feeling about stuff. (Mark, Big University)

Although many of these students had received their diagnosis years before coming to college, they had to learn to manage their unique challenges in a new way. Some students talked with their parents prior to coming to college about how they would cope at college. Some even made decisions about where to attend college based on the support system that would be available. Parents played a key role in helping students plan for maintaining medication, continuing or seeking counseling, and establishing a support system. Some plans (medication refills and counseling) did not work out and parents often intervened when students were nearing or were in crisis.

Gaining Confidence

The theme *gaining confidence* identifies the feelings that students had in relation to an increased comfort level with their college experience, what many called "knowing the ropes." Students became more confident in managing the physical aspects of the campus, academics, and their social life. The following comments express these sentiments.

Yeah, after the homesickness went away and I figured out where all my classes were, and then when [the)]new semester came, I knew where the buildings were, so it was easier this semester. Just having my friends, you know actually knowing people, yeah, I just got a lot more comfortable after the first few weeks of being here. (Melanie, State University)

I was excited to come back. I felt like, I felt like I really knew what I needed to do, how much effort to put into it. I mean I kind of had an idea, like all the engineering classes I took in high school were college level, so I had the –okay, you need to focus – you know that kind of drive. But, um, I was excited, and the other thing I was like really confident that I knew where all, most of the buildings were that I was going to. I knew how the

meal plan worked. I knew all the people in the engineering office, let's see I have papers here with like [disability support services], I knew people here. I had made all those contacts, I felt really comfortable. (Racheal, Big University)

It was much more, like I had to find people to eat with. Now I can walk into the dining hall and it's okay, I don't have to text someone to see if they are eating. I feel pretty comfortable sitting with different groups or sitting by myself. It was a big deal. I kind of would plan my meals around when other people where eating, or like when my friends were walking to class I wanted to walk with them or I wanted to know what we were doing that weekend way far in advance, so I could plan for it. Now, I feel much more comfortable here and with myself here and I can kinda just be more spontaneous, which is nice. I mean, I couldn't pick one point, but I can definitely remember feeling kind of awkward like in October and stuff but then, it might have been when we came back from Thanksgiving break, where I was like okay, I felt more comfortable, I could eat alone, even without a book in front of me and I didn't feel self-conscious. And I think that's when I knew that I really felt like part of the community. (Jackie, Small College)

As the semester progressed and students became more confident and integrated to campus life, some said they began to refer to campus as "home."

It's really nice to finally feel like I'm at home. (Holly, Small College)

I just found a home. I actually slipped up a few times at [my parents'] home and said "I have to pack up and go home" and my Mom was like "what?!." My home away from home. (John, Big University)

This theme provides evidence of students gaining confidence as they became more familiar with campus and integrated to college. They became more confident of their role in the academic and social life on campus. Students felt comfortable calling their college "home."

A New Me

The final individual theme, *a new me*, was evident only at State University. One or two students at the other two campuses expressed experiences that were consistent with the notion of "a new me" but not enough to make it a theme at all three campuses. This theme is closely linked to gaining confidence, because as students gained more confidence they felt freer to be true to their authentic self or to develop a new identity. Students at State University talked about how they were learning more about themselves and things they liked to do:

I think when I first came, I was like, I felt snobby I guess, because this was my back-up school, and coming here from like cheerleading and like it was weird that I realized all these new things that I really enjoyed, like I really enjoyed partying and really enjoyed listening to music and hanging out with my friends, and different things that I picked up on that changed me. (Carrie, State University)

Some State University students saw college as an opportunity to leave parts of their high school self behind and become a new person:

> No, I really thought, college would be an incredible experience, unlike anything else, so I like you know, that's what my parents kept telling me, I expected the best, and thought I would leave it [issues with depression] all behind. (Nick, State University)

> So, maybe I'm not as shy anymore. I guess. I enjoyed the shell, shy was me. Basically, getting out of my shell was my goal. Just go and be more confident, and try and be a new happier, out there me, and um, definitely grades were a goal to keep the grades up. (Patrick, State University)

Carrie provided a great example of how being independent and gaining confidence allowed her to feel that she could be anything or anyone she wanted:

> Don't be afraid, go into the transition with all of your heart and all of your soul and just give it your all, you know this is a fresh start and you can be whoever you want to be. You can be a nerd in high school, or considered a nerd, and then come to college and be the coolest kid. This is your start to do whatever you want to with yourself. Just have the confidence to go into it and be like 'you guys are going to like me for me' and I'm going to miss my parents, but it's going to be cool to be independent to make decisions like 'what do *I* want to have for dinner?' And be like "I don't have to have mom's cooking, I can have Chic-Fil-A", and just to do whatever you want, and just take it one day at a time. (Carrie, State University)

The theme, *a new me*, was only found at State University. These students expressed how they saw the opportunity that college provided for a fresh start, allowing them to develop a new identity or be true to who they had wanted to be in high school. They used their new found independence and confidence to make this change.

In summary, first year traditional aged students with a diagnosed mental illness experience the transition to college in ways similar to other student populations, but there are a few elements that make their experience unique. Several of these were explained in the theme, *living with mental illness*. There are day-to-day experiences that these students must manage: symptoms, counseling, medications, and the involvement of parents.

Additionally, these unique elements are evident in several other themes. Gaining independence and taking on new responsibilities is a developmental task for all student populations. For most students, part of gaining independence involves redefining the relationship that they have with their parents. For students with mental illness, the experience was different because they need to have their parents involved. Many respondents talked about how they

wanted their parents to leave them alone, but recognized that their parents understood what it was like for them to have a mental illness. These students had anxiety about how they would manage "without mom." Parents were sometimes able to recognize symptoms before the students did. They still needed their parents to help them with managing medications, counseling appointments, and other campus resources.

The participants learned to take on new responsibilities that other new students do, such as laundry and time management, but again they had to manage medications, appointments for counseling and disability services. Even with parents' help, they felt a greater sense of responsibility for managing symptoms related to their mental illness.

The issues listed in the theme *balancing act* are common to many students, however those with mental illness are even more challenged to be organized and manage time because of the additional things that they had to deal with (e.g., medication, therapy sessions). Also, for some, their specific mental illness comes with symptoms that can impact how they balance everything that a typical college student has to manage.

While these individual factors influenced the transition to college for students with mental illness, there were also environmental factors that impacted my respondents. In the next chapter I review the findings related to how these students perceive the academic and social environment and their college transition experience.

Chapter Six

How the Environment Influences Transition for Students with Mental Illness

In this chapter I review the findings about the influence of the institutional environment on the transition experience of students with mental illness. When analyzing the data, two major themes emerged, the academic environment and the social environment.

Factors in the Academic Environment that Influence Transition

Three themes emerged relative to the academic environment: (a) making comparisons, (b) experiences with faculty, and (c) academic support. Table 5 summarizes the data analysis iterations that culminated in these three themes.

Making Comparisons

The theme, *making comparisons*, refers to how the students compared their college academic experience with their previous academic experiences. These previous academic experiences relate to academic rigor, study habits, their role as a student, and expectations they had before they came to college. This theme was found at all three institutions.

When students compared high school to college academics they talked about how college was more challenging than high school. Most students had expected college courses to be more difficult. Many students admitted that they had to learn how to study because they did not study in high school.

> See I wasn't sure what to expect because high school was never difficult, so I don't want to come in here thinking that I'm just going to zip through it like I did in high school. I didn't expect that I would actually have to sit down and like study and do my homework for a few hours at a time. I knew that… like I'd heard, you know, via like little interviews on line or little quotes from students and stuff, like you will be studying; you'll work hard, play hard, etc. (Kelly, Small College)

> Getting an "A" in any class isn't hard. It isn't. I realize this isn't high school where I never actually studied for a test. Like studying works. Like if you get down to the grind and study, it's not hard. But if you slack and don't put all your effort in a sitting, then yeah. (Maria, Big University)

> Yeah, finals last semester. I just remember going to the library, sitting down for four hours and just studying, and I was like I've never, ever done this before, ever, it's like well this is college, oh hey. And just learning how to study, instead of having a couple test, quizzes, now having a big huge final at the end of the year just taught me – it's different – and I'm going to be taking different classes in a month. It's a lot less time, if you mess up in the beginning to make it up, towards the end. (Charlotte, State University)

Table 5

Code Mapping for Academic Environment Factors that Influence Transition

RQ1b. How do students perceive the influence of institutional environment as part of their transition experience?

Third Iteration: Data Application

Students with mental illness talk about the academic environment at college in the only context they have: how it compares to high school. Overall, students felt that college was academically more difficult than high school. They also compared themselves to other students, sometimes feeling inadequate. Students began to question how their mental illness affected their academics. Students' experiences with faculty influenced their academic transition. Generally, students viewed faculty as supportive. Faculty members were able to make students feel engaged in and excited about their classes. Few students reported negative experiences with faculty and those at Big University and State University talked about seeking academic assistance from formal campus resources and classmates.

Second Iteration: Academic Themes

- A. Making comparisons
- B. Experiences with Faculty
- C. Academic Support

First Iteration: Initial Codes/Surface Content Analysis

A1. Never had to study in high school
A2. More work and faster pace
A3. Fewer assignments, more test
A4. I was at the top of my class in high school
A5. Symptoms interfering with academics

B1. They really care
B2. Share enthusiasm and expertise
B3. Available for support
B4. Personal relationships
B5. Some don't care or understand

C1. Technical support
C2. Academic accommodations
C3. Sharing academic experiences with classmates

Students also had heard "horror stories" about college work and some were anxious about

classes:

> All I heard was work, work, work. When I thought of college is about work. So I was preparing myself to just be overloaded with work. And I've never had to study ever in my whole life before. I took AP classes, but it really never was a big deal. So I was kinda worried about that. I knew that at college you're going to have to study, and I always heard these horror stories of people like me who never had to study and then got to college and like failed out their first semester. And so I was terrified. So I started to learn how to study. I went to some classes, learned how to study, how to take notes, stuff like that. I realized I had a concentration issue. I cannot concentrate, couldn't concentrate. So I'm seeing someone now, trying to figure out if I have ADD or not. So that was one of my biggest issues, just worried about how in the world I was going to get all this information into my head. But it really helps that my first semester I was taking really interesting classes. All of them for the most part I pretty much enjoyed. It was a lot of sociology classes, which I love. (Liz, Big University)

One challenge for many students was that class grades were based on fewer assignments, usually

on a few tests or exams:

> Well, for me personally, I'm just a terrible test taker, and so, it kind of sucks that, and I know this is all colleges, but that the entire grade is based off exams, like you know you have four tests, and a couple pieces of homework and it's like if you don't do well on the test then you don't do well in the class. So, that's one of the things that most challenging about college courses, is that I wish they were like more based on, I don't know, I don't know what else you could base it on. (Melanie, State University)

Students also spoke about the "pace" of work and how much more material was covered in a

shorter period of time than in high school.

> I would also say the pace of things is really different, we move fast, so that's something… I guess a word to describe it would be intense. Like what you learn that day you need to spend like 3 more days looking over it, at least. (Racheal, Big University)

Students also compared themselves to other students and to the type of student they had

been in high school. Several of the students at Small College talked about how they were "at the

top of their class" in high school and now felt somewhat inadequate when comparing themselves

to other students in their classes:

> I remember I was like one of two freshmen in my English class, I was really nervous about that because everyone seemed so smart and so I don't know, eloquent, and I just didn't feel like that. (Jackie, Small College)

That's where I'm feeling like I don't want to say inadequate, but not sure about my reasons or beliefs because I'm not sure I thought them through as much as other people, or am not as bright as other people. Which I'm totally fine with, but I feel like almost like the intimidation factor of like people being well informed and well educated on things that I'm just kind of figuring out. So, I feel like that has been like stressful for me like speaking in class, whereas in high school I was like I had no problem speaking in class whereas here it's kind of like I don't want to feel, I don't want to look like I'm stupid, like I'm just not sure. So, but I like, I was actually counseled about this and she was like just think of one thing to say everyday, write it down before class and have one thing to say and then you said something at least. (Ellen, Small College)

Melanie knew she would have to be a different student than she was in high school:

Well, the expectations I had with myself was to do really well, because all through high school I wasn't like straight A student or anything, but like I made really good grades in high school and I graduated with a 3.4, somewhere around there. Definitely I knew the transition was going to be hard. But, coming in, I like had my mindset, I was like okay, you're going to have to crack down, because college teachers weren't going to be as lenient as high school teachers. I told myself that, but like when I got here I was just like kinda like goofed off and tried to just slide myself through it, like I did with high school you know, and that didn't really work for me. So yeah, expectations, I knew it was going to be hard, I actually think that first semester was even though I did so bad it was easier workload wise and like test wise than I thought it was going to be, but it was pretty much me not concentrating and doing what I needed to do. (Melanie, State University)

Students talked about how they constantly compared college to high school. Generally, they felt that college was much more challenging. They now had to actually study, there were fewer opportunities to demonstrate competence though grades, the pace of the coursework was much faster, and their peers were viewed as being as smart as or smarter than they were. They quickly learned that they would not be able to continue the same behaviors they had used in high school to succeed.

Experiences with Faculty

The second academic theme at all three institutions is *experiences with faculty*. Students spoke about faculty and how the positive and negative interactions they had with professors influenced their academic transition. At all three institutions, faculty were described as supportive. The students appreciated their instructors' enthusiasm and expertise about the subject they were teaching. This elicited excitement and interest from the students.

The professor is just one of the most amazing people I've ever met. Um, he has a really interesting, unique way of looking at the material that we're reading. We're reading some Rousseau and we're going to do Plato and we read some Shakespeare. And just the way

he examines it is so deep. He's the first teacher who's made me feel excited about Shakespeare. (Sophie, Small College)

My teacher is [laughs] he's really funny, really upbeat, he's just always bouncing around the room. He creates this, well, like history is supposed to be the most boring class that you could actually sit through, but when we're in class, I feel like he's talking about Columbus or something and I feel like he's just so excited about [laughs], it makes you want to listen to him, I just think that's awesome! (Carrie, State University)

Students thought that faculty really wanted them to be successful. They offered examples of faculty emailing them information about tutoring, study sessions, and resume workshops. At each campus, students talked about how much faculty "care about students."

Yeah, my physics class is like 500 people but he really does care about his students. Like sometimes he'll do a lecture period all about how you need to work on your grades and how your GPA determines where you lie on the job bracket, he says it's all about numbers now. Like, he took a whole class period to talk about that, made me feel like he really does care. And he says that he doesn't have a cell phone and he says if you need something like not during his office hours, cause he's pretty much there 9-5, which is pretty unheard of, he says anytime you need help after his hours you can call him on his house phone and talk to him, so I think that's pretty cool. (Tom, Big University)

Faculty also offered support by holding office hours, meeting outside of office hours, checking in with students, and, as Tom noted above, giving out their home phone numbers.

The professors are really open. Even if they're not on office hours they're very open about you calling them or something like that and asking them. And we have like peer tutors and everything. There are avenues we can take to make it better. (Elizabeth, Small College)

Well there's definitely professors who will go above and beyond what's expected of them. They are the kind of people who, if they realize you're not going to be in class a lot, if they know that your grades haven't been the best, they will approach you about it. Well, that's really not their job, especially not at this age; they're not really going to do that for the most part. So that's always nice just to know that someone actually cares. It's not just they have 180 students and you're just one of them. (Liz, Big University)

Students also began to develop more personal relationships with faculty which made them feel more supported and integrated with the campus community.

I'd say the faculty are supportive. You definitely form good relationships with the faculty here. Like during Orientation Week my advisor, who also taught two of my classes fall term, took all of his advisees - the students he was advisor to – out to his house for dinner. He's just really great. I always feel I can talk to them about academic stuff. A lot of times I feel like I get along better with them than with the people my age. It's kinda sad. (Sophie, Small College)

Well, I don't know if it's really a class, but my University 100 class that I took, it was only for like 12 weeks or 9 weeks, I really liked that because I really got close with my teacher, and like she wrote a recommendation for me for this scholarship thing, she was like the first person I thought of. I don't know it was like just nice, because I met people on my hall, in my building, and so it was nice to just like socialize I guess. (Katie, State University)

Yeah, my history teacher [name]. I don't know if you've ever heard of her, but she's actually, she has a disability, she's actually blind. So that was different for me, you know having a blind teacher you know like how does that work with like tests and stuff like that. I've met with her a few times in her office and just told her [about diagnosis]. I guess I feel like I have something in common with her, because she has a disability and like I have somewhat of a disability, and she's just one of the teachers that was most understanding with [it]. Like I missed a test because my anxiety was off the wall today, and she like understands stuff like that. So, I've met with her. I've met with all my professors at least once, with the program. But, I really, all my professors are pretty supportive. The one thing that kind of sucks is my Health 200 class. The professor I have, I loved her and she is so sweet and kept up with me and everything, but she's on maternity leave now and everything so we have a different teacher, which sucks. (Melanie, State University)

Although the vast majority of students felt that their interactions and relationships with faculty were positive, there were some negative feelings related to faculty that students revealed. Primarily, students struggled with "trying to figure out your professors:"

I guess just figuring out your professors. That's probably one of my biggest [challenges]…because they're so different. They're all so different as far as what they expect, how they teach, or lacked or don't teach. I think it's definitely getting to know them was one the hardest things. (Liz, Big University)

Tom felt like he was a number:

Every single professor in the [name of] department, they are just about getting their numbers up, that's what I feel like. I don't know, I feel like they just don't care about students at all. (Tom, Big University)

The experiences in this theme related to students feeling that faculty were generally supportive, not necessarily that they were supportive because students had disclosed their disability to the faculty member. However some students did report experiences of feeling supported after sharing their diagnosis with a particular faculty member. Carrie disclosed her diagnosis with one of her professors and he was not sure how to respond:

I had to explain my anxiety to one of my professors last semester because it was my English [class]... but it was in the morning and sometimes my anxiety kicks in then, like in the morning more than later in the day or night. I had troubles getting to class, so I had

to talk to him and explain to him why I hadn't been to classes and he told me about the (disability office) and told me all the things that State University offered and I felt like he was just a little bit maybe confused because he didn't know how to handle the situation. But I guess there's only so much he can really do to accommodate me without me coming here [disability office]. But, yeah, like overall he helped me out, and I still got a good grade. He told me I would've got an A, I got a B, because of absences. I gotta get through that. I've been way better about those situations, take my medicines, usually just walking to class helps me feel less anxious. (Carrie, State University)

Students' experiences with faculty played an important role in their academic transition. Most students at all three campuses generally described the faculty as being supportive. They provided examples of faculty who reliably held office hours, professors giving out home phone numbers, and spending class time talking about important academic and career issues. Some students felt that they had developed good relationships with faculty members who could provide advice and serve as references in their future endeavors. A few students did have negative interactions with faculty or felt that select professors were not invested in their academic success.

Academic Support

The final academic theme was *academic support*. This theme includes comments that students made about receiving additional academic services, such as, tutoring or using disability support services for academic coaching and accommodations. Although students at all three campuses talked about supportive faculty, only students at State University and Big University shared stories of seeking additional assistance.

Respondents who registered with the disability services on their campus talked about accommodations they received:

Um, yeah, I have like testing accommodations, so I get like a separate room and like double time on the test. And then for like some of the classes that I request, I have like a note-taker and then I can use a reading lab in the library. It's like, they have lots of stuff there, like I use. If I have a lot to read, I'll like scan in my books and then they have a program that will read it to you. And they have like a whole bunch of other stuff, that's the one I use. It's in the library. (Liz, Big University)

I've been there [disability services]. I don't get any accommodations. I haven't asked for any, except to register for classes early which is a huge thing for me and all I have to do is say 'hey I need help' and I know that they will help me. (Holly, State University)

Students found other academic resources beyond accommodations:

I do, I have an academic coach and I come here [disability services] every Thursday in the morning. It's been really helpful. She basically helped me get on track. She told me I

need to do things and keep track of what you've done and keep track of things that need to be done. Since I've been doing that I have been doing really well in all my classes. (Howard, Big University)

Yeah, coming here [disability services] or go[ing] to the [writing lab] and go get your papers edited. There's definitely a lot of outreach that you can go to and get help with anything. (Charlotte, State University)

Two participants who were on academic probation were involved in more formalized retention programs talked about assistance they received:

…although now, I'm on probation, because I got a 1.85 [GPA] last term. So that was kind of a personal blow to myself, so I've been dealing with lots of other problems. I've been seeing [campus counseling center] about depression and other things and just trying to deal with a lot of the stress and getting up and off probation. It's helpful, I think, I have a lot of different meetings to keep me in check. I come here [disability services] every week and I go to [counseling center], and I'm also doing [academic strategies class] and I think the whole idea of it is, I have a much tighter safety net now and if anything happens I can catch it really quickly. (Mark, Big University)

Um, I almost didn't come back this semester. I'm in the [academic probation] program… I just completely just dropped all my school work pretty much, and it just, it killed me. Like, yeah, I was on academic suspension and then you had to apply for the [academic probation] program and if you got accepted in the program it's like now your own probation. Like we have 6 hours of study hall a week, like supervised study hall in [name of building]. Um, in the beginning, in the very first of the semester you had to like meet with all your teachers and have them fill out a form of what we needed to do to be successful in their class, and we have progress reports. It's kind of like, it's not that their babying you but it's making sure you stay on the right track, so. (Melanie, State University)

Some students talked about studying in groups with people they met in class or in their residence hall. Several students at Big University were also in a living-learning environment and reported that they had a lot of support from their peers:

First semester we had all the same classes pretty much so we'd be sitting there doing work. We had the same online quizzes at the same time, the same tests so like studying you'd be sitting in the room and be like "hey I can't get this can you help me" back and forth. Yes, and he's taking a different path this semester so that's not as helpful. But being on a floor of engineers you can usually find help. (John, Big University)

Students at Big University and State University were able to receive accommodations and access to support services because they had provided documentation of their psychiatric diagnosis. Most students reported that these additional resources were very helpful.

In summary, the three themes emerged related to academic transition were (a) making comparisons, (b) experiences with faculty, and (c) academic support. Generally, students with mental illness had a successful academic transition. They did have to adjust to the rigors of college academics. Relationships with faculty played an important role in transition, as faculty were able to get students excited about their classes and were often viewed as supportive and caring. Students at Big University and State University found additional academic support from a variety of campus resources (e.g., tutoring services).

These themes can be can be factors in transition for many college students. However, the students with mental illness in this study had some unique academic transition experiences. Some who disclosed their diagnosis directly to faculty members felt that their professors were in a sense "looking out for them" because they had a disability. However, others had negative experiences when faculty did not know how to respond to students that disclosed their diagnosis. Students at State University and Big University who decided to report their diagnosis to disability services were able to receive accommodations and additional academic support and training.

<div align="center">Factors in the Social Environment that Influence Transition</div>

In addition to the academic environment, however, the social environment on campus influenced students' transitions. The data analysis on the social environment revealed three themes: (a) social challenges, (b) developing meaningful friendships, and (c) strategies for making friends. Table 6 summarizes the data analysis iterations that culminated in these three themes.

Social Challenges

The first theme related to the social environment was *social* challenges. Students at all three campuses faced a variety of social challenges in relation to their college transition. Although each campus had some unique social challenges, almost all students talked about the challenges of meeting people, fitting in, and learning to manage the social environment. The comments below provide evidence of these basic social challenges:

> Oh gosh, probably my greatest challenge has been making friends, and to go into detail, making girlfriends. Um, I've [never] really been like one to go and be like the life of the party or whatever, that's not me. I'll set my toys out, and just wait for people to just come and play. You know like I'm not just going to go out there and so, that's been difficult, just putting myself out there, 'cause it's just not something that I'm comfortable with, it's just not. That's like I realize that when I came back in the [spring] semester – I have to do

Table 6

Code Mapping for Social Environment Factors that Influence Transition

RQ1b. How do students perceive the influence of institutional environment as part of their transition experience?

Third Iteration: Data Application

Students with a diagnosed mental illness experience the social transition to college in some similar ways to other students. Social challenges included fitting in, the drinking culture, Greek life, and making new friends. Meaningful friendships increased students' sense of belonging and provided support when they shared their diagnosis with friends. Students at Big University and State University used strategies to meet people and make friends that those at Small College did not employ.

Second Iteration: Social Themes

A. Social Challenges
B. Developing Meaningful Friendships
C. Strategies for Making Friends

First Iteration: Initial Codes/Surface Content Analysis

A1. Fitting in
A2. Meeting people
A3. Drinking culture/party scene

B1. New best friend
B2. Core group of friends
B3. Proud of friendships
B4. Trust new friends, share diagnosis

C1. Join a club
C2. Get involved
C3. Put self out there

that – in order to meet other people I need to put myself out there. (Racheal, Big University)

Another challenge is just like being patient and friendship making and things like that. I feel like, I was like, I need to find my best friend, everyone else has a best friend, that was really hard. I say my anxiety comes a lot more from social situations than academics

situations. Just because I just don't understand, I don't want to say control but I feel there should be, that I should be meeting some sort of quota or something like that. (Melanie, Small College)

I think maybe [the biggest challenge for me was] opening up to other people more, and like trying to be more social, like my whole life I like went to school with people I had known since I was in kindergarten and they all knew my business I knew all their business. And just like meeting new people that I had never met before, and trying to be friends with them and opening up myself to them. (Katie, State University)

One of the more dominant topics was that of the drinking culture and party scene. Some students consumed alcohol even though they were underage, either because they wanted to because drinking is seen as "part of college" or because of peer pressure:

If you're at a party sometimes it can be a little hard. Just because that's what everyone expects everyone to do on the weekends. If you don't [drink] a lot, you kind of lose some of the social connections that you would have had if you did that. So that's a little hard sometimes because you're like how do I base what I think is right and what I don't think I want to do not just because its right or wrong, just because I don't feel like doing it. Versus this is what's expected and this is how I can get ahead. That's a little hard sometimes. (Elizabeth, Small College)

To be honest, I thought that what a lot of people here say, just people partying here all the time, you know that's what everybody does, just go out every night and everything. And I did that for a semester, which was not good. I definitely learned my lesson and that it's not all about that. It's more about, well, like now I don't even party that much anymore. Like for holidays I do, but I'll go out. But with like me and [best friend] and we'll like go out and like do stupid stuff, and drive around, and I love this weather. Like, just being outside, walking around and finding stuff to do. (Melanie, State University)

Some students decided not to drink usually because they were taking medication or knew it was not the right decision for them personally. However, they could still be successful socially:

A lot of people, are very into like the party scene, and I'm not so much into that because I can't drink and um, it's very challenging dealing with that, because everyone expects you to do that. Because it's kind of awkward explaining like, "oh I can't drink" and such, because they kind of like give you weird looks and then are like okay and just leave. (Patti, Big University)

It's definitely a drinking culture, and I can almost laugh about it 'cause my friends always make jokes about how drunk I'm gonna get. It's like really funny cause I'm like not [going to get drunk]. (Ellen, Small College)

Based on their comments, it seems as though some students may have a more difficult time trying to become involved on campus. Some reported that social activities could provoke anxiety or they were feeling too depressed to get involved:

No, I tried. I went to club fair and everything, but when I first got here I was just really sad and depressed and I've gotten better. I signed up for stuff, but then I got the emails and I was like, no. And I was a cheerleader four years in high school, and I had wanted to do that, but then when it comes down to it, I just can't even get out of my bed to do it. (Katie, State University)

Students had to learn to navigate the social environment, just as they did the academic environment. At all the campuses there was pressure to participate in the social/party scene. Fitting in to the social environment varied slightly by each campus. At Small College, the social scene was described as being an "obligation" and a way to make "connections" while at State University and Big University the social scene was not as serious a topic of discussion.

Developing Meaningful Friendships

This theme, *developing meaningful friendships*, captures what students shared as their need to develop a meaningful friendship with at least one other student or a core group of students. These friendships developed out of proximity, common interest, values, and experiences. This theme was found at all three campuses.

Kelly, Katie, and Mark describe what it is like to have a very close friend:

But my friend from California, she's the first really close girlfriend I've ever had. I've never had close girlfriends before. I've always kind had like acquaintances and everything. Like people that I can talk to at lunch, but I wouldn't give you a kidney – you know what I mean? This is the first person, the first close friend that I would really do any sort of favor for. We consult each other about what we're going to be doing that night, and we're in neuro together so "when do you want to study? When do you want to go to lunch together?" I've just never had a girl that like I'm always calling and gossiping with and talking about boy problems and all that. It's never happened for me so meeting her was really exciting. (Kelly, Small College)

[best friend's name], meeting her and being best friends with her. She's really like made me like, I don't know just go out more and like be more social and just I don't know. You know, she's like the only friend I've made here, like real friend, that I hang out with and stuff, and it's still nice. I'm not like one of those people that like needs 100 friends to be happy. I can have a few friends and be completely set. (Katie, State University)

Um, I guess when I pledged, the whole pledge process, like I'll never forget all the stuff I had to do. It was pretty cool and I made some of my like best friends now throughout the pledging process. Like I don't hang out with anybody from my high school except for Richard, who was one of my pledge brothers. And instead of calling one of my friends from back home, I'll call one of them, even though they're like from Florida, New Jersey, California, all these random places. That probably, it's going to stick with me the rest of my life. (Mark, Big University)

Other students talked about establishing a "core" group of friends:

The most memorable experience [was] like the first football game. I knew that I had established a group of friends when we all got our student tickets way up in the nose bleed section. We still got a group of twenty people together and got tickets all together so we were sitting together. We did the whole body painting thing together even though we weren't going to be on TV of course. And were just way up there having a blast. And then that group of about twenty people kind of narrowed down and by the last game one of my friends, actually Kristen, her parents have an RV, so they came up and did a tailgate. So I knew we were all great friends when the parents of one of our friends was inviting us to a tailgate and we were all hanging out and there was great camaraderie and you could talk about anything you wanted to and nobody would say "why are you talking about that, that's a stupid idea" or something like that (John, Big University)

Um, having just a social network of friends that you can talk to, do homework with, have study nights with, be able like, you know we're like all here and we all have to do the same thing basically. Like to understand each other, if we're all going through the same issues or whatever. (Charlotte, State University)

Many students actually reported that developing meaningful friendships was one of their greatest successes at colleges:

…and you know I've since realized that most people I meet here as friends are good friends. Like when I injured myself, when I was sick, people would take care of me. The female friend I made from the pre-orientation trip, I saw her one day when I was on crutches, and she was like "here let me get a plate for you." She walked around the [dining] hall with me and got food. I guess probably my greatest success is people I've made friendships with here. My closest friendships are with actual good friends, and good people. (Gus, Small College)

Students felt that these new friendships were meaningful, "real friends", who they could trust with personal information. Students talked about disclosing their diagnosis to their new friends or finding others on campus dealing with similar issues:

Yes, I'm very open with it [depression]. I've dealt with it for so many years and I've had lots of friends that have gone through it and everything. My theory is the more open you are about it the more you can help someone else so they don't get where you are. So I've

talked to a lot of my friends here about it. So they've been good support because they know what was going on. They check in frequently. (Elizabeth, Small College)

But my other friend…I know she has problems with her family. She doesn't get along with her mother at all. So I know that she understands what it's like to have those sorts of problems, so I can talk to her about that. And more people than I thought have had problems with eating disorders and stuff, her included. She is one person I've actually mentioned things to. (Kelly, Small College)

Well, I tried to hide it [anxiety] I guess, when I first came here because I didn't want people to be like "oh, you're weird, you have panic attacks for no reason." But then once I got into my group of friends I told all of them about it and, well I had a panic attack one night…and they were like "what's wrong with you?!" and I was just like "I have anxiety and I have panic attacks" and I told them everything and they were just like "why didn't you tell us earlier," so it was kinda stupid. It actually helps to have people there, I mean they can't understand what I'm going through per se, because when you have a panic attack you kinda feel like you're dying and everything bad just hits you. But, people like [best friend], she has anxiety too, and it's easier to talk to people that have the same disorder I guess. (Carrie, State University)

Here on campus I've found a friend that's gone through similar situations [with depression] like I have, and I've found that he's a really good listener and so I'll like go to him and talk to him about stuff. (Racheal, Big University)

Students identified meaningful friendships as a significant part of their transition. Those who established new friendships felt a greater sense of belonging on campus. Some developed their first "best friend" relationship or created a core group of friends with whom they could experience college. These friendships seemed to make even the simplest college experience, like going to a football game, more meaningful. Respondents also felt that they could share their personal struggles with their mental illness with these new friends.

Strategies for Making Friends

The final social theme, s*trategies for making friends*, describes specific actions that students took to develop friendships. Participants at all the institutions described their campus as an easy place to make friends, but students at State University and Big University talked about using specific strategies to make friends. Early friendships were established in residence halls, through orientation, and in living/learning communities.

It was relatively easy to do. It was like as soon as everybody had moved in, because of the living program that I'm in, we were forced to like participate in a ropes course activity, I, it was kinda funny. There was a box like here to here, and we had to fit like 25 people onto that block, and I ended up smashed up against this girl and I remember we were talking and joking about how "oh, yeah, we're going to be like best friends after this

much contact" and actually we are very tight now and since I met her, she has like other friends that I've got to meet. So I didn't really have a hard time making new friends. (Patti, Big University)

After they had spent some time on campus, students developed strategies to increase their social network. These included taking risks and putting themselves "out there" to meet people, joining clubs, and playing sports.

So the first weekend I didn't know anyone, so obviously just staying in the dorm didn't really do anything. But then I started to going to LGBTA meetings…that's really helpful. I got to meet a whole bunch of people, and all of them hang out together and they do stuff on the weekends. (Liz, Big University)

So I basically went around making friends mostly playing volleyball. I made friends playing volleyball outside. (Howard, Big University)

I think it's really important to get involved, because you do meet more people and get more stuff done. They always tell you to get involved, and I do think that's a huge thing. (Holly, State University)

I started going out with the people in my dorm, which is just easier because you like live together, go out together, it's just like having roommates in a big house pretty much… And everything just fell into place and I just put myself out there and everything worked (making friends). (Carrie, State University)

In summary, three themes emerged related to how students experienced the social environment at their institution. Two of the themes were found at all three institutions (a) social challenges and (b) developing meaningful friendships. The third theme, strategies for making friends, was found at the two larger campuses, State University and Big University. These themes are generally common for most student populations.

There were two areas that were unique to these participants. The first was how symptoms of their mental illness influenced the way they experienced the social environment. Some students reported that their anxiety or depression may have hindered their involvement, that it was uncomfortable for them to try to be outgoing and meet new people. Also, the drinking culture was a factor on all campuses and some students knew they could not drink because of the medications they were taking. However, even students were able to find their "place" on campus and friends who accepted them.

The second unique factor was that participants found it helpful to share their diagnoses with new friends. They felt accepted and supported by their friends and even found others on campus facing the same struggles. Although, some students had some early challenges, most

seemed to have made a successful social transition. They thought that their campuses were welcoming places and that it was easy to make friends.

In this chapter and the previous chapter, I discussed findings about individual characteristics and the environmental factors that influenced transition for student with mental illness. In each chapter, I have pointed out the few institutional differences for each theme. In chapter 8, I review the institutional differences and provide additional data about how participants described their transition in relation to their particular institution.

Chapter 7

Institutional Differences

In the previous findings chapters, I have noted the few institutional differences for each theme. In this chapter, I review data about how participants described their transition in relation to their particular institution. I provide a brief landscape of each campus as painted by the participants.

Small College

Recall that students at Small College offered comments that reflected many of the themes that students at the other two campuses reported (see Table 7). However, Small College students differed from their counterparts in three ways. First, in the themes reflecting individual factors, Small College students did not talk about the theme *a new me*, nor was this theme found at Big University. This theme was found at State University where students described how they developed new identities when they matriculated. The second difference at Small College was that only two of the three themes in the academic category were discussed, *experiences with faculty* and *making comparisons.* Students at Small College did not discuss *support*, which was found at both State University and Big University. The *academic support* theme related to comments made by students that sought formal academic support resources. Finally, in the social factor, students at Small College did not provide comments related to the theme *strategies for making friends.* Students at Big University and State University did provide comments related to this theme.

Participants at Small College described their campus as a small tight-knit community with a rigorous academic environment and heavy Greek organization influence on the social life. Due to the small campus size, the students felt that it was easy to become acclimated to campus, for example to find classes. They also felt it was easy to get to know people in their classes and residence halls because of the fewer number of students. Students also described Small College as a friendly campus that is like a "family" environment.

> I actually know where classrooms are. I remember trying to figure out where classes were. And I mean this is a tiny campus too, I can't imagine being at a big school. (Kelly, Small College)

> So it's nice only having 25 people on your floor because you get to know everyone really well. (Elizabeth, Small College)

Table 7

Summary of Themes by Institution

Themes	Small College (SC)	State University (SU)	Big University (BU)
Individual			
Independence and responsibility	X	X	X
Balancing act	X	X	X
Stress	X	X	X
Living with mental illness	X	X	X
Gaining confidence	X	X	X
A new me		X	
Environment: Academic			
Making comparisons	X	X	X
Experiences with faculty	X	X	X
Academic Support		X	X
Environment: Social			
Social challenges	X	X	X
Developing meaningful friendships	X	X	X
Strategies for making friends		X	X

…the fact that it's so small and it's family-like, is that when you come to a party, so many people will recognize you, that they're like "Oh, man you're here, yes, come over here." (Gus, Small College)

They also talked a lot about the strong academic environment at Small College. The students at Small College said that the academic reputation of the institution influenced their decision to apply to and attend Small College.

I guess I came here because of the academic reputation mainly, and also because it's a small community…(Sophie, Small College)

Many of these students had been at the top of their class in high school and it was a surprise to them that they were now surrounded with other "top" high school graduates:

Yes, just because most of the people who come here are at the top ten percent of their class. So you're kind of used to being at the top. And here when everyone is at the top it's even more, you know what I mean. It's not like you can feel the tension cut like a knife, but at the same time you're competitive against yourself. I was in the top eight percent, I think, in high school and I come here and everyone is in that playing field. And you're just like, ok, I used to be one of the best and you come here and you're surrounded with the best. So some days when you get a paper back or a test back and it's not the best, you feel like a complete and utter failure. Because there are all these people around you and you feel like that person probably got an A. And then other days you're like this is good I got an A, I'm surrounded by the best and I managed to do it. Some days it's a curse and some days it's a blessing. (Elizabeth, Small College)

Participants also commented on how refreshing it was to leave high school and come to a campus where all the students seemed to really care about academics as much as they do:

And was just so funny to me that I saw some of the same people earlier that day, like in the library, and then later on that night they were completely social. And this was a Wednesday night, so I mean that's a really big party night here. That was really inviting to me. I was really hoping to find school where people took their academics seriously, but have fun. Because that's always how I was in high school. I wasn't treated very nicely in high school because I was trying to be normal, but I also really cared about my grades. People made fun of me for actually caring about school. The joke's on them now, but I don't know. I'm really glad I came to a school that's rigorous academically. (Kelly, Small College)

Small College is also described as being a very social campus and Greek life heavily influenced the social climate of the campus. Several students said their motto was "work hard, play hard." Students at the other two campuses talked about the social life being important, but

students at Small College talked about making "connections" and how much "pressure" there was to be involved socially, to be "seen" out and at parties.

> Well, we're like 90% Greek or something like that so that was a little daunting. Because it's well known that everything happens here within the Greek circle kind of thing. Also one of the stereotypes about [Small College] is we're very preppy you know kind of school. So I was a little worried about fitting in because I'm a tee shirt and jeans kind of girl. Yeah, we're like that but after a semester I learned that you can get by with a tee shirt and jeans too. (Elizabeth, Small College)

One student that I interviewed was not affiliated with a Greek letter organization, talked about having a difficult time transitioning and making friends because she was an "independent" and described herself as a loner. For this student it was a challenge to manage the Greek party atmosphere:

> ...basically just trying to get along in the social environment. It's such a Greek-heavy... Everyone expects you to go out and party every night. A few thousand times a day in [dining hall] you'll hear, "Hey did you go out last night?" That's like all that people do here. (Sophie, Small College)

Students at Small College faced the challenge of moving to college, redefining their relationships with their parents, while learning to manage their independence and new responsibilities. They had to balance their academic and social life and develop coping mechanisms for dealing with stress. Dealing with the day-to-day challenges of their mental illness was an issue for these students, and their parents played an important role in helping them to manage their symptoms. As students at Small College became more comfortable with college life, they gained confidence. They thought that the College's small campus and close community made it easy to get to know other students and faculty.

As evidenced in this and previous chapters, they felt the environment was academically challenging, but they felt a strong sense of support from faculty and staff, although they did not discuss seeking out formal support and resources. They also compared their college experience to their previous high school experiences. Small College students were excited to find other students who were interested in academics. The academic reputation was one reason these students decided to attend Small College. They were excited about the active social life at Small College, but sometimes felt the "work hard, play hard" social life as a challenge, and they viewed participation in the social life as an obligation.

State University

Unlike their counterparts at Small College, students at State University provided comments on all the themes in each of the three elements. In terms of individual factors, they gained a sense of independence and responsibility which was particularly evident in learning to balance academics and social life. They also developed new ways to deal with stress. Students at State University also had to learn to manage the challenges associated with their mental illness. They also began to gain greater confidence as the first year progressed. The one theme that was unique to State University was the theme *a new me* which was not found at Small College or Big University. This theme reflected comments that students made about developing a new identity while at college.

All three academic themes were found at State University. Students discussed their relationships with faculty and made comparisons to high school academics. Unlike students at Small College, students at State University did provide comments about the theme *support*. Students at State University talked about seeking academic assistance from a variety of campus resources. Finally, all themes related to the social environment were found at State University. Students at State University faced some social challenges, such as dealing with the "party school" reputation of the campus. It was also important for them to develop meaningful friendships at college. Unlike their counterparts at Small College, the theme *strategies for making friends* was found at State University. This theme referred to comments that students gave about specific strategies they used to make friends on their campus, for example, making an effort to get involved in campus clubs.

Generally, students described State University as a very pretty campus filled with friendly people. Similar to Small College, students at State University discussed the party school atmosphere. However, the social life at State University was not as influenced by the Greek culture as it was at Small College. State University was also different in that, unlike Small College, some students found it a challenge to navigate the physical space of a larger campus.

Below are two examples of comments about the pretty, friendly campus.

I immediately like loved it and like it's just so pretty and it's like small town, everybody knows everybody, and it's like it's not a huge school 'cause that's overwhelming. (Melanie, State University)

Katie gave a typical description of the campus as welcoming and noted that most students made friends easily:

> Everybody's really friendly and there are so many different types of people, and I think that nobody's really stuck up here. Like when I went to [private high school], everyone was very stuck up and stuff, but then like here everybody's like really nice, and genuine. But I just have a hard time making friends. (Katie, State University)

Students at State University discussed two challenges in relation to their transition; finding things to do besides "party" and becoming familiar with the campus. The party scene posed a challenge for some students, particularly in relation to finding other things to do on campus and at times served as a distraction. Most students were eventually able to decline invitations to parties and find alternative activities as they became more familiar with campus. However, students talked about how the parties were a disruption early during their transition:

> I feel like the parties are surrounding the campus, which is like it's hard because if you're on campus, you have to go further into campus to study. I just feel like so many people on campus are out, and I don't know I can't really explain it. The party scene is just a big part of [State University], I mean overwhelmingly a big part of [State University], (Carrie, State University)

Students at State University had some anxiety about learning where classrooms were:

> It was just, I was scared that I wasn't going to find my classes, so I like left like 20 minutes before my classes to try and find them, and I had the map, and I had it all highlighted and I was just really nervous, but I made it to all my classes and everything was good when I got there and I loved all my teachers, I loved them, they were all like really nice and welcoming and understanding, since like most of my classes were all freshmen anyway. (Katie, State University)

> Umm, I guess I was kind of confused because I thought I knew [State University campus], but I didn't know where any of the academic buildings are and I was a typical freshmen looking at maps, trying to figure out where to go. (Holly, State University)

In general students at State University experienced the transition to college in similar ways as described at Small College. In addition they felt they had the opportunity to develop a new identity, they discovered new things about themselves or were able to be the real "me" that they may not have been able to be in high school. Academically, they made comparisons to high school in relation to classes, studying, and grades. They felt supported by the faculty and students at State University sought out academic support services. Socially, they had some challenges including managing the party scene and navigating the campus. Unlike Small College, Greek life was not as much an influence on the social scene at State University. It was

also important for State University students to develop meaningful friendships and this required them to engage in specific strategies to make friends, which was not the case at Small College.

Big University

Big University shared the all the same individual themes with Small College and shared all but one theme with State University. Recall that the theme *a new me*, was only found at State University. Students at Big University and State University experienced the academic and social transition in very similar ways. Academically, they discussed strong faculty support, seeking formal support and resources, and making comparisons to high school in relations to classes, grades, and professors. Students at Big University also had social challenges, developed meaningful friendships with at least one person or a core group of people, and had to use strategies to make friends on a large campus.

Participants from Big University generally described their campus as a "big friendly campus." They recognized that the campus was large and there were a lot of students, but most did not feel that this detracted from the friendly, personable environment. Patti offered the first impression she had during a campus visit:

> I just loved the campus and everyone was so friendly and open and like even random people who weren't like the tour guides or anything they would just like stop and start talking to you. [That] just was nice. (Patti, Big University)

> I feel like, everybody, I feel at [Big University] is really genuine and they really care. Like I feel like I have yet to meet a person that I feel like I couldn't just walk up to and start crying or something like that. I feel like if you did that to anybody, like even a complete stranger, like they would care. I think that's like really nice, really important to surround yourself with those people. (Rachael, Big University)

Students made comments about the social life and party scene but it was not as dominant a theme as it was at Small College and State University. Students could decide to "party" or not:

> Party central, because it is a big school. And I knew that before. I don't party. I don't want to jeopardize my grades, but I did know it was pretty much party central. But I also know the vibe and people there are also very, very nice. And it's a southern college; you gotta have a little hospitality in there. I just knew people would accept me and have the same respect I give and give it back. (Maria, Big University)

Like their peers at State University, some students at Big University talked about the size of the campus and trying to discover where everything is located. Liz said it took her a month to learn where some of the dining halls were:

> Well I guess early, I didn't know… I like knew there was some dining halls, some I knew kind of where they were. But I don't think it was until a month into the semester that I even ventured out to like [other dining halls] because I didn't know they existed. (Liz, Big University)

Students at Big University recognized that being part of a large campus with lots of students had its challenges, finding buildings for example, but they still felt that it was a very friendly environment. Generally, students experienced the transition to college in similar ways as the students at Small College and State University, with all the individual themes evident, except for *a new* me. Most felt that they could find support from others on campus. They provided lots of examples of how professors tried to be personally supportive of students despite the fact that they may be in classes with hundreds of other students. It was easy to find their niche because people were so open and friendly. Big University offered a challenging academic environment, and like those at State University, Big University students talked about receiving support from staff in the disability services office or other academic support programs. Socially, students knew that there were parties, but those events did not seem to dominate to social life. Once students identified their core group of friends they could find a variety of things to do besides partying.

In summary, in relation to campus environments, there were some similarities and differences in the transition experiences of students at the three institutions. Students at all three schools described their campuses as friendly. The party/social scene was talked about at all three campuses but seemed to dominate descriptions at Small College and State University. At Small College, the Greek organizations had a strong influence on the social life. Given the larger sizes of State University and Big University, students did have some adjustment issues in learning to find classes, dining halls, and other buildings. Most students transitioned to the campus environment in a reasonable time, however.

Chapter Eight

Discussion

In this chapter I provide a discussion of the research findings. I review how the findings for these 21 student participants compare to previous research. Then I discuss how the findings might influence future practice, research, and policy. Finally, I provide limitations of the study.

The central research question of this study was how first year, traditional aged, college students with a diagnosed mental illness experience the transition process to college. The first question examined how individual characteristics shaped this transition experience. These first year students with mental illness experience the transition to college in ways similar to other student populations. For example, gaining independence and responsibility is a common developmental task for first year students, as is gaining confidence (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). However, there are also distinctive individual characteristics for students with mental illness (SMIs) that impact their college transition process. For example, they live with mental illness on a daily basis, something other students do not have to do. SMIs must manage symptoms, counseling, and often medication on a daily basis.

Parents of these SMIs seem to be heavily involved in helping their student prior to college and they continue to be involved once a student matriculates, sometimes from a distance, probably to a greater extent than parents of students without mental illness. These SMIs are anxious about how they will manage on their own, without mom or dad. Parents may also be nervous about sending their children to college. There is evidence that some SMIs conduct advance planning with their parents on how they will deal with the transition. SMI parents can help their children with managing medications, scheduling counseling appointments, and accessing other campus resources. However, when SMIs do not have a plan, or when they do not follow through on plans, negative consequences including relapses (bulimia, suicidal thoughts) can occur. Parents can provide a safety-net because they often recognize symptoms before SMIs, providing an intervention that non-SMI students do not need.

Due to the active role that parents play in the lives of SMIs, the process of redefining their relationship with their parents seems to be different from the process that non-SMIs experience. These SMIs struggle with the desire to assert their independence and have their parents leave them alone, but they recognize that their parents understand what it was like for them to have a mental illness and they value the support that parents provide. When SMIs

receive formal support and counseling from parents they begin to gain a better understanding of their diagnosis which allows them to take on more responsibility in managing their mental illness.

The act of balancing and managing college academics and social life is a common challenge for all students and those with mental illness do not seem to differ from their non-mentally ill counterparts when it comes to this element of the transition with one exception. These students with mental illness acknowledge the degree to which stress impacts their life. They need to develop coping mechanisms early on in their collegiate experience in order to manage the stress that balancing their academic and social worlds creates.

Personal transition is another aspect of the transition to college. This involves taking on many new responsibilities, such as meal planning, laundry, and time management. While all college students need to learn these skills, SMIs must in addition manage medications, make appointments for academic services and personal counseling, and mobilize to seek support from disability services. Because SMIs have these additional issues to juggle, the tasks of being organized and time management are more challenging.

These findings are interesting because they show that despite the unique challenges they face, these SMIs can have a successful transition, a transition that is similar to other student populations. The students in this study come to campus with the typical hopes and fears that many first-year students have, but they also have to think about how they are going to manage their mental illness. Questions such as where they will fill prescriptions, where will they find support or formal counseling, and whether they would they disclose to friends, faculty, and administrators, were just some of the issues they had to think about. All of these challenges and experiences are unique to this student population.

The second research question asked how SMIs perceive the influence of institutional environment on their transition. Transition experiences related to the environment fall into two categories; academic and social environments. Generally, these SMIs have a successful academic transition that is similar to the academic transition experience of other student populations. However, these SMIs have a few experiences that make their academic transition unique. During the first semester of transition, most of these SMIs make the decision to disclose their diagnosis, at some level, to friends, faculty, or in a formal way to staff in campus disability support services. When SMIs disclose to faculty members, the students felt that their professors were in a

sense "looking out for them" because they were aware of their diagnosis. However, sometimes faculty members do not know how to respond to students who disclose their diagnosis. Perhaps some professors do not have a good understanding of the challenges and needs of SMIs. SMIs who decide to report their diagnosis to staff in disability services are able to receive accommodations and additional academic support and training. SMIs recognize the need to develop a support system at college; this system includes relationships with supportive faculty, friends, and access to counseling and academic support.

Other students with mental illness decide not to share their diagnosis. It is possible that some SMIs may want to leave their mental illness back in high school, that they see college as a fresh start and want to succeed without the stigma that mental illness might have. The decision to disclose or ask for assistance may be influenced by campus resources. For example, in this study, Small College does not have a central office for disability services. Generally, physical disabilities are handled by the dean of students' office and learning disabilities are handled by academic deans and faculty. Perhaps if there was a more formal process, students at Small College may be more likely to ask for assistance. SMIs that did not form a support network usually found out that they did need support. In hindsight they thought that they should have been more honest with themselves and asked for help sooner.

In the social environment realm, once again, these SMIs experienced the transition to the college social environment in ways similar to other student populations; however there are two areas that are unique to this population. The first difference, symptoms of some mental illness, can impact the way that SMIs experience the campus social environment. Some of these SMIs feel that their anxiety or depression may hinder their involvement early in their transition; that it is uncomfortable for them to try to be outgoing and meet new people, or they were so sad and depressed it was hard for them to even leave their room. Also, the drinking culture can be a factor because it is such a pervasive part of the college social environment. These SMIs sometimes chose not to drink because of the medications they were taking or because symptoms could arise or worsen as a result of drinking. These social challenges could limit social opportunities early in the college transition. Eventually, however, most of these SMIs find friends who do not expect or pressure them to drink.

The second unique factor in the social environment associated with transition is that these SMIs find it helpful to share their diagnoses with new friends. They feel accepted and supported

by their friends and finding others on campus facing the same issues. When students with mental illness view their campuses as welcoming places, a place that is easy to make friends, they have an easier social transition. Although, some students have some early challenges, most seem to make a successful social transition.

Again, this study illuminates the unique experiences of SMIs. It seems that some of these students really have to push themselves to become part of the social environment. This could be a barrier for students who need a strong social support system. SMIs may not need a large group of friends, but they feel more comfortable when they have someone with whom they can share their personal experience with. These meaningful friendships seem to help them with their social transition.

The final research question asked how the transition experience is different in different campus environments. Differences and similarities can be examined in the themes (Table 7) as some were evident at all or some of the campuses. The institutional type does not seem to have a major impact on how SMIs transition to college. Although students may describe their campuses in different ways, there were not any significant findings in relation to how the campus environment made the transition experience different for students with mental illness. SMIs seem to transition well when they feel part of the campus and there are people who care about them. They may experience some challenges at schools where there are not resources for them or it is difficult to find resources and support. SMIs do struggle with navigating the physical environment of a large campus, but that is common for many students.

In this study, there were a limited number of differences in that some themes were not found at all campuses. Public state institutions seem to be more similar and less like small private colleges. There was only one theme that was not shared, under the individual factor, the theme *a new me*, was only found at the State University. This may be because several of the students that I interviewed were first-generation students and felt that they were pulling away and now "different" from their family and peers that they left at home. Most of the students at Small College and Big University were not first generation students and expected to attend college.

The theme in the academic environment, *support*, was not found at Small College. Students described the faculty as being very helpful and supportive, and since the campus is small and class sizes are small, perhaps they did not have the need to seek out formal academic

support. Again, the process for receiving accommodations and assistance is not as formal at Small College as at the other two campuses. Also, these students at Small College had all been at the top of their high school classes and possibly adjusted to the academic demands of college more readily. The social environment theme, *strategies for making friends* was also not found at Small College. It may be that because Small College is such a small campus the students did not feel the need to develop strategies, or that the strategies they used in high school to make friends also worked in college. Given the small size of classes and residence halls, and the fact that there were just so many opportunities to be social, they had lots of opportunities to meet other students and make friends. Additionally, orientation was held the week before classes began, allowing for relationships to be established before moving into the academic year. State University and Big University hold orientation earlier in the summer.

<div align="center">Relationship of the Findings to Prior Research</div>

The literature on SMIs is extremely limited, so my findings expand upon what is known about this population. However, there is literature on transition of college students in general and my findings mirror the results of many other transition studies because there were so many similarities between transition for other student populations and how students with mental illness transition from high school to college. Additionally, there were several factors that made SMIs' experience different, a fact that is supported by other studies that have examined subpopulations of students and transition and found their experiences to be unique.

In prior transition studies, social and academic integration (Tinto, 1993) proved to be important factors. Academic transition involved adjusting to more rigorous academic demands and interacting with faculty both in and out of the classroom (Tinto, 1993). Social transition entailed mastery of life skills, like managing time, diet and exercise (Tinto, 1993). My findings are consistent with Tinto's (1993). SMIs talked about adjusting to academic demands, and in the case of Small College students took it even further by noting how competitive academic life was and how they enjoyed being in an environment where other students were as interested in academics as the SMIs were. Consistent with the Tinto (1993) study, as SMIs became socially and academically integrated into campus life they became more confident and committed to their personal and academic goals.

Another major adjustment in relation to academics was finding out that what worked in high school (lack of studying) would not work in college. This is consistent with the findings of a

study about college expectations and the reality of college by Roe Clark (2005). Students in that study talked about how they had to develop new academic techniques or strategies to study and complete coursework (Roe Clark, 2005). My findings were very similar. Roe Clark (2005) also wrote about strategies in relation to meeting personal goals. In this study, students developed strategies in making new friends.

Academic transition is also influenced by the amount of support from institutional personnel including faculty (Yazedijian et al, 2007). For SMIs, faculty played an important role in their academic transition. Students reported that faculty were interested in them as individuals and cared about their success. SMIs at each campus described their faculty in a positive way. Yazedijian et al. (2007) also found that a general supportive campus atmosphere facilitates transition. SMIs generally felt that their campus environments were friendly. Even a large campus that is friendly can feel smaller (Yazedijian, et al., 2007) and this was true for students at Big University.

Terenzini's (1994) study of 132 students at four different types of institutions also found academic and social integration to be important and that it could be experienced differently by different types of students, particularly traditional aged students and first-generation students. My findings add to this research by examining the experiences of yet another sub-population, SMIs. Terenzini (1994) found that traditional aged students are concerned with integrating into the social environment and making friends, which was also a big factor for SMIs, as opposed to first generation students who are more focused on academic integration. Although SMIs transition in ways very similar to traditional students, there is one factor in Terenzini's (1994) findings for first-generation students that is similar to SMIs. First generation students often experience increased stress because of the added task of making a cultural transition (Terenzini et. al., 1994). Stress was a factor for SMIs as they had to manage their mental illness.

Involvement (Astin, 1993) has been identified in previous studies as an important factor for a successful transition. Astin (1993) identified three important areas for student involvement; academic involvement, involvement with faculty, and involvement with peer groups. All of these topics emerged as themes in my findings, reflected in the academic and social themes. SMIs talked about adjusting to college academics and becoming engaged in their academics. They also talked about how important their experiences with faculty were to their academic adjustment. Finally, SMIs also talked about how finding a core group of friends and becoming involved in

campus activities assisted with their social transition. Another study of homeschooled students (Bolle, et at., 2007) found that involvement in co-curricular activities led to a greater sense of confidence for new students. This was true for SMIs in my study as well. The theme *gaining confidence* emerged as students provided comments about "knowing the ropes" as they became more familiar with the campus academic and social life. Yet another study related to involvement was Nunez's (2005) study of first generation women. She found that once first generation women become more involved and integrated they begin to view college as a second home. Many of the students in my study referred to campus as their "new home." By fall break, SMIs began to view campus as a home away from home or second home.

Nunez's (2005) study also examined parental ties for first-generation women, suggesting that these students did not need to fully sever ties with parents to become incorporated into the college community but rather could renegotiate relationships. This was very similar to how SMIs described their relationship with parents. SMIs wanted to keep close contact with parents but this did not seem to hinder their social transition. Support from parents was an important aspect for the students in my study to have a successful transition. Involvement from parents can help or hinder a student's transition (Yazedijian, et al., 2007). Parents can encourage students to live on campus and get involved (Christie & Dinham, 1991) which can help students transition. The students in my study needed parental involvement because they needed the safety-net that parents could provide to assist their child if he or she was struggling.

Keup's (2007) study of students' expectations about college also found that students anticipated that their relationship with their parents would move from one that is authoritative to one that is egalitarian. This was also the case for SMIs who shared that their parents were indeed beginning to see them as young adults. Although, I did not specifically ask students in my study about their expectations of what college would be like, it was a topic that they brought up, and some of these comments fell under the theme *making comparisons* and the themes related to the individual. In addition to a change in relationships with parents, students in Keup's (2007) study had anticipated that college would bring greater independence and more freedom. This was true for SMIs as gaining independence was one of my themes. Like the students in Keup's (2007) study, SMIs found that new freedom came with increased responsibilities. My findings also mirrored Keup's (2007) findings in that balancing social life and academics is an ongoing adjustment.

Another group of studies has further examined social involvement, more specifically the importance of friendships in transition. Students in the Keup (2007) study identified making friends as one of their greatest accomplishments (Keup, 2007). SMIs also talked about how establishing meaningful friendships was one of their successes and an important part of their social transition. Peers provide social and academic support (Yazedijian, et al., 2007) which increases students' sense of attachment to the institution and helps with their adjustment. For SMIs, it was important to make friends who were understanding of their mental illness and were supportive. Pittman and Richmond (2008) found that positive friendships were linked with lower levels of stress, depression, and anxiety. The students in my study all seemed to have made friendships and had a mostly positive social transition experience. Peers also provide academic support by sharing the same academic mindset and by supporting and encouraging one another's academic achievements (Yazedijian, et al., 2007). This shared mindset was particularly evident for students at Small College.

Integration to the campus environment is in important part of transition and persistence to graduation (Tinto, 1993). The environmental transition to a new campus can pose a challenge (Banning, 1989). Except for the SMIs who had to adjust to large campuses, the students in my study had successful environmental transitions and felt they were a good fit with their institution. One study where my findings differed was that of (Banning, 1989). He wrote that ecological fit is very important, but that often students have little understanding of how the campus environment can impact their lives. The students in my study seemed to know what to expect at their respective campus. Their decision to attend their institution was usually an informed one based on what they thought would be a fit for them academically and socially. Most knew what it meant to attend a small private institution or a large state university.

<center>Implications for Future Practice, Research and Policy</center>

The findings have several implications for the future. In terms of practice, there are several constituencies that may benefit from this research, including; higher education administrators that work with orientation and transition programs, mental health practitioners, SMIs and their parents, and faculty.

In particular for staff that work in new student orientation and new student programs, there may be specific programming efforts that could be developed to assist SMIs when they transition to college. The specific needs of students with mental illness should be addressed with

both students and parents early on. The main task would be to provide SMIs and their parents with information that will be helpful in their transition. Information should be provided to both parents and students about campus resources including counseling and academic support services, academic success classes, and disability services, with clear guidelines about how to receive accommodations and who is eligible. Many of these services are in place on most campuses; parents and SMIs just need to be made aware of them. In addition, information should also be provided about medical services, including on-campus and/or off-campus pharmacy information. Staff may not be aware of students who are coming to campus with a mental health issue. Therefore, this information needs to be easily accessible, such as on the institutions' website, and should also be discussed at orientation, for example in parent information sessions. Although most of the parents of the students in my study seemed to have years of experience in assisting their student, there may be students and parents who need this information and education after their students arrives on campus, for example if the student receives a diagnosis later in his or her college career.

In addition, orientation should include a general introduction to mental health and college students given the number of students who come to campus already diagnosed or need assistance once they start college. Campus mental health professionals could provide tips for a successful transition. Mental health providers can not only be helpful at orientation but may consider additional support groups for students with mental illness. SMIs that shared their diagnosis with friends, or met other students dealing with the same issues, felt less alone. A support group or psycho-educational group may help SMIs find the additional support they need and help them learn to manage their mental illness.

Parents and students should be encouraged to develop a transition plan that includes how they will manage medications, seek counseling, and what red flags to look for to recognize a problem. Students should also be familiar with where they can go for help with personal issues and to seek academic support as well as to learn academic success strategies. Students can identify ways they will deal with stress and how they will manage their time. Orientation staff, or dean of students staff with the help of campus mental health professionals and disability service professionals could provide some guidelines, answer questions, or generate topics for discussion that may be helpful in developing a mental health transition plan. Parents and students need to

plan their safety-net. Parents will want to educate themselves about how to balance their need for involvement and the student's need to develop independence, responsibility, and confidence.

Finally, faculty should receive some basic education in how to help students with mental illness. SMIs may feel more comfortable sharing their diagnosis with a faculty member who are knowledgeable about mental illness, and faculty should be able to point students to the proper resources. Also, for students who are not aware of mental health issues, faculty may see early warning signs of a problem and provide some information to students on counseling, academic services, or disability services.

In addition to what these findings mean for practice, this study also suggests future research opportunities. This study provides data about the how students with mental illness experience the first-year high school to college transition experience at three different institutional types. A future study may want to expand on this study by employing a different technique, perhaps a quantitative study that can survey many more students. A larger sample could include a broader population, from a variety of institution types. Survey questions could be developed based on the themes that emerged in the interviews. It would be interesting to if these themes are significant in a quantitative study.

Finally, this study also provides issues to consider for policy, specifically campus policies related to services for SMIs. Policies about accommodations and services for mental health issues need to be accessible to all students early in their college experience. Administrators may want to examine the resources available on their campus. Resources may need to be allocated to meet the needs of students coming to campus.

Limitations

As with any study there are limitations related to the research. One limitation was the qualitative design of this study. There are several factors related to the sample that may have limited the findings. These students all self identified and many of them were connected with some type of formal support services on campus. These findings may not reflect the experiences of students with mental illness who are not receiving assistance. In the second semester when data were collected, these students seemed to be experiencing a successful transition, even if they had had some challenges early on in their transition. There may be SMIs that left during or after their first semester or never connected with counseling or academic support services. Only one interview was conducted with each student. More than one interview at different times may have

provided different information. Also, interviews with others close to the student, parents, faculty, counselors, could have provided additional insight into the participant's experiences. Therefore, transferring these results to SMIs at similar types of campuses should be done with caution

A second factor also related to the method is the interview protocol. There may have been experiences related to transition that the students did not talk about because I did not ask specific questions about those experiences. The findings may be limited by not including these experiences. The participants may have interpreted the questions in different ways than I intended which could mean they provided different responses which could have influenced the results of the study. Additionally, I have experience as a counselor and this could have influenced the types of follow up questions I asked.

The results could have been influenced by my own bias. My own experiences with transition could have influenced how I collected or analyzed the data, which could have influenced the findings. A different researcher may have found different themes. Additionally, the student participants may have viewed me as representative of the university and framed their responses accordingly. Any or all of these limitations might have influenced the findings.

Conclusion

Despite these limitations, this study adds to the research on students with mental illness. It provides a description of how some SMIs experience the transition in different campus environments. The findings reveal that traditional aged first-year students experience the transition to college in ways similar to their non-mentally ill counterparts, with some exceptions. It sheds light on the day-to-day issues that SMIs must manage that are different from their peers. SMIs do face challenges, stress, personal adjustment issues, but they are able to move through many of the individual developmental tasks that other first-year students do and successfully navigate social and academic transition issues.

These results provide valuable insight into the experiences of SMIs. The findings are positive in that it seems that if SMIs are sufficiently supported by parents, friends, formal services, and faculty, they have a successful transition. They are able to manage their mental illness and be successful both academically and socially and become integrated into their campus environment. A successful transition is more likely to lead to higher retention and graduation rates of this population.

Through research, education, and understanding, the stigma associated with mental illness is beginning to fade. Students are able to not let their diagnosis define them or limit them, proving that they can have a successful and meaningful college experience. My hope is that this study will inspire more research in the area of students with mental illness.

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APPENDIX A

Introductory Letter/Email at Big University

Dear_____,

Martha Glass is a doctoral student in the Educational Leadership and Policy Studies program at Virginia Tech. I am also a member of her dissertation research committee. This semester she is conducting interviews with first year students about their transition to college. She is interested in interviewing students that have been diagnosed with a psychological disability. The outcome of this study may help to provide information that will benefit other students with their transition to college.

According to our records, you meet the criteria to participate in her study. If you are willing, you would be required to participate in one interview in the next few weeks. The interview will take place on campus and will last approximately 60-90 minutes. The interview will be recorded and you will be asked to review a transcript of the interview. To thank you for your participation, you will be paid ten dollars ($10) at the conclusion of your interview.

If you are interested in participating, please contact Martha directly, via email at mglass@vt.edu. She will arrange a time to contact you by phone to explain the study, ask a few questions, and schedule an in-person interview. Due to confidentiality reasons, no names have been given to Martha, so unless you contact her she will not know who you are.

Sincerely,

[name deleted]

Director

Services for Students with Disabilities

Introductory Letter/Email Small Private

Dear _____,

This message is being sent to the entire first-year class.

Martha Glass is a doctoral student in the Educational Leadership and Policy Studies program at Virginia Tech. This semester she is conducting interviews with first-year students about their transition to college and has contacted us in Student Affairs with an interest in interviewing students who have been diagnosed with a mental health challenge. This study may provide information that will benefit other students with their transition to college.

If you are a first-year student who graduated from high school last spring and entered college for the first time in fall 2008, if you are 18 years of age or older, and you have been diagnosed with depression, anxiety, or any other related mental health diagnosis, you are eligible to participate in this study.

If you are willing, you would be required to participate in one interview within the next few weeks. The interview will take place on campus and will last approximately 60-90 minutes. The interview will be recorded and you will be asked to review a transcript of your interview. To thank you for your participation, you will be paid ten dollars ($10) at the conclusion of your interview.

If you are interested in participating, please contact Martha directly via email at mglass@vt.edu. She will arrange a time to contact you by phone to explain the study, ask a few questions, and schedule an in-person interview. Rest assured that I have not divulged your name to Martha, so unless you contact her she will not know who you are.

Sincerely,

[name deleted]

Associate Dean of Student Affairs

And Dean of First-Year Students

Introductory Letter/Email State College

320 East Eggleston Hall (0302)

Virginia Tech

Blacksburg, VA 24061

Hello –

My name is Martha Glass and I am a doctoral student in the Educational Leadership and Policy Studies program at Virginia Tech. I am also a [State University] graduate. This semester I am conducting interviews with first year students about their transition to college. I am interested in interviewing students that have been diagnosed with a mental health challenge. The outcome of this may help to provide information that will benefit other students with their transition to college.

If you are a first year student who graduated from high school last spring and entered college for the first time in fall 2008, if you are at least18 years of age or older, and you have been diagnosed with ADD, ADHD, depression, anxiety, or other related mental health diagnosis, I would like to invite you to participate in this study.

If you are willing to participate in this study, you will be required to participate in one interview in the next few weeks. The interviews will take place at your campus and will last approximately 60 minutes. The interview will be recorded and you will also be asked to review a transcript of our interview to ensure accuracy of the recording. To thank you for you participation, you will be paid ten dollars ($10) at the conclusion of your interview.

If you are interested in participating, please contact me via email at mglass@vt.edu. I will arrange a time to contact you by phone to explain the study, ask a few questions, and schedule an in-person interview. Due to confidentiality, I have not been given your name or contact information, so unless you contact me directly I will not know your identity.

Thank you for your consideration,

Martha Glass

Doctoral Candidate in Educational Leadership and Policy Studies

Virginia Tech

APPENDIX B

Phone Pre-Screening Form

Script for verbal consent:

Thank you for contacting me about my study. The purpose of this study is to understand and describe how undergraduates that have a psychiatric diagnosis transition to college. The term "transition" basically means an event or nonevent that result in a change, or a passage. In this instance, the change is leaving high school and becoming a college student. Before we can begin I need to obtain your verbal consent to participate in the pre-screening process. I need to ask a few questions to make sure that you meet the criteria to participate in this study. This should only take a couple of minutes. You can decide to stop at any time. After the pre-screening if you agree to continue your participation I will email you a confirmation and formal consent form that you will sign when we meet for the interview. Do I have your permission to conduct the pre-screening?

Yes _____(initial& date)   No_____(initial & date)

Name of participant_____

Institution_____

Major_____

Year in college_____

Sex_____   Age_____

High school graduation date _____

Number of credits enrolled in during Fall 2008_____

Was fall 2008 your first semester of college?_____

Why do you think you qualify for this study?

When did you receive your psychiatric diagnosis, prior to coming to college or after?_____

Do you feel comfortable talking about your diagnosis in relation to your high school to college transition_____

Mailing Address_____

_____

Telephone_____   Email_____

Date of interview_____

Location of interview_____

APPENDIX C

Recruitment flyer

Would you like to talk about your first semester of college?

I am looking to interview first-year students in a research project about how students transition from high school to college. You will be asked to participate in one interview that will last 60-90 minutes and will take place on campus.

You will be paid $10 for participating.

Criteria:

- ➤ At least 18 years of age.
- ➤ Graduated from high school in spring/summer 2008.
- ➤ Entered college in fall 2008.
- ➤ Currently enrolled as a full time student.
- ➤ Have a diagnosis of depression, anxiety, mood disorder, or other psychiatric diagnosis.

If you are interested contact:

Martha Glass at mglass@vt.edu

APPENDIX D

Informed Consent/Participant Agreement

Project Title:

College Transition Experiences of Students with Mental Health Challenges

Investigator:	**Faculty Advisor:**
Martha Glass	Dr. Joan B. Hirt
Doctoral Candidate	Associate Professor
ELPS – Higher Education	Educational Leadership and Policy Studies
320 East Eggleston (0302)	307 E. Eggleston Hall
Virginia Tech	Virginia Tech (0302)
Blacksburg, VA 24061	Blacksburg, VA 24061
(717) 682-5871 (cell)	(540) 231-9700
mglass@vt.edu	FAX: (540) 231-7845
	jbhirt@vt.edu

Purpose of the research:

This study was designed to examine students with mental health challenges and how they experience the transition from high school to college. Additionally, the study sought to understand how these experiences are influenced by campus environment. First-year, traditional age students with a diagnosed psychiatric disorder will be interviewed.

Procedures:

You have identified yourself as someone who may be interested in participating in this study. If so, you will participate in one 60-90 minute interview that will take place on your campus. You will be able to choose from several campus locations that are convenient for you. If you agree, your interview will be digitally recorded and transcribed so I am sure I accurately interpret your information.

Risk:

There are minimal risks involved with participating in this study. Given the nature of the topic, it is possible that the questions may create some discomfort. Your interview is being held in close proximity to one of the following offices; the counseling center, services for students with disabilities, or the dean of

students. If at the end of the interview you would like to speak to a professional, I can take you to someone that you can talk with. I will also provide you with information about the counseling services available at your institution. If you must seek medical or counseling services as a result of your participation in this study, however, neither the investigators nor the University have funds to pay for such services.

Benefits:

As a participant, you may benefit only indirectly from this study. You may gain insight into your college transition experience. No promise or guarantee of benefits has been made to encourage you to participate. The findings of this study will provide information to other researchers and college administrators about students with mental health problems. This information may improve services provided to such students. You may contact the investigator at a later time for a summary of the research results.

Extent of Anonymity and Confidentiality:

To maintain anonymity, you will be identified by a pseudonym that you select. Your identity will not be divulged to anyone. At no time will I release the results of the study to anyone other than individuals working on the project without your written consent. Only I and my faculty advisor will have access to the data. All forms, printed transcripts and digital voice files (on a flash drive) will be locked in a file cabinet in my home. It is possible that the Institutional Review Board at Virginia Tech may view the data for auditing purposes. The IRB is responsible for the oversight of the protection of human subjects involved in research. The data will be destroyed one year after the study is completed.

Compensation:

You will receive $10 paid in cash at the end of the interview.

Freedom to Withdraw:

You are free to withdraw from this study at any time without penalty. You will be compensated if you participate in any portion of the interview. You are free not to answer any questions without penalty.

Subject's Responsibilities:

I voluntarily agree to participate in this study. I have the following responsibilities:

- To participate in one 60-90 minute interview
- To review the transcript from my interview to ensure that it accurately reflects what I said during the interview.

Subject's Permission

I have read the Informed Consent Form and the conditions of this study. I have had all my questions answered. I hereby acknowledge the above and give my voluntary consent:

_____

Participant's Signature   Date   University

Should I have any pertinent questions about this research or its conduct, and research subjects' rights, I may contact:

Martha Glass   Dr. Joan Hirt (faculty advisor)   Dr. David Moore, VT IRB Chair

(717) 682-5871   (540) 231-9700   (540) 231-4991

mglass@vt.edu   jbhirt@vt.edu   moored@vt.edu

APPRENDIX E

Interview Protocol

Name: _____   Pseudonym: _____Date/time:_____

Campus:_____

Script:

Thank you for meeting with me today. As I explained on the phone, the purpose of this study is to understand and describe how students with a psychiatric diagnosis experience the transition to college. This research is part of the requirements for my doctorate.

I sent you the informed consent by email and we can review that and I will answer any questions you have. Once you sign the form we will begin the interview. [Review informed consent]

1. Please tell me a little about yourself?
2. How did you make the decision to attend (name of institution)?
3. What was it like leaving high school and coming to college? (individual)

    How did you cope with this? How did you feel about it?

4. Tell me about your first few days on campus?

    How did you cope with this? How did you feel about it?

5. What expectations did you have about the social life and academics at (name the institution)? What is it really like? (individual)

    How did you cope with this? How did you feel about it?

6. What's been your greatest challenge since starting college? (individual)

    How did you cope with this? How did you feel about it?

7. Since entering college, what has been your greatest success? (individual)

    How did you cope with this? How did you feel about it?

8. What has been your best relationship since starting college? Which one is most challenging? (individual/environment)

    How did you cope with this? How did you feel about it?

9. Thinking about your academic life here at (name of institution), what aspects are most challenging? What aspects are most supportive? (environment)

How did you cope with this? How did you feel about it?

10. Thinking about your social life here at <u>(name of institution)</u>, what aspects are most challenging? What aspects are most supportive? (environment)

    How did you cope with this? How did you feel about this?

11. Thinking back to what those first few days of college were like, what is a typical day like for you now?

12. What is the single most memorable experience you have about transitioning to college?

Script:

Thank you for participating in this study. As I explained at the start of the interview, I will send you a transcript of your interview and ask that you review it and send any changes back to me by email. I know some of the things we talked about may have brought up some uncomfortable feelings. Would you be interested in speaking with a professional at this time? [If participant wants to meet with a staff member, I will escort him/her to the appropriate person]. Okay, I want to give you contact information for your campus counseling center so if you decide later that you want to speak with someone you will know who to contact. Thank you for your time.

APPENDIX F

IRB Approvals

Dear Ms. Glass,

Your *College Transition Experiences of Students with Mental Health Challenges* study was approved by the Institutional Review Board at [Small College] on 08/01/2009, and you are now cleared to collect your data**.** Your IRB approval number (**IRB-2008-36**) is valid for one year. Should you wish to collect data after this date OR if you make changes to your research design or data collection practices, you are required to resubmit a revised proposal for review.

Principal investigators, project staff conducting the informed consent process, and all others engaged in human subjects research must complete the web-based training at: http://phrp.nihtraining.com/users/login.php. Proof of completion of such training must be provided in writing to the IRB committee before any work on the project commences. In addition to this initial certification, recertification is required every three years.

I also attach a copy of your proposal with comments inserted (in ***bold italics***) by one of the IRB members. I strongly urge you give these comments your most serious consideration.

Please let me know if you have any additional questions.

Sincerely,

[name deleted]

VirginiaTech

DATE: December 16, 2008

MEMORANDUM

TO: Joan B. Hirt
            Martha Glass

            Approval date: 12/16/2008
            Continuing Review Due Date:12/1/2009
            Expiration Date: 12/15/2009

FROM: David M. Moore

SUBJECT: **IRB Expedited Approval:** "College Transition Experiences of Students with Mental Health Challenges" , IRB # 08-764

This memo is regarding the above-mentioned protocol. The proposed research is eligible for expedited review according to the specifications authorized by 45 CFR 46.110 and 21 CFR 56.110. As Chair of the Virginia Tech Institutional Review Board, I have granted approval to the study for a period of 12 months, effective December 16, 2008.

As an investigator of human subjects, your responsibilities include the following:

1. Report promptly proposed changes in previously approved human subject research activities to the IRB, including changes to your study forms, procedures and investigators, regardless of how minor. The proposed changes must not be initiated without IRB review and approval, except where necessary to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to the subjects.
2. Report promptly to the IRB any injuries or other unanticipated or adverse events involving risks or harms to human research subjects or others.
3. Report promptly to the IRB of the study's closing (i.e., data collecting and data analysis complete at Virginia Tech). If the study is to continue past the expiration date (listed above), investigators must submit a request for continuing review prior to the continuing review due date (listed above). It is the researcher's responsibility to obtain re-approval from the IRB before the study's expiration date.
4. If re-approval is not obtained (unless the study has been reported to the IRB as closed) prior to the expiration date, all activities involving human subjects and data analysis must cease immediately, except where necessary to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to the subjects.

<u>Important:</u>
If you are conducting **federally funded non-exempt research**, please send the applicable OSP/grant proposal to the IRB office, once available. OSP funds may not be released until the IRB has compared and found consistent the proposal and related IRB applicaton.

cc: File

Invent the Future

APPENDIX G

Participant Check Email

320 East Eggleston Hall (0302)

Virginia Tech

Blacksburg, VA 24061

[date]

Dear _____,

Thank you for your recent participation in the interview related to your transition from high school to college. Attached for your review is your interview transcript. Please check to be sure that the transcript accurately reflects your thoughts on the topic. If you have any additions, deletions, or clarifications, please make those on the attached transcript and send it back to me within the next 7 days. If I do not hear from you by then, I will assume that you have no changes to make and that the attached accurately represents your comments. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me. Thank you for your assistance with my study.

Sincerely,

Martha Glass

mglass@vt.edu

(717) 682-5871