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“CAN I REALLY DO THIS?”: UNDERSTANDING THE EXPERIENCES AND CHOICE TO  
PERSIST OF UNDERREPRESENTED CONDITIONALLY ADMITTED FIRST-YEAR  
COLLEGE STUDENTS

A Manuscript Style Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Education Student Affairs Administration and  
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FIRST-YEAR COLLEGE STUDENTS

By Sophia A. Engelman

We recommend acceptance of this dissertation in partial fulfillment of the candidate's requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education Student Affairs Administration and Leadership.

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## ABSTRACT

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Research lacks insight into how the transition to college affects conditionally admitted college students and what may influence their stress levels, academic performance, or persistence rates. The purpose of this phenomenological study with nine conditionally admitted students to a Midwestern small private Christian university was to explore and understand the lived experiences of college students who are conditionally admitted to their institution and how this status may influence their perceptions of their success. Specifically, this study focused on first-generation, low socioeconomic (SES), and Black, Indigenous, students of color who represent a disproportionately high percentage of conditionally admitted students across the country (Heaney & Fisher, 2014). The essence of conditional admission was summarized into five components e.g., skill building, confusion with admission status, stressors influencing transition, and relationship building. Connecting the discussion to empirical and theoretical literature, this research suggests providing clear and consistent communication about the conditional admission status may minimize CA students' confusion and stress levels, focus on out-of-classroom validation is critical for creating inclusive limits, and early and positive rhetoric related to conditional admission can increase positively related to this status.

## DEDICATION

To my daughter, Bergen, and my husband Ryan, for your unwavering love and support.

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To the participants, thank you. Our conversations were not always easy, and you were vulnerable and open with me. To this group, I am eternally grateful for your time, energy, and trust. I hope that I have represented you authentically and accurately by sharing how your experiences, perceptions, and beliefs shaped your idea of self and of your understanding of your conditional admission.

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## **CHAPTER I**

### **INTRODUCTION**

The National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education (2010) reported that 60% of first-time college students are inadequately prepared for postsecondary courses. In 2017, the Hechinger Report concluded that 96% of first-time college students enrolled in higher education courses required remediation courses out of 911 colleges in 44 different states (Butrymowicz, 2017). According to the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education (2010), 60 % of first-year college students need remedial courses in English, math, or both. Rates of remedial education enrollment are higher for Black, Indigenous, and students of color and low-income students. 56% of African American students, 45% of Latinx students enrolled in remedial courses, then 35% of white students (Complete College America, 2016). Of the students who took the SAT to enroll in college in 2013, just 43% proved ready for the academic rigor, and the ACT reported that only 39% of their clients attained three or more of the college-readiness benchmarks (Culp, 2019). Nearly a third failed to attain any readiness benchmarks (Culp, 2019). Many of these students were admitted to their college or university as conditionally admitted (CA) college students.

Not meeting an institutional benchmark of a standardized test score or high school GPA can result in college students being admitted conditionally at the beginning of their collegiate career (Heaney & Fisher, 2011; Mapes, 2011; Wildman, 2016). Conditionally

Admitted (CA) students have a set amount of time to meet the academic standard at their institution to remain enrolled. Institutions set their expectations concerning conditional admission policies, as there is no federal mandate, cross-institutional best practices, or other guiding documents to ensure program consistency. Therefore, specific expectations of students to remain enrolled vary and may include participating in specific classes, meeting with an advisor, attending tutoring, or nothing at all (Wildman, 2016). Even with the lack of consistency in higher education, conditional admission can be highly effective in expanding college access at four-year institutions, assisting in institutional persistence initiatives, and providing academic support for academically underprepared students (Laden et al., 1999; Clinedinst & Nichols, 2013). Additionally, conditional admission policies and programs assist in persistence from first to second-year students who may otherwise not continue in higher education without support (Laden et al., 1999; Clinedinst & Nichols, 2013).

Students and institutions alike benefit from conditional admission programs, but the potential stress associated with strict academic expectations may negatively influence student persistence. In 2019, 34% of all undergraduate college students were affected academically by their stress levels (ACHA, 2019). First-year students experience higher levels of ongoing and chronic stress, which can result in the development of poor coping strategies, unhealthy relationships, deteriorating academics, mental health concerns, excessive drinking, and poor sleeping habits (Astin et al., 2011; Cicchetti et al., 2004; Cohen & Towbes, 1996; McKean & Mirsra, 2000).

A disproportionately high percentage of conditionally admitted students across the country identify as a first-generation college student, Black, Indigenous, and students

of color, or as persons from low socioeconomic backgrounds (Boylan & Saxon, 1999; DeVilbiss, 2014; Heaney & Fisher, 2014; Hrabowski III & Henderson, 2017). These three student demographics tend to hold systemic inequities in higher education. Hispanic, Black, White, and Asian students have increased the rate of high school diploma attainment, yet the gap in attaining bachelor's degrees has widened for Black and Hispanics compared to White adults (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). Only 59% of students seeking a bachelor's degree at a four-year degree-granting institution completed their degree in six years (NCES, 2012). Low-SES students are less likely to attend college compared to their peers, and when they do enroll, they tend to matriculate to less selective institutions (Astin, 1975; Tinto 1987; Walpole, 2003). Low-SES students also tend to receive insufficient attention from policymakers to make structural changes in their favor because of the "lack of group identity and political mobilization" which hinders their social mobility" (Walpole, 2003).

First-generation college students are less likely to attend college than high school graduates whose parents have a bachelor's degree (Bennett et al., 2018). Students whose parents never attended college enrolled in postsecondary education at 72% compared to 93% of peers whose parents earned a bachelor's degree (Bennett et al., 2018). For first-generation college students who did enroll, 33% left without completing the requirements for a degree compared to 14% of parents who earned a bachelor's degree (Bennett et al., 2018). Research shows that student persistence rates are considerably lower for historically underserved student populations such as first-generation, low SES, and Black, Indigenous, and students of color (Collier & Morgan, 2008; Kuh et al., 2008; NSC, 2019). Further, failure to graduate or prolonged time to degree attainment can

burden students financially via the cost of tuition and related educational expenses (Shulock & Koester, 2014). These student populations also experience more stress compared to their peers who do not hold underserved identities or who are not CA students (Contrada et al., 2001; John-Henderson et al., 2013). Even with this knowledge, survey the literature found no research focusing specifically on CA student experiences related to a potential stressor or the choice to persist in higher education.

### **Purpose of Study**

This phenomenological inquiry aims to understand the experiences of CA first-year students at a small, private, Christian-affiliated university. For this study, CA students are defined as students who are accepted into institutions of higher education when they do not meet the specified GPA, the benchmark of a standardized test score set by an institution, or both (Heaney & Fisher, 2011; Mapes, 2011; Wildman, 2016). This study aims to understand how conditionally admitted students' transition to college shapes their response to stress and choice to persist from their first to the second year. It is particularly important to look at CA students qualitatively because the potential stress associated with their experiences combined with the feelings or expectations related to their transition to a college environment may influence a student's choice to persist. This study will assist college administrators, faculty, and staff in understanding and appropriately providing support for CA students to aid in their success.

### **Research Questions**

I designed this study to answer the following questions: How do conditionally admitted students describe their experiences at SCU, a small, private Christian institution? What do they say about how their transition to college shapes their

experiences with college environment stressors (e.g., GPA requirements, living in the residence halls, adjusting to a new environment)? Lastly, how do they perceive how the institution student support systems (e.g., advising, instruction, counseling), educational interventions (curricular and co-curricular initiatives), or their relationships with others on campus (e.g., faculty, staff, peers) influence their persistence from the first to the second year of college?

### **Research Approach**

In this dissertation study, I will use a qualitative research approach. Studying conditionally admitted students from a qualitative perspective will allow me to explore, understand, and report how the participants view and experience the conditional admitted program at the research site, South City University (SCU). For the privacy of the participants engaged in this study, the site of this study will use the pseudonym South City University (SCU). In addition, all identifying information has been altered using pseudonyms. A qualitative study is necessary to present a more complete view of how conditional admission relates to a student's transition to college and subsequent stressors.

Phenomenology will serve as the study's methodology. Phenomenology allows researchers to understand the lived experience of the participants through exploring individual's life stories (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Although conditionally admitted students had been participants of qualitative studies (Adebayo, 2008; Cook, 2009; DeVilbiss, 2014; Hornberger, 2010; Logan, 2017; Parisi, 2012; Vultaggio, 2009; Wildman, 2016), few explored the phenomenon of being a conditionally admitted student and no study to date has been published on associated stressors related to conditional admission. Therefore, phenomenology is an appropriate methodology of study to

understand the experience of being a CA college student at a small, private, Christian, liberal arts institution in the Midwest. There is also a need for ongoing qualitative research of conditional admission research to grow the body of literature related to the experience of CA college students.

### **Rationale and Significance**

Students accepted into conditional admission programs are addressed in the literature, typically in quantitative studies focused on academic success and retention or persistence (Adebayo, 2008; Heaney & Fischer, 2011). Few qualitative studies have looked at conditional admission, and those that have tend to be dissertations. Wildman (2016) studied the experiences of CA students through a specific evaluation of the Alpha Program, DeVilbiss (2014) focused on the transition from high school to college within the context of conditional admission, and Clark (2009) narrowed their search by exploring CA student experiences in a specific communications course. These studies reviewed specific aspects of conditional admission, the student transition, or the student experience.

Researchers have found as a student matriculates, there are steady declines in stress levels across the four years of one's college experience (Bryant et al., 2014). However, research lacks insight into how this transition affects CA students, specifically though they have a similar experience at higher stakes. After surveying the literature, I have found no designated studies focusing on varying student identities CA students possess and how these aspects influence their stress levels, academic performance, or persistence rates. These student identities include Black, Indigenous, and students of color, low SES, and first-generation students. Further, it is crucial to understand how

stress affects first-year conditionally admitted students to mediate the potential influence on maladaptive behavior and their persistence. In addition, small, private, Christian, liberal arts colleges have not been the focus of a study, nor have student stress related to CA status and transition.

### **Researcher Positionality**

The philosophy of phenomenology attempts to understand the "lived experience" or the essence of a phenomenon, which is commonly experienced (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The experience or essence of being a CA student in higher education is the basis of this study. As the researcher, my own thoughts and biases about conditional admission need to be disclosed to minimize limitations and increase the trustworthiness of this study.

In the summer of 2018, I became an Administrative Faculty member who oversees the conditional admission program at my home institution. As I learn and reflect as an outsider, I have the opportunity to celebrate my students' successes and feel humbled by the barriers they experience at my institution as a conditional admit. When students feel embarrassed, unworthy, or irritated by their admissions status, I see that affect their studies and their self-confidence as a student and their overall wellness. I also feel disheartened when students were not prepared for academic rigor, fail classes with or without making an earnest attempt, and accrue debt while teetering the line of academic dismissal from the institution.

While I was accepted to my undergraduate institution without a conditional status, my status to my master's program was under conditional admission. The academic rigor at my undergraduate institution pushed me significantly, and I became aware that many

of my peers knew what they wanted to do and how to get there through the academic system of my institution. The main draw to the institution for me was to remain a student-athlete and figure the rest out when I arrived. I realized quickly that I did not know how to manage my time appropriately, how to study in a way that matched my learning preferences, and the social adjustment to a new place while being in the middle of an athletic season proved difficult. These various experiences led me to have a mediocre GPA to access an advanced degree by a narrow margin. Internally, I was fearful that I was not good enough, smart enough, or worthy to be in the program. I can deeply relate to these internal and external feelings CA students may experience and have expressed to me in my current role at my home institution.

In other ways, I am very different from my students. I come from a middle-class family where my parents were able to contribute to my college education financially. All of my parents, mother, father, and stepmother attended college, and it was an expectation that attending college would be my next step after high school. Throughout my four years in high school, I took 12 college credits and received my CNA license before graduation. I worked throughout high school but for personal financial gains rather than supporting my family financially. My high school prepared me to be admitted into a selective, private liberal arts college, and I was awarded merit-based and music scholarships. CA students at SCU do not typically have this kind of pre-college support.

As a researcher, I hold both insider and outsider status in respect to CA students. I am an insider as I work with the conditional admission program as the lead support faculty member and program administrator. I am the person who celebrates the victories and sits in the discomfort of lapses with the students. Together with my students, we

evaluate one another, look to see what support is most helpful, and attempt to adjust my support to create a thriving environment for the students. This likely allows some of the students to feel comfortable talking with me because I understand their specific conditional admission program and policies. However, I am an outsider because I did not attend the undergraduate institution these students are attending and was regularly admitted as an undergraduate. I also hold many privileged identities as a White, cisgender, femme woman who is heterosexual, middle-class, and a doctoral student who oversees the conditional admission program. These and other aspects of my identity imply power dynamics that can create distance between the participants and me.

### **Definition of Key Terms**

I need to define several key terms I regularly use in this dissertation study. The following definitions are provided with the intent to supply a shared understanding and knowledge of the terms to the context of this study.

*American College Testing (ACT)*. The ACT is a national, standardized test used by many colleges and universities as a part of their academic admission requirements and decision process (Hornberger, 2010). The results of the exam contain four sub-scores of English, math, reading, and science, along with one overarching composite score.

*Conditional admit (CA)*. A conditional admit is a first-time college student who did not meet the admission requirements at South City University and is admitted as an exception to the general admission policy.

*CA I*. CA 1 are students who need minimal assistance within the transition to the institution based on the academic profile presented prior to enrollment. Typically, the conditional admit presents a lower than average ACT score and above average GPA. This

results in the student being placed in the course GE 100 or Academic enrichment seminar.

*CA 2.* CA 2 concerns students who are deemed through the admissions committee to need additional assistance within the transition to the institution based on the academic profile presented. Typically, the conditional admit presents a lower than average GPA and ACT score. This results in the student being placed in the course GE 101 or Academic Enrichment course I.

*Ethnicity.* The U.S. Department of Education (2010) has created standards for reporting ethnicity as self-selection between seven categories of Nonresident aliens (for whom neither race nor ethnicity is reported including Hispanic/Latino of any race, American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian, Black or African American, Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, White, and Two or More Races.

*Geographic origin location.* The applicant or student's home address is submitted within the application for admission.

*Grade point average (GPA).* A GPA is calculated in secondary and postsecondary education by dividing the total points by the total hours attempted. The total points are equal to the institution's course grade conversion points multiplied by the course hours attempted. Typically, the GPA is reviewed on a scale of 0.0 to 4.0 where the latter is high achieving grades in the courses attempted.

*Sex.* A student's biological identification of male, female, or intersex is traditionally assigned at birth based on the external appearance of genitalia. Gender refers to the attitudes, feelings, and behaviors that culture associates with a person's biological sex (American Psychological Association, 2019).

## **CHAPTER II**

### **REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

The purpose of this literature review is to examine the research regarding conditional admission programs in higher education. A review of enrollment history in higher education and current models of conditional admission programs allows the reader to understand the context from which conditional admission programs emerged. The literature review identifies key themes about how CA student identities and stress may influence persistence. The review also looks at theoretical frameworks that support the success of CA students in higher education.

CA students are accepted into institutions of higher education when they do not meet the specified GPA, the benchmark of a standardized test score set by an institution, or both (Heaney & Fisher, 2011; Mapes, 2011; Wildman, 2016). Typically, CA students have a specific amount of time to meet the academic standard at the institution of enrollment to remain enrolled. Institutions can set their own policy expectations concerning conditional admission, as there is no federal mandate, cross-institutional best practices, or other guiding documents to ensure program consistency in the protocol. Therefore, specific expectations of students to remain enrolled vary and may include participating in specific classes, meeting with an advisor, attending tutoring, or nothing at all (Wildman, 2016). Even with the lack of consistency varying at institutions, conditional admission can be highly effective in expanding college access at four-year institutions, assisting in institutional persistence and retention initiatives, and providing

academic support for underprepared students (Laden et al., 1999; Clinedinst & Nichols, 2013). Additionally, conditional admission policies and programs may assist in persistence to the second year of academically underprepared students at equal rates as their peers (Clinedinst & Nichols, 2013).

While students and institutions may benefit from conditional admission programs (Clinedinst & Nichols, 2013), the potential stress associated with strict academic expectations may negatively influence student persistence. A disproportionately high percentage of CA students across the country identify as first-generation college students, Black, Indigenous, and students of color, or as persons from low socioeconomic backgrounds (Boylan & Saxon, 1999; DeVilbiss, 2014; Heaney & Fisher, 2014; Hrabowski III & Henderson, 2017). Research shows that student persistence rates are considerably lower for these historically underserved student populations (Collier & Morgan, 2008; Kuh et al., 2008; NSC, 2019). These student populations also experience more stress compared to their peers (Contrada et al., 2001; John-Henderson et al., 2013) even without the label of conditional admit. At the time of this study, the research does not focus specifically on CA students and how the experience may ignite stress or other factors which may influence the choice to persist in higher education.

### **Organization of the Chapter**

This chapter examines literature relevant to conditional admission policies and programs, factors of college student stress, and student persistence. Additional research results related to first-generation, academically underprepared, or termed at-risk college student populations are included as they often overlap with a student's conditional admission status. This chapter begins with a brief overview of college admissions

practices and a critique of standardized testing in higher education. Next, an in-depth overview of conditional admission programs and policies provides context for the reader before reviewing college student stress and persistence. Finally, a summary of student development theories related to conditional admission, first-year student transition, and persistence concludes the chapter.

### **History**

Standardized tests and GPAs are two common forms of prerequisites for admissions consideration at most higher education institutions. However, this has not historically been the case. During recruitment for World War I, Carl Brigham developed the Army Alpha (IQ) Test to separate potential soldiers with higher aptitudes as military leaders and personnel with lower aptitudes toward the battlefield (Berger, 2012). After World War I, Brigham was hired to modify his Army Alpha Test into a similar style IQ test for college admissions as an influx of veterans entered or reentered higher education (Perez, 2002). In 1926, the adjusted Army Alpha IQ test was the first version of the College Admissions Standardized test, otherwise known as the SAT (Atkinson, 2002). The decision to include standardized testing within the admissions process reflected an attempt to change a more rigid social-class hierarchy within higher education with an academic merit-based system (Sternberg, 2015). The social class system created deep divides between the students who were allowed to attend college and those who were not (Atkinson, 2002). Adding the SAT to admissions requirements attempted to create a new system in which institutions selected prospective students on their academic abilities rather than their social class (Sternberg, 2015).

While the SAT was set in place to identify academic merit, many academically underprepared veterans applied for enrollment at varying institutions as some veterans did not complete their high school education. As a response, programs of support began to appear around the country. The first conditional or special admission programs were designed for students who did not complete high school and could only enroll if they showed academic promise in non-credit courses (Lincoln, 1959). By passing the non-credit courses, it was assumed that students showed their ability to matriculate as regular students despite being away from an academic environment and potentially not completing their high school degree (Lincoln, 1959).

In the 1960s, the admissions screening process changed from solely merit-based assessment to request additional information on the applicant's character, emotional stability, and leadership participation (Beale, 2012). In the late 1970s, non-academic and non-cognitive considerations were included in the admissions process. Tinto's (1975) model of student persistence this move after publishing the model of student persistence, which showed that non-academic considerations influenced a student's integration into university communities. Cognitive variables, such as high school grades and standardized test scores, remained a priority in college admissions. The role of standardized tests, including the SAT and American College Test (ACT), continued as a focal point in the admissions process based on academic merit, efficiency, and the hope of predicting first-year grades for middle- and upper-class White males (Sedlacek, 1996). Even with many updates to the ACT and SAT during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the tests have not increased the predictive validity of student success (Bettinger et al., 2013).

The problem with using ACT and SAT test scores as an important part of college admissions is that standardized tests do not create equal access to college admissions (Sternberg, 2012). Students who receive better educational opportunities tend to do better on standardized tests that measure academic competency. Many factors, including the use of test coaches, gender, socioeconomic status (SES), racial status, and stress, can impact test scores (Bell, 2017). One study by Colgren and Sappington (2015) surveyed 145,560 Illinois high school students to evaluate the role of socioeconomic status on academic performance, showed that low-income students were statistically underrepresented in Advanced Placement courses. Students from low SES backgrounds were not “receiving equitable opportunities to participate in rigorous courses” (Colgren & Sappington, 2015, p. 29), which in turn negatively affected their standardized test scores compared to students in more rigorous classes.

When attempting to predict rates of college GPAs, reviewing high school GPAs and standardized test scores only show modest prediction rates (Daugherty & Lane, 1999; DeBerard et al., 2004; Green & Kimbrough, 2008; Wolfe & Johnson, 1995). Many researchers have begun recommending a more significant focus on non-cognitive measures to predict academic success (Mattson, 2007; Noonan et al., 2005; Sparkman, Maulding, & Robers, 2012, Sedlacek & Sheu, 2013). Non-cognitive attributes worth considering include creativity, wisdom, self-concept, a positive support system, long-term goal achievement, or community involvement. According to Sedlacek (1996), standardized tests such as the ACT and SAT were not designed to correlate with grades beyond a student’s first year in college, let alone persistence to graduation. However, ACT and SAT scores are significant components of accepting students into higher

education institutions on traditional or conditional admission status. Colleges and universities have attempted to mediate this gap by implementing conditional admission programs for students who do not meet the academic standards for admission. The following section will explore this style of admissions and its varying components.

### **Conditional Admission Programs**

Conditional admission programs and policies can be highly effective in expanding college access at four-year institutions, assisting in institutional persistence and retention initiatives, and providing academic support for underprepared students (Laden et al., 1999; Clinedinst & Nichols, 2013). Clinedinst and Nichols (2013) report that conditional admission programs support students and institutions alike by providing services to assist in student success, retention, and persistence goals. The five main supports identified by the researchers include (a) promoting postsecondary access to four-year institutions, (b) strengthening students' academic skills, (c) developing students' study and time management skills, (d) building students' confidence, and (e) developing relationships between students and their peers and institutional staff and faculty.

Conditionally admitted students do not meet the specified GPA, the benchmark of a standardized test score set by an institution, or both (Adebayo, 2008; Heaney & Fisher, 2011; Mapes, 2011; Mattson, 2007; White & Sedlacek, 1986; Wildman, 2016). Each college and university set their entrance requirements and conditional admission policies since no federal mandate is available for institutions to use as a guideline. As more colleges and universities employ conditional admission policies and procedures without federal regulations, the context of the college environment, potential stressors of being

conditional status, and potential influences on persistence must be examined in order for institutions to provide appropriate support for students toward achieving academic goals.

Conditionally admitted students do not meet the specified GPA, the benchmark of a standardized test score, or both, yet are accepted to start enrollment under specific requirements (Adebayo, 2008; Heaney & Fisher, 2011; Mapes, 2011; Mattson, 2007; White & Sedlacek, 1986; Wildman, 2016). As stated previously, the requirements vary in intensity and scope with no federal mandate. The specific expectations of students may include enrolling in specific classes, meeting with an advisor, attending tutoring, or nothing at all. Even with the lack of consistency in protocol between institutions, conditional admission policies and programs “help academically underprepared students persist to the second year at equal rates to their peers with stronger academic profiles upon enrollment” (Clinedinst & Nichols, 2013, p. 4). According to Clinedinst and Nichols (2013), more than seven out of ten students considered academically underprepared in these programs complete the first academic year. The following section reviews common types of support services regularly seen by conditional admission programs.

### **Conditional Admission Models**

Clinedinst and Nichols (2013) performed site visits, which detected three distinct programmatic models commonly seen in higher education to provide academic and transitional support for conditionally admitted students. The models include summer bridge experience, supplemental tutoring, and cohort-based curricular instruction. Each of the three models varies depending on the location, institution type, and capacity of

faculty and staff members. The following three model explanations highlight an institution that uses the model and yields favorable results.

### ***Summer Bridge Experience Model***

The Fayetteville State University CHEER Program is an acronym for Creating Higher Expectations for Educational Readiness, and “at its core, the program is a five-week summer bridge program that includes courses in math and English, academic support services, and programs that promote personal development” (Clinedinst & Nichols, 2013, p. 19). After the first five weeks in the program in June and July, the institution expects students to earn a C grade or higher to be unconditionally admitted into the university. CHEER is free of cost to the incoming students. The university pays for all meals, board, and books required for the courses. There is no application for this program, but students are identified through the general application process to the institution. At Fayetteville State University, students who do not meet the admission standard of a 2.4 high school GPA and 800 SAT are sent to an admissions committee to review their file (Clinedinst & Nichols, 2013). After considering the applicant’s admission file and essay, the committee determines whether the student is admitted into the CHEER program. Similar programs to CHEER would include (a) Summer Bridge Program at Andrew College (Andrew College, 2019), (b) Summer Bridge Program at the University of Wisconsin – Milwaukee (University of Wisconsin – Milwaukee, 2019), and (c) Pre-College and Summer Bridge Program at Hampton University (Hampton University, 2019).

### ***Supplemental Tutoring Model***

Winthrop University LEAP Program is going through a restructuring and evaluation process. In years past, students who do not meet Winthrop's entrance requirements may be offered conditional admission to the institution if they agree to participate in the LEAP Program. Once accepted to the LEAP Program, students are expected to meet the minimum academic requirements of a 2.0 GPA before earning 24 credit hours and participate in all LEAP requirements. Participating successfully in LEAP's requirements consists of six components. First, all LEAP students must attend either Orientation Session I, Orientation Session II, or Orientation Session III. At the Orientation Sessions, the student attends an academic advising session, a meeting with the LEAP Director, and is introduced to LEAP faculty during these sessions. Second, each student participates in the Early Launch, a component of LEAP designed to assist students in preparing for the rigors of university work. Third, each student enrolls in and completes one of the designated sections of the course ACAD 101: Principles of the Learning Academy. Fourth, students are expected to attend all classes and all required LEAP study sessions. Fifth, each student must complete a minimum of 24 hours of credits in their first year at Winthrop University. Each student is expected to register for no less than 12 credits per semester, and a student may not drop a course without permission from the LEAP Director.

Students who attain a GPA of 3.0 or higher in the fall semester are considered for exemption from participation in LEAP study sessions and other LEAP activities in the spring semester. Exemption from spring LEAP activities for students achieving a 3.0 GPA or higher in the fall semester is at the discretion of the LEAP Director. Students

offered exemption may attend study sessions and other LEAP activities if they so choose. Exempt students with spring mid-semester grades indicating a decline in academic performance will be required to return to the evening LEAP study sessions (Winthrop University, 2018). Concluding the spring semester, the LEAP Director and the Dean of University College reviews each student's "academic performance, and their participation in LEAP in consultation with the Associate Vice President for Admissions Operations... [to] make the decision on whether a student should be fully admitted to Winthrop University" (Winthrop University, 2018). Similar programs to LEAP would include Inspire Success at Western Carolina University (Davis & Hensley, 2016), Eagle Success Program at Morehead State University (Morehead State University, 2019), and Marshall University Provisional Admission (Marshall University, 2019).

### ***Cohort-Based Curricular Instruction Model***

Pine Manor College is one example of a cohort-based curricular instruction model with their Enhanced Foundation Program (EFP). The EFP is a conditional admission program that provides intensive English instruction in a one-year cohort model primarily tailored toward domestic, first-generation, non-native English speakers (Clinedinst & Nichols, 2013). Participants cannot apply to the program but are identified as potential program participants through the general admission process. The admission counselors initiate admission to the EFP through a comprehensive evaluation of the applicant's standardized test scores, high school GPA, a writing sample, letters of recommendation, an in-person interview, and a writing assessment exam (Clinedinst & Nichols, 2013).

Once admitted into the EFP, the students join a cohort of around 30 students for their first academic year and are expected to complete the three components of the

program to maintain enrollment at Pine Manor. First, students engage in advising and mentoring by the director throughout their time in the program. Second, students enroll in four limited credits in the first semester and have requirements for completion. The credits include two courses focused on increasing English proficiency in writing and reading and one first-year seminar, and one elective course. Reading in the Disciplines is the reading course required which assists students in developing reading comprehension and critical thinking skills through the composition of short stories and essays.

Introduction to Academic Writing is the required writing course, which focuses on improving the students' grammar and technical writing skills. This course also includes a writing lab. Third, students complete a paper-based English proficiency assessment at the end of the first semester and score over 500 to move out of the EFP program in order to participate in Pine Manor curriculum. Students who do not meet this score continue in the EFP writing and reading curriculum in the second semester. Most students do need the second semester within the program to increase their skills to a proficient level.

Concluding the second semester, students may retake the assessment to achieve a 500 score on the test. Rarely, students do not meet this score after the second semester and are encouraged to complete an intensive summer course to stay at Pine Manor College for their second academic year. The student within the program has a retention rate of 85% for the first-to-second year (Clinedinst & Nichols, 2013). Similar programs to EFP include Conditional Undergraduate Admission at University of Nebraska Omaha (2019), Conditional Admission to The University of New Mexico (University of New Mexico, 2019), Undergraduate Admission to Ball State University (Ball State University,

2019), and University of Minnesota Conditional Admission (University of Minnesota, 2019).

### **Program Components**

Conditionally admitted students could feel less confident in their ability to succeed in an academic setting due to the tentative nature of the college acceptance status (Heaney & Fisher, 2011). All three of the conditional admission models listed previously focus on first-year college students, use similar interventions, and encompass components to create a unique atmosphere for students to be successful. Most programs use a number of the following interventions to support conditionally admitted students, which The Pell Institute, in conjunction with Clinedinst and Nichols (2013), recommend providing ongoing and adequate support for students. The interventions include academic support, outlined policies, and procedures, involved faculty and staff, student connection, and monitor performance.

### ***Academic Support***

Admitting students conditionally in conjunction with mandatory participation in academic support services provide experiences where students can thrive. Support services may include academic advising, tutoring, specific curriculum, or other interventions (Stewart & Heaney, 2013). Admitting students without providing proper support services counteracts the goal of providing an equal educational opportunity. Institutions, specifically private schools where the cost of attendance could leave unsuccessful students in financial distress, must be aware of whom they choose to admit (Clinedinst & Nichols, 2013) provisionally. With no guidelines on how to admit conditional students, institutions have a responsibility to the students they admit to accept

their enrollment and money and ensure that the institution does everything in their ability to provide an environment where the student can be successful and persist in higher education. Admission and student support personnel must candidly assess applicants they can serve, both adequately and ethically, based on the existing support structures.

### ***Outlined Policies and Requirements***

While the three models are vastly different, a consistent theme of stating outlined policies and requirements for students who have been conditionally enrolled clearly and concisely is vital. Clinedinst and Nichols (2013) found that most students in their qualitative study did not fully understand the terms of their admissions, were confused after reading their admission letters, or did not thoroughly read the terms of their admission letters. In return, the students were confused about the requirements once they arrived on campus. This gap is not unique to this study as the literature shows that misunderstanding admissions expectations can lead to students signing formal admission contracts or paying deposits without fully understanding what is expected of them upon arrival (Adebayo, 2008; Parisi, 2012; Wildman, 2016). Specific contents to admissions or program contracts vary by institution but can include course requirements, GPA needed to remain enrolled in the institution, housing requirements, and connection with parents if necessary (Parisi, 2012; Wildman, 2016). In cases where contracts are used, students are expected to find and understand the information without additional guidance, perpetuating the confusion for students misunderstanding their admission into the institution. Therefore, providing both in-person communication and traditional admissions acceptance information is critical for students to understand their enrollment terms fully.

### ***Involve Staff and Faculty***

Several studies show there are numerous academic and transitional benefits of summer bridge programs, and they cannot be implemented solely and without continual academic follow-up (Sablan & Tierney, 2015; Wachen et al., 2016; Wathington et al., 2016). Implementing a summer bridge program is one model when faculty and staff are included within the transition process for incoming first-year students. Other conditional admission programs provide personal contact with students before their arrival on campus and throughout their time in the program to some varying degree. This contact typically involves faculty and staff to create rapport, buy-in to the program, and provide support and encouragement (Clinedinst & Nichols, 2013). Involving faculty early within a provisional admission program development or within the instructional aspects of the conditional admission programs is beneficial for the program to be congruent with the institutional mission and goals (Clinedinst & Nichols, 2013).

### ***Student Connection***

Involving staff and faculty allows for conditional admission programs to belong within a solidified place in the institution. A robust institutional connection shows students that they are cared for, reassures them they will be encouraged when times are difficult, and that the students are an essential part of the campus community (Schreiner et al., 2011). Building on the rapport that comes with strong staff and faculty connection, establishing early contact with students can help them feel more comfortable and eased into their transition to college (Clinedinst & Nichols, 2013). These aspects of support are congruent with research that argues establishing a strong institutional connection and sense of belonging can improve student retention, persistence, and success (Kuh et al.,

2008; O’Keeffe, 2013; Read et al., 2003; Tinto, 1975; Williamson et al., 2014).

Continued support and ongoing contact for conditionally admitted students once they are lifted off an admissions status are important to aid in persistence and retention. Faculty and staff involved with conditional admission support programs warn students may “develop a false sense of self due to their early success and discontinue the use of support services” (Clinedinst & Nichols, 2013, p. 28). Heeding this warning, periodic connection by faculty and staff to remind and encourage the use of academic support services could assist in a positive academic trajectory.

### ***Monitor Performance***

A student’s acceptance by conditional admission does not guarantee a student will struggle academically or transition to the institution. Students who are struggling should be identified as early as possible to provide the most beneficial interventions possible. Laden et al. (1999) recommend that institutions should track conditionally admitted students' academic performance to intervene early. Potential options for student monitoring could include frequent connections with academic advisors, using an automated early-alert system, manual progress reports from faculty, peer mentoring, or an in-person early-alert team that focuses on academic performance (Clinedinst & Nichols, 2013).

### ***Students Served***

Institutions of higher education are as unique as the students they serve. Conditional admission programs are no different. Depending on the institution, an admissions staffs look for specific student attribute or characteristics for conditional admission including first-generation status or students coming from a low-income family

(Mapes, 2011; Roszkowski & Goetz, 2009; Wildman, 2016), athletes with specific academic interest (Hornberger, 2010; Mapes, 2011; Mattson, 2007; Wildman, 2016), or students with “diverse backgrounds or unique perspectives” (Mattson, 2007, p. 11). Programs tend to enroll more male, low-income, minority, and first-generation status students than the student body at large (Heaney & Fisher, 2011; Wildman, 2016).

Given the common CA student characteristics, conditional admission can expand access for historically underserved student populations (Heaney & Fischer, 2011). Additionally, these types of programs provide ongoing support through a student’s college career by actively breaking down barriers impeding the opportunity of education (Heaney & Fischer, 2011). A disproportionately high percentage of conditionally admitted students across the country identify as minoritized students or as persons from low socioeconomic backgrounds (Boylan & Saxon, 1999; DeVilbiss, 2014; Heaney & Fisher, 2014; Hrabowski III & Henderson, 2017). The focus of increasing students' persistence and retention rates is important to institutions and for increasing access to higher education. The following section will take a closer look at the persistence of college students and specifically conditionally admitted college students.

### **Persistence**

College student persistence and retention is a continual topic of conversation in higher education as significant amounts of literature focus on student characteristics and the relationship to indicators of college persistence (Attewell et al., 2011; Cook, 2009; Vanderberg, 2008). The best predictor of retention and graduation at four-year institutions is academic preparation before starting collegiate work (Attewell et al., 2011; Vanderberg, 2008). Ethnicity, gender, race, and SES have also been associated with

specific academic outcomes in some studies (Attewell et al., 2011; Vanderberg, 2008). According to the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (NSC) (2019), 73.8 percent of first-time college students persisted at any U.S. institution in the fall of 2008, while 61.7 percent were retained at their initial institution. An average of one in eight college students who began college in any fall term in the past nine years transferred to a different institution by the following fall (NSC, 2019). However, a more focused conversation of the persistence and retention of conditionally admitted students has begun to emerge (Bell, 2017; Cook, 2009; DeVilbiss, 2014; Hensley & Cutshall, 2018; Hornberger, 2010; Logan, 2017; Wildman, 2016). The following section will review conditionally admitted student persistence and a focused look at common identities conditionally admitted students typically possess.

### **Conditionally Admitted Student Persistence**

Kuh et al.'s (2008) study on the relationship between student engagement, college GPA, and persistence of 6,000 students, pre-college characteristics including admissions requirements represented by the ACT or SAT, matter concerning first-year students' grades and persistence. The college environment and supports implemented for college students are equally crucial as pre-college characteristics because they positively affect grades and persistence from the first to the second year at an institution (Kuh et al., 2008). Student persistence rates are considerably lower for historically underserved student populations such as first-generation, low SES, and Black, Indigenous, and students of color (Collier & Morgan, 2008; Kuh et al., 2008; NSC, 2019). As stated previously, conditional admission programs typically enroll a higher number of historically underserved student populations than the general student body. A general

understanding of persistence factors for these students is important for student affairs professionals to consider when assessing conditional admission programs and policies.

### ***First-Generation Student Persistence***

U.S. undergraduate students whose parents have not attended college remains a sizeable amount of the incoming student population (U.S. Department of Education, 2019). For instance, one-third of students enrolled in a U.S. postsecondary institution in the 2011-2012 academic year did not come from families whose parents attended college (Bennett et al., 2018). Research indicates students identified as first-generation face significant challenges in accessing higher education, succeeding academically post-enrollment, and completing a degree (Bennett et al., 2018; Choy, 2001; Stephens et al., 2012; Woosley & Shepler, 2011).

Lohfink and Paulsen (2005) found that first-generation college students were less likely to persist than their peers during the first two years of college, which could be for many reasons. Chen and Carroll (2005) suggested that many first-generation college students are at a greater risk of not persisting in their academic programs because of challenges such as being less academically prepared and working full time. DeAngelo and Franke (2016) proposed that the relationship between first-generation status and retention varies based on students' college readiness. Those students defined as “college-ready” were equally as likely to persist at their institution as their peers (DeAngelo & Franke, 2016). Students labeled not college-ready, and first-generation college students were less likely than peers to persist (DeAngelo & Franke, 2016).

Once enrolled, a valuable source of cultural capital that typically assists students navigating college is lost as first-generation parents cannot assist in navigating the

campus environment (Collier & Morgan, 2008). Therefore, first-generation students who are academically prepared for postsecondary education may inherit adverse effects due to the lack of cultural capital. First-generation Black, Indigenous, and students of color attending predominately White institutions experience additional challenges once enrolled. These challenges include negative racial campus climate (Fischer, 2007), lack of cultural sensitivity, and racism, resulting in increased feelings of isolation (McCoy, 2014).

### ***Persistence of Black, Indigenous, and Student of Color***

In the United States, the percentage of Black, Asian/Pacific Islander, and Hispanic students attending college has been increasing (NCES, 2019), yet the disproportionate persistence of White students compared to Black, Indigenous, and students of color has been a continued topic of concern. Within the Education Longitudinal Study (2002), the researchers found a 25% discrepancy when comparing White student entrance rates and bachelor's degree completion compared to Black students. The disparity in graduation rates may be related to lower academic and financial resources (Education Longitudinal Study, 2002). These resources include parent education, family income, high school rigor, and GPA. Academic preparation concerning high school rigor was the most significant contributing factor in the differing persistence rates for this study. This data has specific implications for conditional admission programs. Before they attend college, what happens to students makes a difference in their persistence in higher education, specifically for Black students (Schoenberger, 2019). Conditional admission can provide the opportunity to affect Black students' trajectories in a more significant way than White students' trajectories.

Hispanic student enrollment is steadily increasing. Since 1999, enrollment in 2- and 4-year institutions for students 18 to 24 years old saw a 13% increase (Krogstad, 2016). The U.S. Department of Education's study indicated that in 2003-2004 Hispanic students who enrolled as first-year students at 4-year institutions, only 56% of women and 46% of men had graduated five years later (Ross et al., 2012).

### ***Low SES Student Persistence***

Low SES students are less likely than their counterparts to obtain high levels of postsecondary education (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015). The Educational Longitudinal Study (2002), which tracked a high school sophomore cohort from 2002 through 2006, showed that 60.3% of this nationally represented cohort immediately enrolled in college after receiving a high school diploma. Only 20.8% of the students came from family incomes of \$20,000 or less and attended four-year colleges, and only 30.6% of students coming from family incomes between \$20,001 to \$50,000 and attended four-year colleges (Educational Longitudinal Study, 2002). Additionally, six-year attainment and persistence rates for all postsecondary students initially enrolling under similar financial situations show a disproportionate exclusion of first-generation and economically disadvantaged students from four-year colleges and universities (Educational Longitudinal Study, 2002).

Students with low GPAs or ACT scores, who hold historically underrepresented identities, and who enroll at institutions without conditional admission programs are substantially more likely to leave the institution without a college degree (Clinedinst & Nichols, 2013). Clinedinst and Nichols (2013) produced a qualitative study of four colleges and universities with a quantifiable commitment to serving low-income, Black,

Indigenous, and students of color; and first-generation students showed that their conditional admission programs benefited their students. Specifically, conditional admission programs provided a postsecondary opportunity for students otherwise being left out of higher education, strengthened academic skills, developed study and time management skills, built student confidence, and supported and strengthened student to peer, staff, and faculty relationships (Clinedinst & Nichols, 2013).

Considering the many different factors that affect conditionally admitted student's persistence, one may assume this label student may compound stress related to the college transition. This aspect of conditional admit student persistence is unknown since conditionally admitted student persistence and stress relations have not been studied. The following section will review overall college student stress, its impact on persistence and retention, and the gaps in the literature related to conditionally admitted students.

### **Stress**

Three out of four undergraduate students experience moderate to severe stress during college (Keim & Pierceall, 2007). According to the ACHA (2015) National College Health Assessment results, 32.5% of undergraduate students have experienced levels of stress that have affected their academic performance by receiving a lower grade on an exam or project, received an incomplete in a course, or dropped out of a course entirely. In 2017, this number increased to 33.7% of all undergraduate students, and most recently, in 2019, 34.2% of all undergraduate students express high levels of stress that directly affect their academic performance (ACHA, 2017; ACHA, 2019). Several other studies have reported that common sources of stress in undergraduate students include transition to their institution (Lester & Radcliffe, 2003), academic performance pressure

(Damer & Melendres, 2011), lack of sleep (Heckert, Niebling, & Ross, 1999), personal relationships (Novotney, 2014; Pedersen, 2012), and poor coping skills (Supe, 1998).

The effect of stress on first-year students is particularly concerning. The American Freshman National Norms Study conducted by Eagan et al. (2017) reported that first-year students had increased stress levels and lower emotional well-being compared to older undergraduate students. First-year students tend to have higher levels of ongoing and chronic stress which can result in the development of poor coping strategies, unhealthy relationships, deteriorating academics, mental health concerns, excessive drinking, and poor sleeping habits (Astin et al., 2011; Cicchetti et al., 2004; Cohen & Towbes, 1996; McKean & Mirsra, 2000). The development of stress-related difficulties and maladaptive coping, including excessive drinking and poor sleeping habits, is concerning because these behaviors further perpetuate distress and mental health concerns.

The developmental transition of entering college warrants greater understanding since a radical shift in personal responsibilities characterizes it, an adjustment in built-in support from secondary education to higher education, and an abrupt change of social environments (Cicchetti et al., 2004; Dvořáková et al., 2017; Hurrelmann, 1990; Jager et al., 2012). The following section will review transition and retention issues related to stress and common maladaptive behaviors seen in college students.

### **Transition and Persistence**

Conditional admission is a practice of accepting the admission profile of prospective students who do not meet the institutional standard for admission requirements (Hornberg, 2010). One significant aspect of gaining admission to any institution of higher

education is the transition into the academic and social environment. The transition to college includes developmental and ecological transitions, including new academic, social, and often living contexts; this crucial turning point in development presents a heightened risk for disruption and vulnerability in all first-year college students (Compas et al., 1986; Rutter; 1996; Rutter & Sroufe, 2000; Seidman & French, 2004). Taking into consideration this vulnerable transition time, first-year students tend to report higher levels of ongoing and chronic stress, leaving them susceptible to poor coping strategies, unhealthy relationships, deteriorating academics, mental health concerns, excessive drinking, and poor sleeping habits (Astin et al., 2011; Cicchetti et al., 2004; Cohen & Towbes, 1996; McKean & Mirsra, 2000).

In a longitudinal study with 109 first-year students, Garrett, Liu, and Young (2017) found that students' initial stress levels can be informative in terms of their stress levels later in the semester. According to Bryant et al. (2014), the first semester of college is a pivotal period of development characterized by steep declines in adjustment across various psychosocial domains. Despite a general trend of plateauing in the second semester, emerging adults continue to experience depleted levels of functioning, resources, and well-being compared to their prior adjustment levels. Researchers have found as a student matriculates, there are steady declines in stress levels across the four years of one's college experience (Bryant et al., 2014).

In addition to the typical stressors college students experience related to academic, social, and financial demands, conditionally admitted students who hold additional marginalized identities are likely to experience additional stressors. Black, Indigenous, and students of color are likely to experience environmental stressors, such as minority

status stress (Contrada et al., 2001); minority status stress places minority students at a unique risk for psychological distress (French & Chavez, 2010), academic difficulties, and lack of degree persistence (Rodriguez et al., 2000) due to challenges related with discrimination, cultural adaptation, and perceived academic disadvantages. Studies with African American, Asian, and Hispanic college students (Smedley et al., 1993; Wei et al., 2010) show that minority status stress is associated positively with increased stress, depression symptoms, and lower GPA attainment when controlling for typical college stress. Minority students' status and related pressures cause increased concerns of academic preparedness, questions about academic legitimacy, and negative perceptions of expectations from White peers and faculty (Smedley et al., 1993; Wei et al., 2010).

Low SES and first-generation students have their barriers concerning stress and higher education. Research shows that first-generation low-SES students are more likely to experience more significant emotional distress through higher levels of depression (Stebbleton et al., 2014). First-generation students report having fewer outlets to engage in conversation about negative experiences (Barry et al., 2009) and are more likely to feel guilt concerning accessing higher education (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015). Additionally, low-SES students report feeling that they “do not belong” in the educational environment (Harackiewicz et al., 2014) and are prone to experiencing imposter syndrome or the feeling that they do not belong and have fooled those who believe they do (Gardner & Holley, 2011).

Researchers have found that as a student matriculates, there are steady declines in stress levels across the four years of one's college experience (Bryant et al., 2014). However, research lacks insight into how this transition affects conditionally admitted

students though they have a similar experience at higher stakes. There have also been no designated studies focusing on varying student identities conditional admit students possess and how these aspects influence their stress levels, academic performance, or persistence rates. Further, it is important to understand how stress affects first-year conditionally admitted students to mediate the potential influence on maladaptive behavior and their persistence.

### **Maladaptive Behavior and Coping Strategies**

Ramasubramanian (2017) stated that coping is requiring self-regulatory processes and defined coping as “conscious volitional efforts to regulate emotion, cognition, behavior, physiology, and the environment in response to stressful events or circumstances” (p. 309). In college students, maladaptive coping relates to psychosocial stressors that are triggered by the demands on college students, which can “lead to unhealthy consequences including excess alcohol use and other drug use, adopting irregular sleep patterns, and then struggle with their mental health” (DeBerard et al., 2004). Unfortunately, college students report feeling overwhelmed, hopeless, anxious, and depressed (American College Health Association, 2017). These feelings combined with poor coping skills or lack of healthy coping strategies add to stress that is natural to the transition to college.

During students’ years at college, the increasing practice of binge drinking (Larimer et al., 2006; Lo & Globetti, 1993) and general increase use of alcohol (Baer et al., 1995; Leibsohn, 1994) often occurs within the first year. First-year students who live on campus show an increased use of alcohol and other drug use compared to peers who live at home or do not attend college following high school (Johnston et al., 2000). Findings

from a national study suggested that 46% of college students reported binge drinking in the last 30 days (Bible et al., 2017).

Flensburg-Madsen et al. (2010) completed a 26-year longitudinal study that found smoking is associated with an increased risk of developing depression later in life; individuals who smoked more than 10 grams of tobacco per day had significantly higher depression rates than nonsmokers. Similarly, a 10-year longitudinal study of emerging adults by Jorm et al. (2010) showed that both occasional and daily smokers with high levels of depression and anxiety symptoms had a two-fold increase in nicotine dependence in young adulthood, compared with those with low levels of emerging adult depression and anxiety symptoms. Crawford et al. (2015) found in a qualitative study that first-year students using tobacco and illicit drugs had significantly lower well-being levels than their counterparts.

Sleep deprivation or short sleep for emerging adults is defined as sleeping time less than nine hours per night, although many as one-fourth of emerging adults report sleeping six hours or less per night (Roberts & Duong, 2014). Disturbed sleep and sleep deprivation among emerging adults are linked to deficits in functioning and social-emotional, psychological, and physical well-being, including depressive symptoms (Dewald-Kaufmann et al., 2014). Among individuals with depression, sleep disturbances often include difficulty with sleep initiation, frequent early awakenings, and insomnia or hypersomnia (Berger et al., 2001). Patterns of disrupted sleep and patterns of short or long sleep duration have been associated with the presence of several chronic health conditions, including chronic pain, obesity, and cardiovascular disease, as well as lower

self-reported health-related quality of life and more significant health-related functional impairment (Brennan et al., 2016).

According to Crawford et al. (2015), the strongest predictor of well-being among college students was sleep. The quality rather than quantity of sleep and ensuring a quiet environment, incorporating sleep hygiene, and teaching stress management skills during first-year orientation dramatically increased positive sleep habits and overall well-being (Crawford, 2015). Lack of quality and quantity of sleep can magnify and increase other issues related to the stressors of transition that first-year students experience.

### **Mental Health**

Emerging adults frequently report experiencing loneliness, homesickness, conflict, and distress in interpersonal relationships while attending college (ACHA, 2017; Bryant et al., 2013; Dunn et al., 2005). Several studies have shown that these stressors can leave students vulnerable to stress-related mental health issues (Bryant et al., 2013; Eisenberg et al., 2007; DeBerard et al., 2004; Furr et al., 2001). A national study of over 14,000 students found that 17.3% of college students screened positive for depression (Eisenberg et al., 2013), and 33.7% of undergraduates in the ACHA (2017) reported that stress and depression affected their academic performance, causing them to receive a lower grade on an exam, an incomplete or drop a course or significant disruption to research or practicum work. In a longitudinal study of 2,095 first-year college students, a steep decline in their psychological and social well-being occurred between the start of college and halfway through the first year (Bryant et al., 2014).

When evaluating the literature related to stress and maladaptive behavior, there are many studies related to college student stress and transition (Astin et al., 2011; Cicchetti

et al., 2004; Cohen & Towbes, 1996; McKean & Mirsra, 2000). Some studies evaluate specific student demographics related to stress and transition, including race (Smedley et al., 1993; Wei et al., 2010), SES (McCoy, 2014), and first-generation college students (Chen & Carroll, 2005; DeAngelo & Franke, 2016). These studies are essential to consider as student demographics are overrepresented in conditional admission programs (Heaney & Fischer, 2011). Research lacks in providing studies relating specifically to the influence of stress on conditionally admitted students' persistence. Therefore, the impact of stress, transition to college, and persistence of students possessing the conditional admit the title is unknown.

### **Theoretical Frameworks**

The connection between a study and the theoretical framework to a problem or topic is necessary to understand the lens through which we execute educational studies (Creswell, 2007). Previous researchers have connected classical theoretical frameworks to conditional admission research in an attempt to understand the experience of these students. Typically, Tinto's student integration model, Astin's model of student involvement, Bean and Metzner's student attrition model. The theories found in conditional admission research typically include transition theories, persistence theories, and engagement theories. This literature review steps away from the classic theories as these theories do not consider the unique perspective of stress and transition concerning conditional admission student persistence. This literature review includes Schlossberg's (2011) transition theory, Rendón's (1994) theory of validation, and Abes, Jones, and McEwen's (2007) model of multiple dimensions of identity as the lens to evaluate conditional admission policies and student experiences.

## **Schlossberg's Transition Theory**

The Schlossberg's (2011) transition theory (STT) is an adult development model that serves as a framework to understand adults in transition and directs them to help when they need to cope with events, which cause a change in assumptions, relationships, roles, and routines (Patton et al., 2016). Schlossberg et al. (2011) suggested that the type, context, and impact of the transition is important to understanding the meaning the transition has for the individual experiencing it. According to this model, there are three types of transitions, including anticipated which occur predictably; unanticipated, which are not predictable; and non-events which are expected but do not occur (Patton et al., 2016). The context refers to an individual's relationship to the transition, one's own or someone else's, and to the setting of the transition, e.g., work, personal relationships (Patton et al., 2016). The impact, or the degree to which a transition alters daily life, is also important for someone undergoing a transition. Both positive and negative transitions can produce stress, and with the multiple transitions happening simultaneously within the first year of college, these factors combined can make coping especially difficult.

Transition happens over time and provides opportunities for growth, decline, separating, and creating new roles, relationships, routines, and assumptions (Schlossberg et al., 2011). Schlossberg et al. (2011) endorsed the idea of transitions having three phases, which they called "moving in," "moving through," and "moving out." Moving into a transition requires adaptability and familiarity with rules, norms, and expectations within a new environment. Moving out requires the transitions of ending on experiences and welcoming a new experience. Schlossberg et al. (2011) described four significant

factors, known as the “4 Ss,” that influence the ability of an individual to cope during a transition: situation, self, support, and strategies. The situation requires an individual to think about what triggered the transition, the timing, the amount of control the person has over the transition, the new roles the individual is taking on, the duration of the transition, one’s previous experience with a similar transition, how the individual assesses the transition, and other stresses the individual is experiencing (Patton et al., 2016). Self refers to personal and demographic characteristics which affect how one views their life and includes socioeconomic status, gender, ethnicity/culture, age, stage of life, stage of health, ego development, outlook, personal values, spirituality, and resiliency (Patton et al., 2016). Support refers to the amount of support an individual has that impacts one’s ability to adapt to a transition (Patton et al., 2016). Lastly, strategies refer to the ways individuals cope with a transition (Patton et al., 2016).

A person’s effectiveness in coping with transition depends on their resources in these areas. Individuals have both assets and liabilities as they encounter transitions. Assets may outweigh liabilities, making adjustment relatively easy, or liabilities may outweigh assets making the transition more difficult to manage (Schlossberg et al., 2011). An individual’s appraisal of a positive, negative, or neutral transition also affects how the person feels and copes with the transition. Schlossberg et al. (2011) emphasized that individuals cope best when they remain flexible and use multiple strategies. Schlossberg’s (2011) theory supports the need for additional research in how first-year transitions of conditionally admitted college students could have positive or negative health and coping consequences, which may influence persistence rates in the environments they are experiencing.

## **Rendón's Theory of Validation**

Emerging from a Transition to College Project study in the 1990s, the theory of validation explored how student learning was affected by academic and social experiences college students were involved in (Rendón, 1994). This theory explored the idea of involvement and considered how nontraditional students became involved on their college campuses. In the context of this study, involvement is defined as the time, energy, and effort a nontraditional student invests in the learning process (Rendón, 1994). In this study, non-traditional students were non-White, working-class, first-generation, or women who were expected to unlearn past behaviors and attitudes and adapt new learning practices upon admission to the institution's values and institutional protocols. Traditional students were depicted as middle- to upper-class SES and predominately White (Rendón, 1994). The author proposed that colleges were designed to work with primarily privileged traditional students and that non-traditional students mentioned above were commonly overlooked. Rendón (1994) proposed that non-traditional students have two options when they attend college: adopt the dominant culture or look within and use strengths from past experiences to create a safe environment for themselves.

Rendón (1994) offered the theory of validation as an evolved alternative to the integration models of Tinto and Astin. For Rendón (1994), two types of validation and six key components perpetuate validation for nontraditional students. These validation aspects emerged through interviews with nontraditional students across five campuses in the author's grounded theory study. The two types of validation identified are in-class academic validation and out-of-class validation. In-class validation assisted students to trust their own ability to learn and gain confidence in their innate ability to be a college

student. Through this confidence building, the role of faculty support, development, and academic validation was important. The second type of validation, out-of-class, included validating agents who could be administrators, counselors, family members, faculty, or peers. These agents play an important role in providing students with valuable resources and information to build an authentic relationship based on understanding and trust (Rendón, 1994). The six components about validation include: validation is supportive and confirming, promotes learning, is needed to facilitate healthy development, occurs in and out of the classroom, is ongoing, and should be offered early in the student's college experience.

Conditionally admitted students typically have multiple underserved identities (Heaney & Fisher, 2011; Wildman, 2016), and Rendón (2002) argued that validation may be more critical for marginalized student success and persistence in higher education. Validation consists of the interactions students have, initiated by faculty and others in the college environment, that bolster feelings and the belief of self-worth and in the students' ability to succeed. Rendón described these interactions, including appreciation, recognition, and respect for students, families, and communities. Rendón and other academic scholars (Rendón & Jalomo, 1995; Terenzini et al., 1996) stated that students who do not assume growing up that they would attend college could have insufficient knowledge and ease with college environments without additional support. Examples of validation of this sort could include conversing with students about their goals, showing appreciation for their cultural and personal history, knowledge, and taking time to help a student learn course material outside of class.

## **Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity**

Jones and McEwen's (2000) model of multiple dimensions of identity (MMDI) was created because of a gap in research. At the time, research had frequently not addressed intersecting social identities in conjunction with college students' gender, age, racial, ethnic, sexual identities (Jones & McEwen, 2000). This model offers a conceptual understanding of how college students socially construct their identity dimensions, recognizing that each dimension cannot be fully understood in isolation; rather, they influence one another (Abes et al., 2007). MMDI describes how the salience of multiple identities, such as race, sexual orientation, or culture, are influenced in their identity development based on the changing contexts or environments (Abes et al., 2007).

MMDI uses the symbol of intersecting rings around a core. The rings signify the identity dimensions which cannot be understood individually; rather, they are understood in relation to one another. Located at the center is the core sense of self which is comprised of personal attributes and characteristics of the person (Abes et al., 2007). Outside of the core and intersecting rings is how a person experiences their life and that influences how one thinks and understands their experiences. The context can include family backgrounds, sociocultural conditions, current experiences, and career and life planning considerations.

In the reconceptualization of the MMDI, Abes et al. (2007) incorporated the idea of meaning-making capacity into the model, which shows the relationship between context and salience of identity dimensions and the relationship between social identities and the core identity. Unlike the original model, the reconceptualized model shows the interactive nature of relationships between components of the identity construction

process: context, meaning-making, and identity perceptions (Abes et al., 2007). The self-perceptions of identity rings and core-self remain the same. The meaning-making capacity is illustrated as a filter and was added between contextual influences and self-perceptions.

The ability for contextual influences to move through the filter depends on the depth (thickness) and permeability (sizes of openings) of the filter, which depends on the complexity of the person's meaning-making capacity (Abes et al., 2007). Those with complex meaning-making would have a filter with increased depth and smaller grid openings, while those with less complex meaning-making capacity would be drawn through a narrow filter with wider openings. Context influences identity perceptions regardless of the differences in meaning-making ability.

By adding meaning-making to MMDI, there is an expanded possibility of understanding relationships between context and identities and social identities and the core (Abes et al., 2007). MMDI provides a critical reminder that identities with high salience in relationship to the core do not always imply that identity's positive self-perceptions. Abes et al. (2007) cautiously warn that a student's externally defined identity could be salient to oneself for negative reasons, such as family expectations or religious disapproval. Adding meaning-making to MMDI contributes to a deeper and more dynamic understanding of how students negotiate the complexities of their personal and social identities.

### **Chapter Summary**

Few qualitative studies have explored the experiences of conditionally admitted college students. The studies that have used qualitative methodology (Wildman, 2016;

DeVilbiss, 2014; Clark, 2009) and reviewed specific aspects of conditional admission programs, college student transition, or the student experience. Research lacks insight into how the college transition may influence conditionally admitted students as they experience college with higher stakes of academic dismissal from the institution. After surveying the literature, I have found no designated studies focusing on varying identities conditionally admitted students possess and how these aspects influence their stress levels, academic performance, or persistence rates. Further, it is essential to understand how the transition to college for first-year conditionally admitted students influence their experience. Specifically, small, private, Christian, liberal arts colleges have not been the focus of a study, nor have student stress related to CA status and transition.

## **CHAPTER III**

### **METHODS**

This phenomenological study aims to understand the lived experiences of CA college students at South City University (SCU) and how these experiences may influence the decision to persist in higher education. First-generation, low SES, and Black, Indigenous, and students of color who are CA at SCU were the focus of this study. I designed this study to answer the following three questions. First, how do conditionally admitted students describe their experiences at SCU, a small, private Christian institution? Second, what do they say about how their transition to college shapes their experiences with college environment stressors (e.g., GPA requirements, living in the residence halls, adjusting to a new environment)? Lastly, how do they perceive how the institution student support systems (e.g., advising, instruction, counseling), educational interventions (curricular and co-curricular initiatives), or their relationships with others on campus (e.g., faculty, staff, peers) influence their persistence from the first to the second year of college? This chapter introduces the research design, research site, recruitment and sampling strategies, data collection, and data analysis. Ethical considerations and aspects of trustworthiness conclude this chapter.

#### **Research Site**

The research site for this dissertation study was South City University (SCU). SCU is a small, private, not-for-profit, 4-year or above bachelor's and master's granting

institution in the Upper-Midwest (Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 2019). A Christian college, SCU enrolled 1,155 students, comprised of 1033 undergraduate students, 70 graduate students, and 52 online students at the time of this study (SCU, 2019). Of the undergraduate population, 43% identify as men, and 57% identify as women (SCU, 2019).

As a predominately White institution (PWI), a majority (69%) of the student body identified as White (SCU, 2019). Hispanic students were the next largest ethnic category comprising 9% of the student body, followed by African American students at 6% (SCU, 2019). Students who identified as unknown and multi-racial were each represented by 5% (SCU, 2019). Asian students represented 4% of the population, and American Indian and Pacific Islander students 0.5% of the student body (SCU, 2019). Over half (52%) of the student body was Pell-eligible, with 12% of the population receiving full Pell grants (SCU, 2019). First-Generation status is another important factor of the SCU student body composition. More than one-third of the student body identified as First-Generation College students (SCU, 2019).

Retention and persistence are two different aspects of student data. The National Center for Education Statistics (2019) defines retention as an institutional measure where persistence is a student measure. Higher education institutions attempt to retain students to graduation at their campus, whereas students persist from one semester to the next within any institution of higher education. The data of persistence rates of conditionally admitted students at SCU is concerning. In 2019, the first time in college (FTIC) persistence rates for the entire student body at SCU increased from 75% to 80% (SCU, 2019). On the other hand, CA students only increased from 36.8% from 2016-2017 to

58% in 2017-2018 (SCU, 2019). Each semester, the persistence rates at SCU for CA students vary, some years reaching as low as 18%, whereas the rest of the student population reached 74% (SCU, 2019). State and national data related to conditional admit student persistence or retention was not available at the time of the present study due to a lack of collection and reporting methods at a cross-institutional level.

It is essential to distinguish the religious identity of SCU as it is vital to the institution's culture. SCU is an institutional affiliate of The Council for Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCCU). The CCCCU is an association for institutions of higher education whose mission is to “advance the cause of Christ-centered higher education and to help [our] institutions transform lives by faithfully relating scholarship and service to biblical truth” (CCCCU, 2019, para. 1). A CCCCU institution is different from an institution with a religious affiliation by three fundamental commitments. First, CCCCU institutions integrate “biblical truth” into all aspects of the educational environment, such as hiring faculty and staff, implications within the classroom, and each college chapel (CCCCU, 2019). Second, institutions use the education setting to teach course content and develop students' “moral and spiritual formation” (CCCCU, 2019, para. 11). The formation means that the core Christian values of love, courage, humility, and wisdom are core components of the educational structure (CCCCU, 2019). Last, students who attend CCCCU institutions can expect that the academic programs will be beacons of the common good and a redemptive and restorative role within the workforce (CCCCU, 2019). This distinction of SCU being a CCCCU affiliate is essential because the role of spirituality and faith did come up in responses from participants in this study.

## Research Design

### Sampling

CA students at SCU were the focus of this study. According to the Director of Enrollment, conditionally admitted students have been attending SCU since at least 2009 (Z. Hettler, personal communication, October 30, 2019). An official conditional admission program has never truly existed at SCU due to the high turnover of the admissions and student support staff (Z. Hettler, personal communication, October 30, 2019). Aspects of the CA programs recommended by Clinedinst and Nichols (2013) already exist at SCU. These interventions include academic courses, academic advising, outlined policies, involved staff, and monitoring performance.

Academic systems geared toward academic success at SCU for CA students include a 1-credit course called Academic Enrichment Seminar (GE 100) or a 2-credit course called Academic Enrichment I (GE 101). At SCU, students enrolled in GE 100 are referred to as CA 1. The admissions committee assumes these students need minimal assistance within the institution's transition based on their academic preparation in secondary schools (Z. Hettler, personal communication, October 30, 2019). Typically, CA 1 students present a lower-than-average ACT score and above average GPA. Therefore, SCU places CA 1 students in the Academic Enrichment Seminar.

CA 2 students, however, seem to need additional assistance with the transition to the institution based on their academic preparation. Typically, CA 2 students present a lower-than-average high school GPA and ACT score; which results in SCU placing CA 2 students in GE 101 Academic Enrichment I. Part of this rationale in course placement is based on the ACT's lack of predictability of student success beyond a student's first year

in college (Sedlacek,1996). In addition, standardized tests have raised concerns about their bias against underserved populations (Banerji, 2006; Beatty et al., 1999). CA students typically hold one or more of these identities. Providing academic transition courses to students who find themselves slightly below the institutional admissions requirements is essential for the admissions staff, Director of Admissions, and the senior leadership team to increase retention of these students (Z. Hettler, personal communication, October 30, 2019).

SCU created GE 100 and GE 101 to assist CA students by explaining the policies and procedures of their admission status; providing academic skills such as test-taking, study skills, emotional regulation, and stress-relief skills; and giving a direct connection for the students with a faculty member at the institution. GE 100 occurs during Welcome Week, the first-year orientation one week before the beginning of each semester. This one-time, one-hour seminar outlines the syllabus (see Appendix A), the CA admissions policy (see Appendix B), and the 1.8 GPA requirement for all students who have earned 30 credits or below. The students also meet the Academic Enrichment Seminar faculty member. The course introduces the students to various academic resources, including academic tutoring, peer academic coaching and mentoring, and test proctoring. Following the GE 100 seminar, the faculty member remotely monitors students' academic performance via the online retention software and meets with them twice per semester to talk about their current performance. The students also receive additional academic recommendations and tips through an online Moodle course page.

GE 101 is a 15-week two-credit course offered each semester to CA 2 students and first-year students who do not meet the GPA requirement. This course includes

academic and personal skill development, assistance related to college transition, reviews the CA admissions policy, and the GPA requirement. These CA courses are not considered an official program at SCU; instead, they are considered options that the Department of Student Support offers for students who need additional assistance. SCU uses conditional admission policies to recruit and enroll a diverse student body and provide higher education access to historically underserved student populations. Students admitted conditionally by the admissions committee are expected to understand the specific requirements as outlined in their admissions letter.

A varying number of students are admitted conditionally at SCU from year to year. The participants for this study are from the 2019 to 2020 first-year cohort. In the fall of 2019, 59 students were enrolled conditionally, yet, nine students did not qualify for this study, as they were not Black, Indigenous, and students of color, first-generation, or low-SES. Through criterion-based sampling (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), a collection of the second semester conditionally admitted students currently or previously enrolled in one of the academic enrichment courses were identified for this study. Criterion-based sampling is a common form of sampling in qualitative studies, which requires all participants to meet specific criteria (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I invited students from the 2019 cohort who remained on conditionally admitted status and who were first-generation, low-SES, or a student of color were to participate in the spring of 2020.

I altered my original recruitment plan due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Initially, I planned to announce the study to my sections of GE 101 and ask them to consider participating. In return, the students who participate in all four aspects of the study would receive \$50.00 cash as an incentive for participation. My study began after the stay-at-

home orders began, and SCU moved to virtual learning. Therefore, I recruited all participants via email. I sent an email to all eligible students and asked them to respond via email if they were interested in participating. The email described the study and requested those interested in participating in contacting me by email or phone (see Appendix C). When a student contacted me to express interest in participating in the study, I emailed the student a response, an informed consent form (see Appendix D), the demographic survey, and times to set up their first individual interview via Zoom. I sent three rounds of invitations to eligible students and recruited nine students for this study.

### **Data Collection**

In this study, I used a social-constructivist methodology, focusing on the participants' lived experiences and perspectives. Social constructivism is a framework where individuals develop their own meaning and understand the world around them through experience (Creswell, 2013). Meaning is not innate within each person; instead, meaning is formed through interactions with the world around us (Creswell, 2013). By applying this framework, I approached data collection openly to allow the participants to fully describe their experiences of being CA students in as much detail as possible. The interpretation of these experiences revealed information related to the phenomenon of being a CA student and provided new insight to this experience. Data collection included document analysis, two critical incident forms, two individual phenomenological interviews, and a demographic survey. The process began after receiving approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of Wisconsin–La Crosse and SCU.

## **Document Analysis**

Document analysis was one data retrieval method for this study. According to Bowen (2009), document analysis is a method used to examine or evaluate both printed and electronic materials. Documents contain words, images, and symbols, requiring the researcher to analyze the data to be interpreted to elicit meaning, gain understanding, and develop empirical knowledge (Bowen, 2009). Various documents can be used within the prescribed systematic evaluation. Using various documents for analysis benefits qualitative studies as they can assist in developing, understanding, and uncovering insights related to the research study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) while complementing other data retrieval methods (Angers & Machtmes, 2005).

For this study, documents included the conditional admission policy (See Appendix B); the conditional admission letters for CA first-year students in the seminar class (See Appendix E); CA first-year students in the 15-week class (see Appendix F); CA first-year transfer students in the seminar class (see Appendix G); CA first-year transfer students in the 15-week class (see Appendix H); and the academic relief notification (see Appendix I). Document analysis of the admissions letters is essential because this letter serves as the first communication a student receives, signifying their acceptance into the university. This letter could boost CA students' confidence or inhibit confidence depending on the institution's language (Heaney & Stewart, 2013). This initial communication can also dramatically adjust the perception a student may hold to the systems and structures they must encounter during their transition to college (Heaney & Stewart, 2013). Admission letters and material cannot compensate for poorly designed programs or policies to fit CA students' needs (Heaney & Stewart, 2013). However, the

rhetoric used in the initial communication with students can set the tone for their self-efficacy related to their potential academic success. In this study, document analysis was an aspect of triangulation or a method of combining various data collection methods to study the same phenomenon (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). Detailed information about triangulation and credibility can be found later in this chapter.

### **Critical Incident Technique**

I utilized the critical incident technique (CIT) as a method of data collection and analysis. CIT is a technique that requires a researcher to ask participants to identify important events or experiences that were critical (Kain, 2004). A critical incident relates to a specific satisfying or dissatisfying interaction to an activity or phenomenon (Gremler, 2004; Vianden, 2012). In this study, critical incidents are any experiences participants share concerning their experiences, relationships, responses, or interactions with being a CA student, with validation agents such as faculty or staff, or encounters with CA policy and interventions. CIT allows for participants' perspective and correlated responses to remain free from preconceived constructs, definitions, or questions, as it does not require participants to provide experiences within a provided framework (Vianden, 2012). Thus, creating cultural neutrality (Gremler, 2004) where participants may share their unique perspectives without cultural boundaries in other data collection techniques used within this study (Vianden, 2012).

As a data collection method, CIT provides an avenue for participants to share authentic accounts and meaningful insights (Vianden, 2012) into how a group experiences specific institutional environments, courses, or student services. CIT is appropriate for this study, as it provides meaning to the stories about incidents or events

that are most critical or important to the participants (Kain, 2004; Vianden, 2012).

Additionally, CIT is a logical and appropriate method as it provides participants with a “wide range of responses within a given research study” (Vianden, 2012, p. 339).

The first CIT form focused on pre-college incidents related to the CA status. The second CIT form explored current collegiate experiences as a second-semester CA student. I was looking for the most important incident for each of the specified periods through the CIT forms. I conducted 18 individual CIT forms, two forms per participant. The first CIT form related to pre-college incidents related to the CA status. Typical for CIT studies (Gremier, 2004), I asked the participants the following questions in an electronic survey format via email before their first individual interview. The first question was specifically, when and where did the incident or event take place (e.g., last week, last summer; May of my senior year of high school; around family or friends). Second, specifically, what happened and what was said and done during this incident or event. Third, specifically, were you satisfied or unsatisfied during the incident or event. Lastly, in what way did the incident or event influence your future behavior, action, thoughts, or feelings during your first semester of college (e.g., I told others how happy I was; I did not share the information with anyone; I felt proud to be accepted here; I felt nervous about the expectations; I felt confused about what this meant). After we completed the first interview, a second critical incident instrument was administered via email to explore the most essential college experience the CA student has encountered.

### **Phenomenological Interviews**

The experience of being conditionally admitted at a small, private, Christian university is the specific phenomenon that I focused on for this study. Through

phenomenological interviews, I aimed to capture rich descriptions of phenomena and their settings (Bentz & Shapiro, 1998; Kensit, 2000). The interview questions aimed to understand the participants' experiences, feelings, beliefs, and understanding about being a CA college student. The data obtained related to how the participants' think and feel about their conditional admission experience (Bentz & Shapiro, 1998). Using a phenomenological interview allowed me to understand the phenomena from the participant's point of view (Crabtree & DiCicco-Bloom, 2006) and allowed the participants to provide their point of view directly to me without going through another data collection source (Crabtree & DiCicco-Bloom, 2006). This process allows me to see the participants' experiences unfold and to understand the phenomena in their own terms (Bentz & Shapiro, 1998). With this process I intended to provide a rich description of human experience as the people themselves experience it (Bentz & Shapiro, 1998) and allowing the essence of this experience to emerge naturally (Cameron et al., 2001).

I used phenomenological interviews as a data collection method. Each participant had two recorded semi-structured phenomenological interviews via Zoom. I transcribed each recorded interview verbatim using the Otter Transcription Service or Go Transcript. The individual, 60 - 90-minute phenomenological interview with each of the participants allowed me to ask follow-up questions based on responses from the Critical Incident Technique (CIT) form and additional clarifying questions from their first interview (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Additional information about the CIT form is in the following section. I asked questions related to pre-college academic and first-semester in college history. Some questions included; What were the things you heard about college growing up? How did you prepare for college? What was it like to be admitted as a

Conditionally Admitted student? What were your experiences like sociality in your first semester of college? The full interview script is located in Appendix H.

I contacted the participants via email once the first interview was completed, transcribed, and summarized. In this email, the participants received a copy of the interview transcription and an invitation to participate in the follow-up CIT and second phenomenological interview. I scheduled a second phenomenological interview at this time to clarify any answers from the participants and allow elaboration from the first interview. Some of the questions included: Was there anything that came to mind after we met last that you want to share? Tell me about your experiences in college since the fall semester. How have your impressions about being conditionally admitted changed over the last year, and what lead to those changes? What would you want other people – friends, professors, university staff, counselors, college admissions counselors, family – to know about you and your college experiences? The full interview script is located in Appendix I. The second phenomenological interview also created the opportunity for participants to explore their thoughts and feelings about their transition to college and the first semester at SCU. Questions related to entering SCU and their transition connect to Schlossberg's model of transition. Questions related to their time within the conditional admission program, connections with professors and staff, or other validating agents connect to Rendón's (1994) validation theory.

### **Demographic Survey**

I utilized a demographic survey as a data collection method. According to Vogt and Johnson (2011), researchers who examine the quantifiable statistics of specific populations engage in the field of study called demography. Demographics that are

commonly collected include age, sex, ethnicity, education level, disabilities, employment, and socio-economic status (Connelly, 2013). Researchers typically study a sample of a particular population to inform readers about “the sample of respondents to their survey” or about their affiliation to the topic (Connelly, 2013, para. 4). Researchers should compare the data collected from the sample and compare it to what is known about the larger population. This study included CA first-time in college first-year students, first-generation, low-SES, or Black, Indigenous, and students of color. Demographic surveys allow a reader to compare the sample data to what is known about the larger population to see “how closely the sample matches or is representative of the general population” (Connelly, 2013, para. 5). For qualitative studies, demographic information allows a reader to determine if the study presented provides the researcher with the rich description of the phenomenon of interest (Connelly, 2013). Marshall (1996) recommended that the demographic data presented should help the researcher demonstrate that the participants selected for the study are appropriate.

Each participant completed the demographic survey (Appendix J) and participated in both interviews and both critical incident forms. I completed the entire process from recruitment to the end of the second interview between April 2020 and August 2020. Concluding the second phenomenological interview, persistence data was collected through SCU’s retention software from the academic enrichment specialist in the fall of 2020 to see which of the participants did persist from the second to the third semester at SCU. All students in the study persisted at SCU for Fall 2020.

## **Data Analysis**

Analyzing documents begins by skimming, reading, and interpreting a document to involve elements of content and thematic analysis (Bowen, 2009). Content analysis requires the researcher to combine the document elements into categories related to the research questions (Bowen, 2009). According to Bowen (2009), thematic analysis requires the researcher to search for patterns within the data that provide emerging themes or categories for analysis. This data review requires a researcher to look closely at the data to “perform coding and category construction” (Bowen, 2009, p. 33). Through this coding and category construction, the data will begin to provide themes pertinent to the phenomenon, such as how the institution explains academic performance expectations and assumptions related to student understanding of their CA status, and completeness, which is described in detail in the next paragraph. The analyzed documents were selected because they are sent directly to CA students from the university concerning their academic status at SCU starting as prospective students.

I reviewed each document in relation to their communication with students in the sense of completeness. Completeness, according to Bowen (2009), relates to a document being comprehensive in covering topical material completely or selective, as only a part of the topic is covered; if the document is balanced or uneven relating to the detail or little detail of aspects of the topic (Bowen, 2009). For this study, the completeness related to communicating the CA status and expectations fully and comprehensively. I also reviewed the document's original purpose, the target audience, secondary information relating to the document like being written in first-person, from a secondary source, solicited, edited or unedited, or written anonymously (Bowen, 2009). Incompleteness,

absence, or sparseness are three aspects Bowen (2009) suggested that a document may obtain, which would suggest that “little attention or that certain voices have not been heard” or considered in creation to the document creation (p. 33).

The CIT data analysis requires three specific analysis strategies (Vianden, 2012). First, the researcher defines a frame of reference, which for this study include participant perceptions of their conditional admission to their university (Vianden, 2012). Second, the researcher creates categories that reflect the nature of the critical incident, such as interactions with academic programs or experiences with institutional policies (Vianden, 2012). Third, the data is categorized with each participant’s pseudonym, incidents they shared, the code or description of each incident (e.g., receiving the admissions letter, arriving on campus, taking a required course, grade checks), and the number of dissatisfying and satisfying incidents (Vianden, 2012). Last, larger themes will replace the smaller categories and serve as the overarching structure for reporting results (Vianden, 2012). I conducted the CIT data analysis from October 2020 through December 2020.

Data analysis of the phenomenological interviews began after I completed all interviews and CIT forms. Seidman (2006) recommended caution to researchers in the process of gathering and analyzing data. Working with data as it comes in through various methods of the collection is expected, especially in the process of transcribing phenomenological interviews. For this study, the data collected in the CIT and interviews informed one another in relation to follow-up questions and clarification. I attempted to avoid placing meaning on a participant’s responses or imposing an assumed understanding of the experience during the data collection process (Seidman, 2006). I

also memoed during this process. Memoing is a method of data collection in qualitative research that required me to take field notes recording my experiences, what they heard, saw, and thought through the course of collection and reflection (Miles & Huberman, 1984).

In the data collection process, researchers may become absorbed in this process and may fail to reflect or notice what is happening around them. Miles and Huberman (1984) recommend maintaining a balance between descriptive notes and reflective notes. I did this with electronic notes within the Dedoose data analysis software and on notebook paper kept within a locked filing cabinet. The memos were dated so that I could correlate them later with the collected data. Memoing is a method in which research can identify their own interest in the topic and examine personal feelings, bias, or prejudice (Seidman, 2006). As I moved through interviews, I made continuous notes of similarities and differences between what is being described by the participants. I also made reflective notes related to my own impressions, feelings, hunches, and assumptions.

Each interview was hosted on Zoom and recorded. I transcribed the interviews verbatim using the Otter transcription service and Go Transcript. Recording the interviews removes a researcher's paraphrasing or summaries and allows the participants' thoughts and actual words to remain present for data analysis (Seidman, 2006). I backed up the recordings on my password-protected computer. I also kept all transcriptions as separate file documents. I used open coding (Creswell, 2013) after I transcribed the first interview and continued as the subsequent interviews followed. Open coding is a process that includes labeling concepts, ideas, and categories based on what the participants provide in the interviews (Creswell, 2013). During open coding, my focus was on

expected and unexpected conceptualizations related to the experiences of conditionally admitted students at SCU. Open coding garnered abstract representations of events, objects, actions, interactions, or feelings that may assist in understanding the phenomenon of conditional admission better. The representations included, but were not limited to, conflict, hopes expressed, language relating to process, frustration, identity, and power (Seidman, 2006). The initial analysis resulted in 269 codes in which axial coding aided in discovering four larger themes throughout the various interviews (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

### **Ethical Considerations**

Any research involving human subjects has certain risks. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) described potential ethical issues in qualitative research: deception and disclosure; informed consent; coercion and “deformed” consent; confidentiality and privacy; and distress and emotional harm. This section will address each of these areas and how I addressed these concerns for this dissertation study.

#### **Deception and Disclosure**

I made a conscious effort to be clear and honest with participants about this study's purpose before interviews or the critical incident form was filled out. I have had experiences personally and as a professor for the conditional admission courses, which may inform some of the interviews' analysis and understanding. While understanding my relationship to the topic is important, this study's data will come primarily from the interviews with the participants who will be fully informed about the study in advance. Minimal attention was brought to my personal experience or potential observations.

## **Informed Consent**

I made the informed consent form available to potential participants when they contacted me expressing interest in the study. Presenting the informed consent in advance allowed the potential participants to review the information and risks that may have been associated with this study to make a well-informed decision about participating. Once on Zoom but before the recording was started, I reviewed the form with the interviewee to confirm that they understand the form. The recording did not start until the participant fully demonstrated they understood the information on the form, agreed to the interview, and signed the form. The form was not signed for the second interview. I asked for ongoing verbal consent before the second interview.

## **Coercion**

To avoid coercion or the appearance of coercion, individuals interested in the study were informed that deciding to participate will in no way impact their association as a conditional admit or the university. It was also critical to remind the participants that they may leave the study at any time. This critical aspect of the study was specified in the informed consent paperwork, beginning of each interview, throughout the interview as I switched from one section of questions to another, and in email correspondence.

## **Confidentiality and Privacy**

The population of participants was limited and specific. It is of the utmost importance that other students, professors, or administrators cannot discern those who chose to participate in this study. To ensure I protected the participants' identities throughout the process of this study, I put a few specific precautions into place. The name of the university and participants are pseudonyms used in place of the real names. Zoom

recordings and transcripts used for this study are accessible only to me as they are on a password-protected computer. Any identifiable characteristics have been concealed in a way where students at SCU or staff members will not identify the participants unless they choose to disclose the information.

In addition, consent forms and the names of future participants were kept separately from the Zoom recordings and transcripts. I used the corresponding pseudonym for labeling transcripts and Zoom recordings. All physical paperwork was stored in a locked filing cabinet only accessible to me. All digital recordings and transcripts was maintained on a computer which was password protected.

### **Distress and Emotional Harm**

I designed this study to understand the experience, transition, and associated stress of first-year students who are conditionally admitted to college with historically excluded identities. Some of the experiences the participants shared might not have been entirely positive memories and may have caused distress. While I did not design the questions to elicit overwhelming emotions, all participants were given the contact information for Therapeutic Services at SCU through the informed consent process.

### **Trustworthiness**

Qualitative research involves conducting an investigation within a study in an ethical way to ensure validity and reliability (Merriam & Tisdell, 2019). Bloomberg and Volpe (2019) provided three avenues for trustworthy criteria, which I cover in this section: credibility, dependability, and transferability. This section will review each of these three sections explaining how I set up the study to ensure each of the three aspects was reached and maintained.

## **Credibility**

Credibility refers to internal validity or how the “participants’ perceptions matchup with the researcher’s portrayal of them” (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019, p. 202). To increase the credibility of the study, I laid out potential biases within Chapter I. I also began journaling during the development of this proposal for the research study. I triangulated the data by using individual interviews, critical incident form, document review, and a demographic survey to corroborate evidence via different means of data collection (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). Other strategies to improve this study’s credibility have included reporting negative findings and peer debriefing (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). Peer debriefing is a strategy that can enhance the accuracy of a researcher's account. I asked two colleagues to review field notes and data, and then they asked me questions that helped me evaluate assumptions or consider alternative viewpoints from the data (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019).

## **Dependability**

To achieve dependability, a researcher must make sure the process is documented logically, traceable, and transparent. Additionally, dependability is achieved when the data is answering the research questions and the methods for collecting and analyzing data maintain transparency. I conducted an audit trail to record to the fullest extent all of the data collected, including field notes and transcripts (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019).

## **Transferability**

According to Bloomberg and Volpe (2019), transferability is focused on how a study can provide deep descriptive content that can be applicable across broad contexts while maintaining the richness provided within data collection. Transferability does not

focus on creating a study that can be a representative sample. Instead, transferability is used to assist the reader to decide “whether similar processes will be at work in their own settings and communities by understanding in-depth how they occur at the research site” (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019, p. 205). I attempted to do this by providing detailed descriptions to create an experience in which the reader feels as if they are present.

### **Conclusion**

This study focused on conditionally admitted students at a specific institution. This narrow reach could be assumed to have little depth that may be relatable to a reader. However, I feel that I have provided context and rich detail of how the participants are experiencing their life within the study's bounds; the findings could have profound realizations for the reader. The reader may understand and appreciate how conditionally admitted students differ from regularly admitted college students and that the pressure associated with conditional admission may have implications for their persistence. The goal is to develop further understanding of this group of conditionally admitted students' experiences so that they may also provide meaning to other conditionally admitted students at other universities.

## **CHAPTER IV**

### **DOCUMENT ANALYSIS, INTRODUCTION OF PARTICIPANTS, AND FINDINGS**

The purpose of this chapter is to report the findings of the qualitative phenomenological research study to understand better the experiences of conditionally admitted students at a small, private, religiously affiliated institution. Three research questions framed this dissertation study: How do conditionally admitted students describe their experiences at SCU, a small, private Christian institution? What do they say about how their transition to college shapes their experiences with college environment stressors (e.g., GPA requirements, living in the residence halls, adjusting to a new environment)? Lastly, how do they perceive how the institution student support systems (e.g., advising, instruction, counseling), educational interventions (curricular and co-curricular initiatives), or their relationships with others on campus (e.g., faculty, staff, peers) influence their persistence from the first to the second year of college?

I separated this chapter into four sections. The first section overviews the document analysis reviewing the conditional admission policy found within the academic catalog, conditional admission letters, and the conditional admission relief notice. The next section describes the participants who completed all parts of this study. Then, I share critical incident data under the headings of institutional policy, staff interaction, and transition support. The phenomenological interviews are the final section of this chapter.

This section is split into four themes: (a) perception of academic ability, (b) influences of academic communication, (c) sense of belonging, and (d) transition stressors. The remainder of the chapter discusses each research question with summary findings and conclusions.

### **Overview of Documents**

I reviewed each document for a sense of completeness by the researcher.

Completeness relates to a document being comprehensive in covering topical material completely or selective, only a part of the topic is covered; if the document is balanced or uneven relating to the detail or little detail of aspects of the topic (Bowen, 2009). For this study, the completeness related to the communication of CA status from the institution to the student and expectations the institution had of the student once they arrived on campus. I also reviewed the documents for its original purpose, the target audience, and for secondary information relating to the document, written in first-person, from a secondary source, solicited, edited or unedited, anonymous (Bowen, 2009). I monitored the documents for incompleteness, absence in content, or sparseness in the explanation of expectations. When found, these items can suggest the documents had little attention paid to them or that the opinions of CA students and those who support them were not heard in creating the document (Bowen, 2009).

### **Conditional Admission Policy**

The conditional admission policy is located within the SCU Academic catalog, located solely online. No hardcopies of the Academic catalog are printed for prospective or enrolled students to access. The policy is located in three sections: the conditional admittance policy, the course requirements for conditional admittance, and the online

course policy. The conditional admittance policy is brief in length. It lists the GPA and ACT requirements to clarify what students are conditionally admitted to the institution. The policy outlines expectations of this status once CA students have matriculated on the campus of enrolling and passing a course or seminar titled Academic Enrichment course, enrollment to online courses is not allowed unless approved by the Center for Student Enrichment, and limited course registration to 16 credits. If the student does not reach the minimal 1.8 GPA requirement by the end of the first semester, they are moved from Conditional Admittance to Academic Probation. The courses listed vary in credits from 0 to 2 and are named Academic enrichment seminar and Academic Enrichment course 1. Both descriptions use language that attempts to explain what the content of the courses covers identifying and developing beliefs, attitudes, behaviors, and skills for academic, career, and personal success. The online course policy outlines the expectation that students may only enroll in online courses if they are in good academic standing. This rule automatically disqualifies CA students from enrolling which is in direct opposition of CA policy listed in the educational requirements.

### **Conditional Admission Letters**

SCU sends conditionally admitted students two letters, one regular admissions letter and one conditional admission letter. Once they filled out the application, the students received their specific letter, paid the application fee, gathered any additional documentation requested by the Admissions Committee, and a decision from the committee had been made to accept the student. A CA student's letter depends on their placement in one of the two support classes and if they are considered a first-year transfer

student. CA students with a high GPA and low ACT score are placed in the GE 100 and are sent the accompanying letter.

The GE 100 letter is one page in length and should arrive simultaneously and in the same envelope as their regular admissions letter. It begins by congratulating the student on being accepted to the institution, with the second line notifying the students they are conditionally admitted. The CA letter tells the student why they have been admitted conditionally and outlines the five expectations for conditionally admitted students. The first is to enroll within the Strategies of Success seminar course, which the Registrar's Office automatically completes. The second is having a limited 15 credit load for the first semester, which is different from the 16 credits listed in the Academic catalog policy. Next, students must maintain a minimum GPA of 2.0 after completing the first semester, which is different from the 1.8 minimum GPA listed in the Academic catalog. These two discrepancies are essential because they create inconsistencies that could add to stress felt by students working to be lifted of CA status. If the student does not maintain this GPA, they must enroll and pass GE 101 in the subsequent semester. The cumulative GPA is expected to be achieved by the second semester, or the student can be academically dismissed. Academic dismissal is not guaranteed and is decided by the academic dismissal committee. Lastly, the students must attend all required academic advising meetings as outlined within the CA letter but is not listed in the Academic catalog as part of the CA policy.

The last paragraph of the GE 100 letter begins with a requirement not stated elsewhere that students must pass 20 credits within the first two semesters in conjunction with the five requirements above. When the expectations outlined in the letter are

completed, the student is no longer considered conditionally admitted to the institution and is no longer up for academic dismissal. The letter concludes by telling the reader that the policy and expectations to provide support in the students' academic success and that the academic support coordinator is their academic advisor until their CA status is lifted. The conclusion lines are inconsistent with the reality of how academic advisors are assigned. Once a student declares a major, they are automatically assigned an academic advisor within the institution. The academic support coordinator only serves as an academic advisor to students who have not declared a major.

The letter for first-year CA students enrolled in GE 101 is similar to the letter as previously described. What varies is the expectation of enrolling and passing GE 101 and enrolling and pass GE 200. GE 200 is a follow-up course reserved for upper-class students who are on academic warning or academic probation. Again, this is inconsistent with the academic catalog policy and course requirements. In addition, this letter outlines a limit of 15 rather than 16 credits for the first two semesters.

CA students who are first-year transfer students enrolled in GE 100 receive two admission letters. First, they receive what looks like a traditional admission letter outlining they have been accepted into SCU, their academic scholarship amount, and how to set up an account with SCU. There is no information about how the students are conditionally admitted, and there is the assumption the student will continue onto the next page to understand they have been conditionally admitted. Page two describes the same expectations of being conditionally admitted as the above section with a slight variation that the Director of Admissions does not sign the letter. The letter is electronically signed by the Assistant Director of the Center for Student Enrichment. The CA admissions letter

for first-year transfer students enrolled in GE 101 is nearly identical to the transfer GE 100 students. The only variation is that the students are required to attend academic advising meetings and tutoring and coaching sessions as mandated by the Academic Specialist.

All four letters outlined above are supposed to be sent to students with a regular admissions letter in the mail inside a package of gear to celebrate their admission to the institution. Two participants vividly remembered receiving their conditional admission letters. Two participants vividly remembered receiving their CA notification by a phone call from an admissions counselor. The other five participants did not receive a letter, phone call, email, or any other form of notification of the CA status. Instead, they found out they were conditionally admitted when they saw the academic enrichment seminar listed on their orientation schedule. By not receiving their letters in advance, students agreed to attend the institution without fully understanding their admissions status and their implications once they arrive.

### **Conditional Admission Relief Notice**

Conditionally admitted students who have received a 1.8 GPA at the end of their first semester receive a relief notice via the institution's retention software. Students receive notices unrelated to their admission status or grades throughout the semester through the retention software. Therefore, the assumption is that students will see the notice and read it in full, unlike emails that may be deleted or left unread frequently. The author personalized the notes greeting the student by name and a note of congratulations. After providing context to why the student is receiving the note, the author explains they have been lifted from CA status and may enlist in a full course load for the subsequent

semester and do not have course expectations moving forward. The note ends with a reminder of resources provided to all students is placed before an ending from the instructor of the Academic Enrichment course courses. This note, like the CA policy, is short and to the point.

### **Description of Participants**

I recruited participants for this study via campus email to all conditionally admitted students who began at the research site in fall of 2019, self-identified as first-generation or as a student of color; or identified as low-income. After I sent the initial recruitment email, participants contacted me, and I scheduled the first interview after the completion of the demographic survey. I sent four rounds of invitations to potential participants over nine weeks. Nine participants completed the entire data collection process, and each participant chose their pseudonym. The participants were across the country either at home with family or at the research site due to stay-at-home orders during the COVID-19 pandemic. Five participants identified as people of color. Five of the participants self-identified as men and three as women. I redacted Quinn's gender from this study with additional details found in their vignette.

The following vignettes give a brief description of each of the participants, including their age, ethnicity as self-identified, gender, and disability if applicable. Additional context relating to the participants' home location, high school context, general information relating to applying to SCU, and significant identifiers related to their college search process. Each vignette ends with the participants' GE 100 or GE 101 course, their current GPA at the time of the interviews, and academic major. Questions related to age and gender were collected in the demographic survey using open-ended

response options. Typically, in writing, I would not use the sex binary of male and female to represent gender. However, the participants all wrote in male or female as their gender identity and I have kept it as such in the vignettes to honor their words used in the survey.

### **David**

David is a 20-year-old Black male who lives with attention deficit disorder (ADD) and Autism and is from the metropolitan area in the Midwest. David attended a local public high school and was very excited to leave high school after bullying lowered his overall self-esteem. After receiving a 17 on the ACT and a “lower than preferred” high school GPA, David was declined admission to SCU directly out of high school. As a result, his parents required him to take courses at a local community college for at least two semesters to increase his GPA to reapply. After the two semesters, David had to persuade his parents that he was academically, socially, and financially to go to school at a 4-year university. He reapplied to a few institutions and was only admitted conditionally to SCU. He enrolled as a first-year transfer student taking the Academic enrichment seminar (GE 100). David started his first year commuting from home because his family could not financially afford for him to live on campus. David’s CA status was lifted after one semester, and he currently has a 3.56 GPA with a major in communications studies.

### **Bob**

Bob is an 18-year-old White female from a rural town six hours from SCU. Bob attended a public high school and had heard about SCU from friends from school and church. After an English class assignment that required him to reflect on the prospect of college and what he would want in that experience, he found himself writing about

SCU's attributes. He considers himself a legacy student because many family members have attended SCU. After taking the ACT in high school and receiving a score of 16, he thought it would be best to enroll part-time at a local community college to help him get into SCU. After a semester of classes, SCU accepted him as a first-year transfer student taking the Academic Enrichment Seminar (GE 100). Bob lives on campus and will be a student leader in Fall 2021 in a peer spiritual development role. Bob's CA status was lifted after one semester, and he currently has a 1.8 GPA with a major in education.

### **Savannah**

Savannah is a 19-year-old White female from a rural town 10 hours west of SCU. After being homeschooled for most of her life, Savannah was bullied a lot at her public high school, and she knew she did not want to attend a public institution. Savannah wanted to attend a Christian university, and after she had a conversation with her pastor and reflected on the experience her mother shared about her time at a bible college, she knew she wanted a similar experience. Even though she knew what type of institution she wanted, Savannah attended several college fairs and college visits of institutions of all sizes and types. SCU was the only institution she applied to, and with a 16 on her ACT and a 3.8 GPA, Savannah was accepted as a first-year student taking the academic enrichment seminar (GE 100). Savannah's CA status was lifted after one semester, and currently has a 3.8 GPA with a major in church leadership.

### **John**

John is a 20-year-old Latino male with a disability who grew up in Europe. His parents are religious missionaries who both hold terminal degrees in their field of study. His older sister is currently in medical school. Going to college out of high school was a

“natural next step” as the importance of attending an institution of higher education was communicated with him by his parents frequently. John took International Baccalaureate courses while living in Europe and enrolled in a community college after coming to the United States because his ACT score was “much lower than preferred.” After two semesters of taking college courses part-time and working, he and his mother looked at state licensure requirements in the United States for teachers. They settled on looking at institutions in the Midwest, Florida, Texas, and Missouri. After applying to SCU with a 13 ACT and high GPA from community college, he was conditionally admitted as a first-year transfer student taking the academic enrichment seminar (GE 100). John’s CA status was lifted after one semester and currently has a 3.0 GPA with a major in secondary education, focusing on Social Studies.

### **Quinn**

Quinn is a 20-year-old Latinx person whose parents immigrated to the United States when they were very young. Quinn grew up in a metropolitan area in the Midwest and went to three local public high schools during their four years in high school. College seemed impossible to Quinn because no one in their family or their community went to college, and graduating from high school was their goal. As a potential DACA student, Quinn was nervous about going to college because of their family’s immigration status and was concerned about how they would pay for attending a four-year university. After a talk held at their church by a DACA student, Quinn felt empowered to research institutions, attended many visit days, and participated in a full-ride scholarship program. After being rejected from the scholarship program and from SCU because of their low ACT score and low GPA, Quinn graduated from high school and attended a local

community college to increase their chance of being accepted the next year. After reapplying to the scholarship program and SCU with an 18 ACT and college credits, SCU conditionally admitted Quinn and the scholarship program as a first-year student taking the academic enrichment seminar (GE 100). Quinn's CA status was lifted after one semester and currently has a 3.0 GPA and is a social work major.

### **Madeline**

Madeline is a 20-year-old Asian female with an ADD diagnosis and a traumatic brain injury. Madeline was adopted alongside her sister from one of the Pacific Islands and came to the United States when she was in late elementary school. Madeline grew up in a metropolitan area in the Midwest and attended a public high school. Madeline and her sister are two years apart but were academically in the same grade when they started attending school in the United States. Her college search process was done in conjunction with her sister and with the help of their mother. Madeline knew she wanted to attend a Christian college and knew that she wanted to work within the oral health field because of her own positive experience with her orthodontist. After learning about an academic partnership program SCU had with a local institution and her sister found a major she liked, Madeline took a closer look at SCU. Since the cost of SCU was more manageable than other institutions she was looking at, she applied with a 14 ACT. Madeline and her sister were both accepted as CA students at SCU, enrolling in the Academic Enrichment course (GE 101). Madeline's sister did not participate in this study. Madeline's CA status was lifted after one semester, she has a 3.34 GPA, and is majoring in general studies to work in the dental health field.

## **Jack**

Jack is a 20-year-old White male from a metropolitan area in the Midwest. As an only child whom his parents homeschooled, Jack took advantage of taking college credits at SCU while in high school. While he enjoyed his college credits at SCU and other institutions in the area, the rigor of the academics proved to be difficult. Jack found it hard to balance commuting to the institution, managing a social life with high school and college friends, and adjusting to the academic rigor. With a “less than stellar” GPA for the college courses he took and a 26 ACT, Jack applied to a handful of Christian colleges, hoping to get a chance to attend a university where he could grow as a student and a person. While waiting to hear back on his acceptance, Jack formally visited SCU as a prospective student. Instead of having the viewpoint of a high school student taking courses, he found the community to be a place where he wanted to invest the next four years of his life. Jack was accepted as a CA student enrolled in the enrichment seminar (GE 100). Jack’s CA status was lifted after one semester, has a 3.5 GPA, and majors in biblical and theology studies.

## **Henry**

Henry is a 19-year-old Indigenous male from a small town on the east coast of the United States. Henry considers himself at home at SCU since both of his older siblings attended and graduated from SCU. Henry did not visit SCU as a prospective student and trusted his siblings about the community and education he would receive. The main draws to the institution were the ability to play lacrosse in college and familiarity to the institution because of the family connection. As an athlete, he felt he was not actively recruited anywhere of interest because of his low high school GPA and a low ACT score.

After a few conversations with the coach, considering his sibling's recommendations, and finding a major he was interested in, Henry applied and hoped for the best. With a 14 ACT and 2.3 GPA, Henry was conditionally admitted and placed in the academic enrichment course (GE 101) course. Henry's CA status was lifted after one semester; he has a 2.5 GPA, and is changing his major from sports management to criminal justice.

### **Jackie**

Jackie is a 20-year-old White female from a large metropolitan area about 18 hours from SCU. The oldest of three daughters, Jackie enjoyed high school but was not ready to go to college when she graduated. After taking part-time credits, working full-time at the flagship state institution in her state, and doing poorly academically, Jackie decided she needed to do something different. Jackie had not lived away from family as she lived with her aunt and uncle during this time. She was craving more independence and needed a "change of pace." After deciding that she wanted to attend an institution in a large metropolitan area, her father recommended she consider SCU as he and friends had spoken highly of it. After viewing it online, she thought it was worth applying and seeing if they might consider her with her low college GPA and a 26 ACT. She was nervous about the distance away from home but thought if SCU accepted her, she would go. Jackie was accepted to SCU as a CA student enrolling in the academic enrichment seminar (GE 100). Jackie's CA status was lifted after one semester; she has a 3.7 GPA and is majoring in business administration.

### **Critical Incident Forms**

The participants shared a total of 18 individual incidents about their experiences through two critical incident forms the students completed prior to each individual

interview. The first CIT form focused on pre-college incidents related to the CA status. The second CIT form explored current collegiate experiences as a second-semester CA student. This section covers the critical incidents by reporting the findings in three overarching themes of institutional policy, staff interactions, and transition support. The participants' most consistent drivers of satisfaction related to an interaction with a person at SCU who supported them or made them feel welcomed and accepted. The most consistent drivers of dissatisfaction were lack of clarity in their admissions status and attempting to transfer credits into SCU. These experiences resulted in negative feelings, including embarrassment, frustration, confusion, or annoyance. Generally, these incidents seemed to influence how the students thought about themselves, their academic ability, sense of belonging or worth to the institution, and overall attitude toward the institution.

### **Institutional Policy**

The largest dimension of the data features satisfactory (3) and unsatisfactory (4) incidents about institutional policy. The most consistent driver of participant satisfaction was the conditional admission policy granting a second chance for attending college. Jack, a current sophomore, noted a positive experience with the CA policy during the admissions process:

I remember specifically receiving my ACT score, which was actually 17, from what I remember, and being pretty disappointed. I thought I wasn't going to be able to go to SCU, which was really hard because I was already getting A's and B's in my dual credit courses. I felt like the ACT was not accurate in showing *my* capabilities. I did not understand how to reconcile my score and grades taking college courses. I then remember being told by [staff member] I could be

conditionally admitted, and that was a huge relief. This was a huge blessing and without that, I would not have been able to keep going in my college career.

Quinn shared an experience about the process of trying to transfer college credits they had taken previously:

I knew that I struggled with grades at my [community college], so I was having trouble with SCU accepting credits to transfer. I ended up being okay with all of it because they [SCU] transferred as much as they could. I didn't tell anyone it was happening, but I worked much harder [at SCU] once I arrived so that I got much better grades.

Jackie felt similarly with her interaction with the transfer credits policy even though it influenced her academic skills and effort positively once she arrived at SCU John reflected on the CA policy providing a pathway to college that he felt was otherwise unattainable, which instilled a feeling of being “wanted and accepted at SCU.”

Aside from these positive notions with policy, more participants expressed dissatisfaction with institutional policies that resulted in direct personal repercussions. Examples of these include paying more money out of pocket for college and taking more classes than the participants initially thought was required. Some participants found themselves questioning the university's motives and thought the process of transferring credits felt more drawn out than necessary. The dissatisfying incidents relating to institutional policy describe how disappointment manifested after the interactions. Madeline expressed fear and nervousness after receiving her second ACT score of 14 because she did not think any college would accept her. Once she was accepted at SCU, Madeline was nervous for her first year:

I thought everyone was going to be a lot smarter than I am. I was upset because I couldn't schedule [classes] my own classes because of being conditionally admitted, which I found very confusing, and [8-second pause] I felt like, uh, I was stupid cause I couldn't do it on my own.

David shared the feeling of disappointment after receiving notification that most of his credits from a local community college would not transfer into SCU even though they were considered general education requirements:

I thought I was going to [enter SCU and] become a Junior if I transferred my credits and I didn't have clarity on what that status was during the spring. If I knew those credits were not going to transfer, I would have had to stay another semester at [community college] and try to get more classes in and then transfer those credits in. I just didn't know anything, and that was really scary.

In his interview, David expressed if additional clarity had been provided by SCU about how or why credits did or did not transfer, it would have allowed him to make a more informed decision about where to complete his bachelor's degree. This lack of clarity in policy created repercussions of spending more time and money in college to meet those requirements he thought he already met.

John's incident related to receiving no news about his acceptance to SCU and was impatiently waiting after applying:

I gave my admissions counselor a phone call. He said they sent me a letter which never arrived. Probably because I'm not from the United States. So, I received a few emails explaining my conditional status, and I showed it to my parents. I had a scholarship for Texas A&M because of my IB scores and was curious to why

they [SCU] accepted me. It felt nice to be *wanted* [emphasis added] another school; however, I felt as though SCU had *low* [emphasis added] standards and didn't understand why they accepted me.

Henry was at home with his sisters and parents when he got a call from his admissions counselor:

I answered the phone, and he told me I was conditionally admitted but that I did get into SCU. I was disappointed because I was conditionally admitted and that there were these things I had to do that, like, other people didn't have to do. And like, my sisters were really good at school and then I had to do this stuff that they didn't have to do. I didn't even want to tell them.

The last line in Henry's block quote is important. He was so unsatisfied about this CA policy, even though it granted him a pathway to higher education, he did not want to share with his family that he could attend university.

### **Staff Interactions**

Participants shared five satisfactory and one unsatisfactory incident about non-teaching interactions with staff and faculty. Staff interactions were the second-highest data dimension. Generally, the students were satisfied with welcoming staff, provided the notice of admissions to the institution, and built up their sense of belonging. Three participants shared specific incidents about their admissions process with an admissions counselor. Savannah shared that her campus tour made a large impact on her decision to attend SCU:

I applied because I wanted to go to SCU for a while. As soon as I got on campus, I knew it was where I belonged. After my tour with [admissions counselors], they

sat me down with different majors and costs. I asked a ton of questions, and [the admissions counselors] were willing to answer and was very helpful. After that process, [admissions counselor] encouraged me to apply that day so I did and I am very glad I did. I was so scared I wouldn't get accepted because I am horrible at taking tests such as the ACT, and I wasn't able to get higher than a 16 but my GPA had been a 3.8.

Bob and Quinn shared encounters with helpful admissions staff who told them about being admitted to SCU. Bob reflected on the moment of talking with one of the admissions counselors when he was at work. He found out he had been admitted to SCU and expressed gratitude for how the admissions counselor had kept him informed about his status. After the conversation, Bob shared his excitement about moving away from his very rural town and moving to a metropolitan area. Quinn also reflected on the moment of finding out they had been admitted to SCU:

I was in the middle of [Biology], and we have just gotten our test results from our exam we had taken that week. I was devastated because I had failed the test, and I did not want to fail a class that I was paying for out of pocket. Then I got a call from the [scholarship] administrator for SCU. I walked out of class, and it was the most important call of my life. They told me there was a spot opening, and they wanted to offer it to me, a full-ride scholarship to my dream school. I could not believe it! I accepted it right there, and then... this had changed everything for me.

Henry described an experience once he arrived on campus with his hall director:

In the fall semester, I remember getting a haircut from my hall director. He's always positive, and then he always talked to me when he saw me after that [haircut]. I guess the first time he actually cut my hair I saw him as, like a principal or leader. Then we just talked for a long time, and as weird as it sounds, getting that haircut was the first impactful thing in fall semester. I felt welcomed and that I belonged.

After John had arrived at SCU as a CA, he had a disappointing interaction with his academic advisor:

My academic advisor said he would [*uses air quotes*] help me by staying on top of me [*uses air quotes*] referring to my grades. However, I rarely heard any communication from him. I had little to no trust in him to accurately advise me.

As a result of this incident, John went to other professors within the college for guidance. The satisfactory and unsatisfactory incidents discussed here reveal how staff members can influence the trajectory of the way students think about themselves, their future, and how students perceive being wanted by an institution.

### **Transition Support**

Of the three data dimensions, transition support represented the smallest data set but was disproportionately more unsatisfactory (3) to satisfactory (2). In general, participants found transition support confusing, embarrassing, shameful, and annoying. Bob shared a confusing but ultimately satisfactory experience with the Academic enrichment seminar for CA students:

At the seminar, I remember the Dean of Student Affairs and the faculty member being there. We talked about study skills, what I needed to do to do well, and how

to get off of CA status. I was annoyed that I had to be there and that others did not, but overall it was helpful. I just know where my weaknesses are, but it was fine. I am here [now], and I felt like [at the time] I knew what I needed to do moving forward.

Three other participants shared confusing and unsatisfactory experiences with the Academic Enrichment course. Madeline expressed how the beginning of class made her feel about their capabilities:

The first day of class stuck uh out because [5-second pause] I felt this like, I don't know, feeling of within knowing that if I didn't get my GPA or I didn't push myself, I just had so much pressure to prove myself that I can do this and I felt like so insecure about it all.

This idea of feeling the pressure of being a CA student and it being realized at the seminar was described by Jackie. Jackie found out she was a CA student by looking at her schedule when she arrived on-campus for First-Year Orientation:

I wasn't sure what to think. I didn't realize I was conditionally admitted until I showed up to that class. I don't remember getting a letter or a call about it before. I wasn't surprised because I didn't do well academically at all before, but I was also excited that people were going to be pushing me and trying to help me get better. I just wish someone would have told me ahead of time because once I found out there was a lot of pressure to do well.

Savannah had a similar experience as Jackie, not knowing that she was a CA student until she attended the seminar in the first few weeks of the fall semester:

I left the meeting feeling very frustrated and confused. I don't know, it was just, to me, it was frustrating, like, when I talked with other people, they asked me why I was here, and I just said I don't know why I'm in this. I was confused, frustrated, annoyed. There was such a huge lack of communication of what this [conditionally admitted] even meant, and like, how could I have a huge academic scholarship and still be on probation? It made no sense.

Savannah was calling her CA status probation is essential because even after signing up voluntarily for a research study based on her conditional admission and her experiences, she still mislabeled being conditionally admitted.

The critical incidents shed light on the participants' most memorable satisfactory and unsatisfactory experiences with institutional policy, staff, and transition support. When we consider the experiences of conditionally admitted students' clarity of communication and staff or faculty interactions, these significant incidents shape the way students think about their academic abilities, sense of belonging, and overall attitudes towards the institution and higher education. These experiences also provide insight and complement the overall themes from the phenomenological interviews: perception of academic ability, sense of belonging and self-efficacy, academic communications, transition stress.

### **Phenomenological Interviews**

After the first critical incident form, I used open coding in the DeDoose data management system, and interviews were transcribed through Otter and Go Transcript software and continued for the subsequent interviews. During open coding, the focus was on the expected and unexpected conceptualizations related to the experiences of

conditionally admitted students at SCU. I was able to garner abstract representations of events, objects, actions, interactions, or feelings that may assist in understanding the phenomenon of conditional admission better. The initial analysis resulted in a list of 269 codes in which axial coding assisted in discovering four larger themes throughout the various interviews (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The themes are reported in four categories from the data of all 18 interviews. The findings of interviews one and two complemented each other; thus, the results are combined into four major themes: perception of academic ability, influence of academic communications, sense of belonging and self-efficacy, and transition stress. These themes complement critical incidents pinpointed by the participants and show consistency between critical incidents and their higher education experiences thus far.

#### **“Can I really do this?”: Perception of Academic Ability**

The first theme focuses on the perceived academic ability of the participants as conditionally admitted college students. Three main factors formulated this perception of their academic ability. The first was related to the academic pressure they felt concerning their academic status. The second was disappointing and affirming experiences that contributed to their perception related to the academic ability. The third related to the participants coping skills used to manage these experiences.

#### ***Academic Pressure***

All participants noted academic pressure due to their admission status or related to the transition to their institution. The participants pinpointed the various academic weaknesses contributing to the academic pressure they all felt. Savannah shared she felt

academic pressure related to the admissions process when she was in high school. She knew test-taking was not her strength when she applied for college:

With the ACT, I already know I was a horrible test taker [*4 second pause*] that it was not going to go well, which it didn't. That really didn't help me ... I really didn't think I was going to get into any school because of my ACT score, which really sucked. I had a 3.8 GPA in high school, like, I should be able to get into good schools. College should be looking at how I did in high school, not just my ACT score. That really scared me a lot, and especially when I applied at SCU, I didn't even think I was going to get in just because of my ACT score. I almost had to prove my intelligence through my words [application].

For other participants, the awareness of their academic weaknesses that resulted in this feeling of pressure came from self-reflection. Bob said he knew that being “on top of your schedule, even having a schedule really helps you get your class assignments done and making a planner” are challenges he was still trying to adjust. Henry felt that his academic writing, regardless of topic or length, was never a strength as “I tend to say the same thing over and over, just different wording. I was just nervous about writing papers [in college].” Henry had heard about the paper and writing expectations in college from his sisters who had attended SCU and received varying feedback about his writing, which contributed to his awareness of his weaknesses.

John felt that achieving balance was his academic weakness before attending college. After arriving on campus, this weakness was amplified when he attempted to balance his work hours to pay for bills and complete his studies promptly. While he recognized that many college students go through “this same process of finding balance

between working and attending college ... I feel like it, uh, kind of sets me back in school.” Without adequate time to spend on studying because of his work schedule, he felt pressure to cut into other self-care areas to compensate. For John, this meant he does not get enough sleep. This lack of sleep combined with lack of time to focus on academics makes “the balance really hard to figure out...it really sucks.”

Jackie reflected on an assumption she had that students who are not conditionally admitted do not have as much pressure on them as those admitted without the status. For her, the pressure related to worried about either being put on academic probation for not meeting the academic standard or being academically dismissed. This pressure she described made the need to meet the minimal academic goal “more real because the consequences are a big deal for me but not really for them [peers].” Jack’s gut reaction during his first semester is that other students were more careless about their academics:

They are just like, a little more lackadaisical, like, oh I got into college so I could go anywhere else if I needed to ... being conditionally admitted put more of an expectation on me to do really well and not just let myself fly with the assumption that I could just do this [college] anywhere. Because I can’t.

Quinn and David reflected on how their experiences in high school influenced their awareness of their academic self-doubt. Quinn reflected specifically on their community and how it is different than for many of their peers at SCU:

I think they [peers] have different experiences throughout high school. Like, for me, I had no role models that I looked up to. I knew like I cannot compare myself to people that look like me. So, I was an upperclassmen at the time, I would be like, oh they look like me, they are undocumented in this country like me, and

now they are high school dropouts and a parent. You know what I'm saying?

Like, I was like, maybe that's my life. So, I feel that the mentality was always implemented on my mind like college was not an option for me.

When Quinn realized DACA was a pathway to higher education, they began focusing on preparing to apply and attend college. They began having feelings of self-doubt because it was too late to increase their GPA, and they began to compare themselves to other people with "good ACT scores and GPAs." Quinn began to wonder,

What am I not smart enough? Or like, what kind of like principles do those people have that I don't have? And I was kind of worried about going to college like, am I gonna be like one of those people that don't know how to pass a class?"

The majority of the participants felt academic pressure in some form. Savannah, Bob, Henry, and John reflected on assumptions and self-awareness about their perceived academic challenges. Jackie and Jack related their assumptions to their conditional admission status and what may differ from their peers' academic attitudes. Quinn and David outlined their self-doubt. All of their experiences hold importance because it shows how their conditional admission status may influence students perceived academic ability, participants' assumption of peers' attitude, and stress-related to their academics.

### ***Positive and Negative Experiences***

Each participant spoke directly about positive and negative academic experiences that influenced how they thought of themselves as a student. The negative experiences related to individual academic performance, questioning ability due to nerves of attending college, or relating to their CA status. The positive experiences related to interactions

with staff, faculty, peers, and how their sense of self-evolved during their first year of college.

**Negative Experiences.** Jack quickly recounted the negative feeling after receiving a 60% on a paper he had worked “really hard on.” After reviewing his paper, he realized the many errors in his paper that he had missed. He described the experience as a “reality check that if I wanted to go anywhere with writing, I probably needed to learn how to write differently.”

Savannah’s experience related directly to being conditionally admitted. What was most upsetting is that she knew things about her peers:

I have other students’ stories who had higher ACT scores than me, but they were not required to be on probation [conditionally admitted], and ended up failing or like not being able to be like come back? Like being dismissed from SCU.

She felt that many students do need the help that is accompanied by being CA, and the ACT was not a good indicator of needing the supports. Savannah expressed that she felt the admission committee was not targeting the right students. She provided an example of a friend of hers who had this experience:

Like my friend ... If the school would have come to him earlier and asked if he needed help ... I honestly feel like he would have succeeded. I wish there would have been an intervention sooner, and he would have maybe been put into that [CA group] and stuff because he would have kept up with it, and there would have been some *accountability* because somebody would have been like, okay we need to fix this. We don’t want you to fail and have to pay back all this money.

He and his whole family are immigrants and don't have money to pay all this back. *Now*, what is he supposed to do?

John, David, and Madeline were not concerned with the actual admissions status or a singular academic experience. Rather, as students with disabilities, they each spoke to the disappointment when they felt separated from their peers because of being conditionally admitted. John shared:

Growing up with disabilities and just have to ... go into those *other* classes I had to go to ... my initial impression of whenever we had the [seminar], I was like, "oh, I don't want to be in another one of these where it's like, I have to like, everyone's like, oh that kid goes to those classes."

David is autistic and disclosed having attention deficit disorder (ADD). Before being admitted to SCU, he knew that he would need to have continued support academically to succeed because of his high school support. He did not "want to have to go" to the academic support courses because he "already knew" he would use the resources for various reasons, including assistance with accommodations, testing requests, communication with faculty, and needing extended absences for health care appointments. Madeline also has an ADD diagnosis as well as a traumatic brain injury. She felt that taking GE 101, meeting with the faculty member, and attending tutoring helped her more than what she would have done independently.

The experience of questioning academic ability in college after having a disappointing academic experience was also common. Quinn shared how during their first semester, they had failed a required class for their major and had the reoccurring thoughts relating to her admissions process, "Can I really do this? ... Am I smart enough

to be here?” Quinn then reflected on how they relied on a peer to get them through the class, which ended up being a barrier to their success:

I remember having friend, where we would be together [in class]. It was like, I always depended on her, and she would always depend on me and stuff like that. It was not good for us. I wanted attention, whatever, but the next semester, I had to retake that class because I needed it for my major. I had to push myself, and I remember sitting in the front and paying attention and relearned all these things that I was already supposed to know. I relearned these things, and it really impacted my life in such a crazy way. I’m like, “wow, all these things are quite interesting” or like, “why didn’t I pay attention before?”

David used a comparison between his gap year while taking some community college credits. When he attended community college, his math professor taught with the material too quickly, and David could not keep and ended up failing the class. When he retook a similar class at SCU, he was “very nervous about retaking that class” because of his earlier experience.

This section outlines negative experiences that may aid in understanding the essence of conditionally admitted students. Some factors outside the institution's locus of control influenced the participants’ perception of their academic ability. Performance on the ACT, disabilities, and past academic experiences were three critical factors that influenced the participants’ sense of academic self. These experiences hold implications for the use of Schlossberg’s (2011) transition theory to inform the experiences of conditionally admitted students. The experiences aid in situation understanding of the transition to college and the factors considered necessary in relation to the self.

**Positive Experiences.** Overall, positive experiences related to interactions with staff, faculty, peers, and how their sense of self evolved during their first year of college. These findings are similar to what the participants shared within their critical incidents. Throughout the interviews, participants brought up their peers frequently. Some peers played an integral part in how the participants engaged with their academic material. Madeline described how her connection to peers started to develop during orientation which “blossomed throughout the rest of the year.” Quinn’s affirming experience came from a staff member who provided a space for them to be authentically themselves and space for them to be emotional:

I would go to her office, and she would try to understand me, give me advice, give me inspiration about how to keep going with my grades. Then she left to go to another office, but she got me through that first year. I remember hitting rock bottom in my first semester ... when I had finals and stuff, and I just couldn’t even go to school. She emailed my faculty ... advocated for me during that time, and helped me with the incomplete process.

David shared that his peers treated him with respect and were willing to help him understand the content of their shared classes. One example was in his biology class where “without my classmates, there was no way I would have passed.” David also talked about how vital his connection with his academic advisor was. His academic advisor was someone who could have checked his class schedule and then “said see you later, he didn’t do that.” Instead, David felt connected to him because of how he listened and helped him “understand what I could do with my major out in like the, uh, the real world.” David noted that there were conversations about scheduling with his advisor, but

the main focus was on him, “how my classes were going, what I wanted to do in with my life, what I wanted to do with my major.” Most importantly to David, his academic advisor “focused on me as a whole person rather than just a student.” David believed after this interaction that he had another person “almost like [8-second pause] almost like rooting for me.”

Savannah pinpointed connecting with her academic advisors as affirming experiences related to her academics. The first academic advisor meeting she had was unfortunate:

I like I met with the met with the wrong person because I got mixed up because I didn't understand there are two academic advisors for my major, and I met with the wrong person. Like on the paper it said I had two people for my advisor, but he [advisor] didn't care that I wasn't like *his advisee* ... he made me feel really cared for. It ended up working out really well, and he led me in the right direction, and I felt more confident about my major and classes for the next semester.

Henry noted that his friends were part of his motivation to stay at SCU. His friends have been a consistent support method who have kept him “focused on everything” related to his academics and schooling. In his second critical incident form, he also discussed an incident with his hall director. He noted that when he got a free haircut, his hall director was positive, talked with him after that, and it made him feel welcomed and belonged. This impactful moment was brought up in his interview two other times as being the most powerful moment with a staff member because of how the hall director used the haircut as the gateway into creating a stronger and more authentic

relationship with his residents. Henry felt “this community and uh feeling safe made me like feel okay with reaching to him [hall director] for school and personal stuff.”

When Jack was asked about positive academic experiences, he felt that the academic supports provided by the Academic Success Center were “like a net under me to catch me when I would fall.” Resources like academic tutors and writing consultations made him feel that even if he did not do well, “it was going to work out because people are here to help.” He reflected on how it was important to know that support was available that he called his parents after the Academic enrichment seminar to tell them “there is academic support at my fingertips if I ever have an issue.” Having a place Jack could go to for support was comforting. Jack felt that he had the freedom to fail and to know that “I wouldn’t slip through the cracks.” Henry also spoke about this idea of a safety net from the Academic Success Center because “they very much welcomed me and if I needed anything, I knew that they [CSE] would be there to help me. That safety net again is just so nice to have.”

Jack’s positive experience with a faculty member grew out of the disappointing one. When he received a poor grade on a paper he worked hard on; he felt defeated. His faculty were encouraging and inspired him to do extra reading and writing over the summer to refine the skills he had worked on during the semester. This type of encouragement made him realize that she cared about his success in her classroom and overall, during his time at SCU. Jack did some of that work in the summer after his first year. He found it to be “really helpful, and it is something I am going to continue doing until school starts this fall.” Jack noted that his faculty as a whole had been very willing

to meet with him about classes and without their assistance, he “would not have been able to pass my classes.”

John was quick to name a specific faculty member who influenced him academically and as a person. He called this faculty member “crazy, crazy awesome” because of the way she showed she cared for him after the loss of a very close friend in his spring semester. As a result of his grieving, he missed class, two quizzes, and a paper. When he contacted the professor about the academic items he needed to make up, “she pretended like she had no idea what I was talking about.” She gave him grace on those assignments and instead asked him to come in and check-in to make up the points. As a future educator himself, he felt conflicted whether what she did for him was fair but being in his position, “It was the best thing that could have happened in the moment and there were like no questions about her [faculty member] and how much she really cared about me.” The experience gave him motivation in her class and made him feel more confident moving forward.

Bob also spoke specifically about a faculty member multiple times throughout his two interviews. The connection with this faculty member was described like so:

I really love [faculty member] because it’s so much like on a personal level. We talked about my life and his life, and I got to be myself ... when you can have that connection with someone, you’re bound to have a way better grade in their class because it kind of pushes you to not only like, you don’t want to do bad in their class if you know them on a personal level. They keep you accountable, and you want to be accountable to them because you look up to them. When you have that like respect for each other, then I think you just want to do well.”

This type of connection, respect, and accountability was brought up seven other times with this specific faculty member by Bob and twice by one other participant.

These reflections hold implications for Rendón's (1994) Validation Theory. The experiences with faculty took place outside the classroom and were more meaningful related to participants' sense of belonging to the institution and their academic self-efficacy. The experiences also seem to connect to Schlossberg's (2011) transition theory. The participants shared how their social support aided in understanding situational stress and considering how situations are in or out of their control.

***Self-Acceptance.*** Each participant spoke to how a sense of self-acceptance about being conditionally admitted and their academic abilities were necessary to succeed. Each person used different coping skills or had a situation that aided in this idea of self-acceptance. When Bob talked about how he copes with the struggles he has had academically, he reminds himself of his good attributes:

I've had a lot of good experiences and a lot of bad experiences for academics. I want people to know that I work hard and I want to succeed ... sometimes it doesn't seem that way for some classes than for others. Some people can have a totally different experience with me, sadly. It depends of the class if it's a little bit easier [for me]. I'm a hard worker, and I really care about other people.

Similarly, Savannah focused on academic strategies that worked in the past when academics increased in difficulty. As someone who was homeschooled for most of her life, she leaned into her skills related to back planning, reaching out to ask for help when confused or lost, and had a consistent schedule to stay motivated. These habits helped Savannah earn a spot on the Academic Dean's List in her first semester of college. She

was “so excited about that because I had kept up my GPA, was lifted off of [CA] status, and I get my academic scholarship again.” When she realized she could lose her academic scholarship if she did not reach the minimal GPA requirement for being a CA student, she was nervous. Savannah would not have been able to afford to attend SCU or any college without it. Therefore, making the Dean’s List was an academic success because that meant she would keep paying for college.

Quinn took the opportunity to reflect on their “academic rock bottom.” They noted that this rock bottom was beneficial for them in their life:

I feel like these battles that I’ve gone through have made me so much stronger as a person and a student. I wouldn’t trade those hard struggles for anything. I understand how I work as a person, and it has helped me think about what I need to do for school and like my future and how to give back to my community.

Quinn also noted that this rock bottom they experienced helped them figure out how to advocate for themselves. After feeling discouraged in a class and not receiving much help from the faculty member, Quinn pushed through the feeling of discomfort and asked the faculty for more help during office hours. They said, “I felt like I could never have done that like, ya know, ask for help and stuff in high school, and now I have a 3.9 GPA. I’m so proud of myself.”

Madeline spoke explicitly about how the Academic Enrichment course aided in her self-acceptance concerning academic ability. She felt that the class helped her figure out how college “was supposed to work, how important my schedule was ... and how to manage my time better.” After refining her class skills, she felt more confident during the rest of the semester and moving into her second semester. Henry also spoke specifically

about how the Academic Enrichment course boosted his confidence in asking for help when he needed it and “the importance of accepting who you are and like what you need to work on.” When he received his first A on a college paper after seeking a tutor in the Center for Student Enrichment as a requirement for the Academic Enrichment course, he also felt more confident in his writing skills.

Jackie and David talked about their jump from their past institutions during gap years to how they did academically at SCU. Jackie did “so good academically” compared to where she was before. After getting on the Academic Dean’s list, she saw this as a door opening to “being able to do anything I put my mind to.”

**“It was all just very frustrating”: Influence of Communication Methods**

Communication specifically related to the institution delivering the academic policy and CA expectations was a frequent code being used over 60 times in the interviews. This code broadly covers communication related to the participants' conditional admission notification, transfer credits, the application process, and scholarships. Most participants were pleased with their conditional admission status because it meant they had access to the institution. Some of the participants were disappointed that they had additional requirements and reiterated that pressure related to the expectation to do well. Transferring credits had an overwhelmingly negative experience that was highlighted in the critical incident discussions. Common difficulties included not understanding why standard classes did not transfer into the institution and general frustration with communicating with staff within the Registrar’s Office. Some of the participants explained feeling content with the ease related to the application process.

A few participants also shared confusion about earning academic scholarships while also being admitted conditionally to the institution.

### ***Conditional Admission Notification***

David vividly remembers receiving his acceptance email. He was “very joyful” when he received it because SCU was the institution he wanted to attend. SCU did not send a formal admissions letter, nor was there a specific conditional admission letter for him. He realized he was conditionally admitted when he arrived during summer orientation to register for classes. The person helping him put his schedule together told him he could not register for more than 15 credits because he was conditionally admitted:

I didn’t ask her what that meant, uh, because I uh didn’t know. It was kinda embarrassing ... when I got on campus though for fall, and I got my orientation packet, that is when I knew I had to go to the seminar.

After that meeting, he understood what it meant to be CA. He was okay with the admission status and did not have a strong emotional response positively or negatively. Instead, he “realized that I needed to focus, really focus in the first semester” to have his CA status lifted.

Quinn reflected very positively on their admission notification:

Thank God they accepted me as a CA because it has really benefited me going through those experiences of my academics, to be pushing me for greater students. If I didn’t go through that and I was like a regular student or whatever, I feel like I wouldn’t learn or like I wouldn’t have had that pressure on me, I feel like it just helped me so much.

They also noted that their younger sibling was planning on attending SCU in the fall of 2020 and was also placed in the academic enrichment course. They gave their sibling advice related to being conditionally admitted:

They have to take the class, the actual full semester class. I told them even though they are annoying, or they seem like, annoying right now, I told them in the long run, they will help you so much, benefit you on how to navigate your school and how to navigate your work and, for them, they have to pay out of pocket for tuition. They have to pay for those classes and, I'm like, I know they seem, you don't want to waste your money you know? I told them these classes will benefit you, you're not wasting your money on education. You're never going to do that.

Education is education at the end of the day, these things are going to benefit you.

Quinn then reflected on their own experience on what being conditionally admitted meant for them. They learned how to reach out to people, that associated negative feelings with college do not have to be a load to carry alone, and that the faculty are there specifically to get students through college.

Jack thought "being conditionally admitted was awesome." He had a similar feeling of gratitude that Quinn expressed with a combined sense of appreciation for the campus community. Jack realized that he was not alone in struggling academically and knew there would be others to assist him but that his academics were his to succeed in. While a sense of ownership was necessary, he also felt that being conditionally admitted was "a door of opportunity for those who really care about their education." This opportunity was being able to attend college even when his "academic skills hindered my testing ability. I was willing. I really wanted this." Jack vividly remembers receiving his

acceptance notification by mail, and he felt an overwhelming sense of accomplishment and hope for the future because of his admission. As for his conditional admission notification, Jack remembered that this information was not included in the letter and could not remember any other notification before seeing the academic enrichment seminar on his schedule when he arrived for fall orientation.

Without other options, Jackie would have had to start from scratch without her conditional acceptance. It allowed her a “second chance without having to go take time away from school.” Even though she was happy with the acceptance, Jackie did not know she was conditionally admitted until she arrived at the Academic Enrichment Seminar. David also spoke about the opportunity or second chance that came with his conditional admission. He noted that being a CA student “gave me the opportunity to help the school with videos and be able to pursue my passion. It just gave me the opportunity to be a better student than I was before.” Madeline did not have a strong recollection of her conditional portion of her admissions letter but did remember being very excited that she was accepted to the institution.

Savannah expressed frustration and confusion with her CA status notification. When she received her acceptance to SCU, she did not receive notification about it being conditional. She received the same package that came with an acceptance to the institution: a confetti popper, banner, and the “normal” admissions letter. When she arrived on campus and found out her admission was conditional, this caused confusion and frustration:

I didn't even get one [CA admissions letter or call]. I got an email [later] about it [seminar], but nobody told me what it was. Nobody told me what it was about. I

showed up to the seminar very confused ... I was very upset about it. I don't know. It wasn't a great experience, because I was very confused as to why I would get academic scholarships, but also I was thrown into this random meeting that nobody decided to talk to me about or explain to me what it was.

Bob was not worried when he received his admissions notification. He already planned on going to SCU, conditionally or regularly, and shared some neutrality related to his CA status:

I mean, like, I know my abilities, and obviously, some things are harder [for me] than others. And some things are easier for me to do than others. But like, I don't know, it's just I know who I am and like my capabilities and weaknesses and that's fine ... none of that stuff [admissions status] really matters if you do your work.

Instead of concern or excitement related to the admissions status, Bob felt confident that he would be able to perform and stay at the institution once he arrived. John had a very neutral reaction to being conditionally admitted once he found out. He received the admissions notification via email but SCU never sent a physical letter or a conditional admission letter. Once he arrived at SCU and realized he was conditionally admitted, John was not concerned about it. Since he has learning disabilities, he is used to being on some type of academic remediation and quickly being lifted off. Therefore, John was not surprised but did not have a strong resentment or excitement related to the status. For him, this was normal and "didn't really affect me in a meaningful way ... or at least consciously." John wished there had been something verbal related to his CA notification so that he would have been able to ask questions and fully understand what it meant.

This theme has included both positive and negative impressions participants shared about the conditional admission notification. Importantly, each student had individualized reactions and feelings related to this information. All participants expressed happiness being admitted to the institution. Most of the participants were disappointed that they faced additional requirements and reiterated the feeling of pressure or stress I addressed in the first theme. These reactions are critical to note because they complement the work of various researchers of conditional admission (Adebayo, 2008; Clark, 2009; Clinedinst & Nichols, 2013; Parisis, 2012; Wildman, 2016). The reactions also connect to Schlossberg's (2011) transition theory as the unanticipated event of being conditionally admitted shapes their situational understanding of control, the duration of the event, and self-related factors that seem to influence their response to the notification.

### ***Difficulty Transferring Credits to SCU***

Many participants had college credits they transferred into SCU due to a gap year to raise their GPA or because college courses were taken in high school. Participants with credits experienced significant issues related to communicating with the Registrar's Office and attempting to transfer their college credits. Over half of John's credits did not transfer even though the college he was taking courses at was listed as a "sister or like partner school where credits were guaranteed to transfer to SCU." This experience resulted in him not graduating early, taking out loans for his year he was not anticipating paying for, and adding to his overall student loan debt. David also expressed frustration with not having clarity from his high school or SCU about what classes at his community

college would have transferred, even after asking in advance. He felt that he wasted precious time and finances on classes that did not count towards his degree.

Madeline had a similarly disappointing experience when her general college credits in psychology, biology, composition, and sociology did not transfer. While the number of classes may not have been large, “it would have still been a, uh, well almost a full semester I would not have had to pay for.” While disappointed, Madeline felt grateful that two of her classes did transfer, and she felt that she made the right choice to attend SCU. Jackie wished that she would have had someone helping her to advocate for transferring her salvageable credits to SCU. She was initially told that only 11 credits were going to transfer, which was lower than she expected. She had to review her transcript and try to figure out why the rest were not eligible. When she would ask the Registrar’s Office for clarity, she would get the response that “this is a different class than ours when they were general classes that we [SCU] has [sic] like psychology and biology.” Jackie started pushing back to ask the Registrar’s Office to reconsider since her prior state school did not help advocate for transferring classes. SCU required her to find her old syllabi to verify the classes were college-level courses even though they were listed on her transcript. She described the process, “It was all just, like, *extensively* [emphasis added] more difficult for common classes to be transferred from a very *established* [emphasis added] state school to SCU, which is like much newer and smaller school ... It was all, just, very frustrating.” Transferring credits was a significant barrier for the participants. The added stress and financial implications seem to create additional barriers that increased communication could resolve.

### **“I had such high expectations”: Sense of Belonging and Academic Self-Efficacy**

The feeling of belonging and believing in one’s academic abilities were codes frequently used over 40 times within the interviews. This theme broadly covers the transition to the institution, peer connection, and faculty and staff encounters. Each participant shared varying experiences related to transition, but first-year orientation came up 22 times as the most discussed common experience. Participants shared varying interactions with peers, faculty, and staff.

#### ***Transition to College***

All the participants spoke about the transition to college in various ways related to institutional supports like first-year orientation or interactions with others at the beginning of the school year. Savannah expressed how helpful first-year orientation was to her transition:

I really liked it [orientation] a lot, and I’m actually going to be a part of the organization that does it this year. I thought it was so much fun, and they did a great job. They welcomed you as you’re coming in, and they’re all excited, and you just like was really good.

She also shared how exciting it was to know people from her home state and separately, how she could connect with other new students. This experience affirmed her decision that attending SCU was the right decision because of the students she met. While she reflected fondly on this experience, Savannah wished that first-year orientation would have been a bit more practical as a first-generation college student. Items such as security protocols and how parking tickets on-campus work in a metropolitan city were never covered by staff leading the informational sessions. Students were expected to “just read

the book” relating to the student handbook and code of conduct rather than receiving the institution's basic information and rules. Savannah shared, “I would have experienced like a lot less consequences financially and conduct wise if this stuff would have been covered in depth.”

David also reflected on first-year orientation as a highlight related to his transition. Since he was coming to SCU from a community college, he felt that it influenced him “in a more positive way.” The experience at SCU required him to be more active in meeting other students, and “being more engaged in that college type of life made me able to participate in student activities.” As a result, he was more vulnerable with others and got to know new people. Compared to his experience during his gap year with the community college, he felt “a real sense of life here [at SCU] compared to community college where you go to class and go home.” Once classes began and the semester started to take off, David also recounted how he loved the ability to connect with peers with similar interests, which allowed him to feel “just more focused on my major and my classes. It makes me open to the environment more than my [community college].”

While Henry appreciated orientation as a space to understand the campus culture and norms, he also had concerns with the orientation leaders. He noted calling these students Peer Leaders was shortsighted and made him disappointed the rest of the year:

Like the student leaders were present during orientation, but like there was no follow-up with any of us [first-year students] past that week. How do you call someone a leader when all they do is lead team-building activities and icebreakers ... that’s not leadership, that’s like a camp counselor.

Madeline spoke to the ease of connecting with new people during orientation which helped her feel more comfortable moving through the space of college. As a first-generation college student, she had many questions about where and how to access services, where to go to get basic needs met (toothpaste, shampoo, soap) and, where to access help if she was sick. Orientation acted as a “camp week before college really started” to help her feel more comfortable with her surroundings. She also noted that the week also felt like “chaos” as there was so much expected of the new students that there was no space to take in that “this is college, and this is where you will spend your next four years.” David also shared this idea of a week of space before the reality of college set it in. This space allowed him to reflect on how positive the experience was as it allowed him to “understand the atmosphere of SCU, and it felt more alive to me” where he had options to get involved in the community in the city as well. Jack and John echoed the experience about the reality of college sinking in while buying books the fall semester.

The stories shared by the participants about the transition to the institution are important because they add to bodies of research on conditionally admitted students. Orientation seems to be essential to the participants of this study, as does the opportunity to connect with peers. These experiences seem to connect to this study's theoretic framework and give insight into how to support CA students entering higher education institutions.

### ***Peers Shaping Sense of Belonging***

Peers had a significant influence on the participants’ feeling of connection to the institution, sense of belonging to the campus community, or feelings of isolation and

exclusion. These feelings were significant at the beginning of the participants' transition but also carried on throughout the year. Some of the participants felt cared for and supported because of the way their peers acted toward them. Bob shared an experience with a peer whom he connected with after a chapel service in the fall. SCU brought a speaker to the chapel, which made Bob sit and think after the service was over. This peer sat next to him, and they had a "crazy awesome conversation, and he ended up being a stern friend but, uh, very supportive person in my life." This connection has lasted throughout his first year, and it has helped him see that there are peers who want to see him be successful. Bob also spoke about his close friend group and how they increased his feeling of belonging to the institution. He felt what was most influential about having a close group of friends is that they were the people who were always there for him no matter what. This safety made him feel that he could have many surface-level friendships, and he knew that he had those who would "always have my back."

Henry spoke about deep relationships that he built on the lacrosse team. As someone interested in SCU because of the ability to attend college, play a sport, and go to a place where his family was connected to, he assumed that SCU would "automatically feel like home." When this was not the case, his teammates helped him feel like he had a group he could be himself around. They helped him through difficult situations like when a floormate passed away or when he had struggled with his mental health. Their care and concern are what made him feel like he belonged. Savannah echoed this feeling of being cared for by saying that because she met her "real friends" she feels she can be most authentically herself without fear of being ridiculed. Like Savannah, David felt that his

peers encouraged him to learn more about himself and who he “really was” and felt grateful to be included.

Madeline shared it was challenging to make friends at first because of her accent and having English as her second language. For her, being bilingual is something she is proud of, but it takes time for her to process what people say and how to respond:

I have to think really hard about what I was going to say and, uh, [*10 second pause*] if this is the right word and what if they don’t understand what I am trying to say? It made me feel, uh, well self-conscious about talking to them.

Over time, this difficulty to connect changed as her friendships are no longer surface level. Her friends are the people who “understand who I am.” Once she became more confident, she found that group of core friends, and they are the ones who “helped me grow into the person I am today.” This connection creates “the reason I stay [at SCU].” Quinn shared that their friends made a difference in convincing them to stay in college. Having friends who understood their culture “helped me through many of my struggles because they listened and were there for me. They really got it.”

Even with the many positive experiences shared, participants also expressed deeply disappointing experiences that caused them to question whether they really belonged. Henry shared that some of his initial friend groups made it an obstacle to staying at SCU because their values and focus differed. Out of all the experiences that were “not so great,” the ones with friends or peers were “by far the most influential when I was questioning, like, did I make the right decision? Do I like really belong here?”

Quinn shared about how they had expectations of what they thought the institution and their peers would be like:

There were some positive moments before going to school, and I felt like very excited because I was like, oh, like, I'm going to be accepted by all my peers. Like who's to say that my peers won't accept me, or my faculty won't accept me. In most cases, you know, this was the truth. Many students were welcoming and like, faculty that were welcoming. But on the other, like numerous cases, there was that feeling that I felt lied to because I was told this is a Christian university, and if God's people are here then we will all love each other and respect each other. So, I had such high expectations. Then when I experienced the opposite of what I felt like, like not being welcomed because I am different than everyone else, it crushed me. I wanted to hide or like hid who I was. I felt like the good experiences were like good, but the bad experiences outweighed them.

Quinn stated that staying at SCU and college, in general, were difficult because of these negative experiences.

Savannah talked about experiences with her first-year roommate that were disappointing. As a student of color, Savannah was excited to be living with another person of color because she grew up in a predominately White town. As a white and Middle Eastern person who is also White-passing, she felt that her roommate did not realize she was a person of color at first and may not have wanted to be around her. Savannah assumed her roommate thought she was "only White and that I was going to be like all the other white kids who didn't get it." The "it" that Savannah talked about related to experiencing discrimination and racism as a person of color. This experience of explaining to her roommate that she was not "totally White" was challenging for her

because she assumed that her roommate would not make that assumption about her.

Savannah reflected on this experience in-depth:

Part of me wonders like, I wonder what she [roommate] and her friends experienced as dark-skinned people of color when they went around the school and stuff and then when they went back to the room and tried to retreat to that space as a solitude almost ... and I feel like I was interrupting. And like I didn't have that because to most of the kids here I just look like a tan white girl. It was just hard.

Savannah was also disappointed when she realized there was no "real space" at SCU where multicultural competency and support to engage in complex dialogue would be provided. The reality was:

If you are one race, you are expected to all hang out together and there is no real help from school. Plus, like there isn't a lot of modeling from the school, either right? Like how to have a conversation like, hey I need the room because I need a space away from the racism that I experience every day. Like you can't expect, because we are both people of color that we are going to know how to talk to each other about this stuff.

Savannah and Quinn's experiences are essential because they give understanding to the essence of their experience at the research site as Black, Indigenous, and students of color.

David also spoke about the tension he felt with peers once he arrived at SCU, which differed from his assumption of the environment. He felt at a disadvantage because he wanted to attend SCU out of high school but could not because he did not meet the

academic requirements. After his gap year at community college to raise his GPA, he felt thrilled to be accepted at SCU where he had initially wanted to be. Once he arrived, he felt “most of the relationships are surface level.” Until he found his core group of friends, when he would say hello to someone, and they would ignore him or would not say hello back. It was hard for him not to take that personally. He wondered if these interactions connected to how he looked, how he talked, or something else he did not consider.

Jack described how finding relationships with peers who will “always be there” was difficult. He ended up leaning on those he lived with and noticed a pattern in other peers:

Roommates are a big deal. I think we really lean on who we live with as much as we want to or don't want to. Because like, sometimes you don't want to open up to people, which is very real, but I ended up opening up with the people I lived with because it was easy. Right like they were just always there.

Jackie also expressed the influence of her rooming situation but as a disappointing experience. As someone who had lived at home and college was the first time not being in her own space, Jackie struggled to set her schedule and get enough sleep to feel rested. This influenced how she was able to study and perform academically, which was necessary because of her CA status.

The experiences shared by the participants in this section show varying responses to relationships with their peers and how these connections influenced their feeling of connection to the institution, sense of belonging to the campus community, or feelings of isolation and exclusion. The participants seemed to prefer or desire a genuine connection with their peers and peers who understand their underserved identities. In addition, a few

participants expressed a desire for increased cultural competence of their peers and the institution. It is also essential to understand that the feelings shared were significant at the beginning of the participants' transition and carried on throughout the year.

### ***Faculty and Staff Shaping Sense of Belonging***

Faculty and staff had significant influences on the participants' sense of belonging and self-efficacy related to their academic ability. Participants brought up faculty in four main categories that transpired either in-class or out-of-class connections: feeling supported, caring actions, engaging and helpful conversations, or being misunderstood by faculty. David shared how his experiences with faculty made him feel like they invested in the students at the institution:

They [faculty] invest their time in their students, to help them and to help them grow, but also to motivate and challenge us to do what we need to do. You know, they are very supportive, and just like, they helped me get the work I needed to get done, done.

After sharing vulnerability in class about personal aspects of her life story, Savannah had a faculty member reached out to her and affirmed that her story and experiences were valid and important for others to hear. This conversation made her feel that "wow that is really cool of you [faculty member] to support me and that I'm not just another student in your class who pays your salary." Outside of this individual experience, generally, she feels that most of the faculty truly care about the student body and what happens related and unrelated to their academics. She also talked about an experience with a faculty member who made her feel fully supported. This faculty member "was a rock when I was experiencing a difficult situation at home which made it difficult for me to be

fully present in my academics.” By not being mentally present, Savannah started to think that she was not worthy to be at college. The faculty member would actively reach out to her, and she helped Savannah understand that “yes academics are important, but my wellbeing must always come first.” This experience was so important to her that she emailed the faculty member and:

I told her what an impact she made on my life and how I aspire to be like that one day. The amount of grace I was given when I didn’t deserve it... it was such an impactful experience to have someone care for you that way without expecting anything in return.

Savannah also had a negative experience with a faculty member after the institution transitioned to virtual learning at the beginning of stay-at-home orders during the COVID-19 pandemic. She felt that a faculty member struggled to transition due to their inexperience teaching online. While she tried to be patient during the transition, she felt neglected as a student because of the inorganization related to posting quizzes or assignments last minute. When Savannah contacted the professor to request a meeting, the faculty member “would respond randomly and say, I am free now, hurry up.” In an attempt to reschedule, she would receive responses telling her she was “too late and you missed the window to connect.” These interactions left Savannah feeling like her questions were not valid and that she was missing something the rest of the class must have already figured out.

John expressed feeling supported by faculty but was also quick to note that there was a stark difference between faculty saying and showing that they care. This showing of care happens not only in words but by actions, using “active teaching styles” and

connecting outside of lecture. In the second semester, John lost a very close friend, and some of his faculty adjusted assignments, and “she ... gave grace to me that I didn’t show that I deserved before this happened and then supported me moving forward.” John spoke candidly about how this example stood out of a faculty member who removed barriers for him to stay afloat academically and put “their values into action.”

Close connection with faculty members made Bob feel academically capable. He shared that it was easier for him to “put in the effort and push yourself when you know about a faculty member as a person.” Bob appreciated vulnerability and willingness to share faculty members’ struggles or challenges. Bob used an example with his first-year composition faculty. This faculty member invested their time into Bob and made him feel cared for, and held him accountable for producing the academic work they knew Bob was capable of. Bob said,

This accountability changed the way I study and, uh, how I like, think about myself because, like in this class, it didn’t seem like [faculty member] really cared and then after class with [faculty member] I realized they do, and I want to work hard for those who care about me.

Bob also noted he felt disengaged when faculty members come to class to teach, and they do not take the time to get to know their students.

Madeline also spoke to the idea of actions being more significant than words. As a person with disabilities and as a non-native English speaker, she experiences multiple communication barriers daily. She described feeling “frustrated,” and she has a hard time “processing information in class,” which made her feel that faculty were more impatient with her than her peers. Madeline began to think that her faculty did not care about her as

a person or her academic success. She reflected, “when they [faculty] say they are there for you but then don’t say your name in that class or go into depth when you [ask a] question, do they really care?” Madeline was nervous to reach out for help until her Academic Enrichment course faculty member shared ideas on addressing these concerns. After seeing slight improvement, Madeline wondered if being conditionally admitted or a non-native English speaker changed how her faculty connected with her because she felt they spoke to other students more than her.

David had a math professor instill a sense of confidence in him that he did not have before attending SCU. David had taken algebra at the community college and did not pass the class. At SCU, his faculty member aided in his understanding by staying after class to work through formulas he found difficult. This time the faculty member encouraged him to apply the extra effort that he “took with me for the rest of my classes and really helped me be confident in my abilities.” Jack echoed the importance of faculty shaping his academic self-efficacy because of how a faculty member “shaped my holistic growing because I always looked forward to class with [faculty member].” This excitement led him to be more focused in class, and he started to view required classes as “classes that could shape me as a whole person who can contribute to the wider community when I graduate.”

Quinn shared how some faculty made it hard to remain at SCU because the faculty made them feel “like less of a person.” In one instance, Quinn spoke up in class about a racist comment made by a student, and the faculty member did not intervene or back up Quinn. Rather, the faculty member tried to move on completely by ignoring the conversation even happened. Quinn was brought to tears by the interaction, left class immediately, and missed a quiz at the end of class. They told the faculty member:

I am not doing the quiz, and you need to give me an extension because you made me feel this way in your class, and you didn't stick up for me. You didn't say anything to the student that made me feel so upset. So, I am not going to do this quiz, it's the least they could do for me.

Quinn was not alone in having these types of experiences and spoke about friends who shared similar experiences throughout their first year. Quinn began to question their place at SCU because of these collective experiences:

I would think like do I even belong in this school? Like, am I even going to make it? Stuff like that would creep up, and I would have these negative thoughts that I shouldn't be thinking. But those people made me feel like I felt like it was going to be impossible to stay here. It is their job to education people; it's not my job. Like I am a social work major, the faculty should be able to have hard conversations about race and racism instead of looking at the one person of color in class.

The experiences with faculty and staff are important because it gives insight into how significant faculty and staff relationships are to the participants. These experiences also give insight into how conditionally admitted students with historically underserved identities have barriers that their non-conditionally admitted peers may not have. Concerning Rendón's (1993) framework, out-of-class experiences seemed to hold more significance than in-classroom experiences for these conditionally admitted students. It is also essential to note that faculty and staff have clear implications of conditionally admitted students' sense of self, perception of their academic ability, and sense of belonging to the institution.

### **“There is just so much more I want and need to be doing”: Transition Stressors**

This theme broadly covers the four main transition stressors and coping mechanisms the participants perceived. Half of the participants shared significant stress before or after matriculation to the institution related to finances. Most participants had positive reflections related to the culture and critiques about how the environment caused excessive stress on their lives. All participants shared stories of support from their parents. All participants spoke about the Christian culture of the university and how it positively or negatively influenced their transition to college. A few participants reflected on how their families created an additional barrier to transitioning to the institution. All participants shared how the overall transition to college influenced their well-being and coping skills used to mitigate negative influences of stress. Within the personal relationships section, peers, faculty, and staff did make significant positive and negative impressions on participants’ transition. These topical areas are discussed in-depth earlier in chapter four under sense of belonging and self-efficacy.

#### ***Preparing Finances for College***

Prepping financially for college, implications of participants’ financial situation on their stress levels, and family expectations or participation in participants’ fiscal health were important to all the participants. David talked about finances in conjunction with his parents’ expectations:

David: My dad did not, did not want for ... didn’t want me to work at school because it could impact my financial aid. So, he wanted me to, for him to pay it off himself. For the family to pay it off.

Researcher: Did you say earlier the payment plan was something that you all

did?

David: Yeah. Um, I did the payment plan instead of private loans even though I didn't want to because, like, I just really didn't want to take out loans. And it was very flexible. And mainly because of my dad.

Savannah pays some of her tuition, and her parents pay the rest. She applied for whatever scholarships she was eligible for and takes out loans wherever there is a gap. She did not receive significant financial aid support because:

My stepdad makes a comfortable amount [of money], but the FASFA does not take into consideration the nine kids in the family; four of us are currently attending college.

If Savannah were not conditionally admitted, she would have qualified for more scholarship money. She expressed this can be "really frustrating" because she felt that she could take that financial pressure off her parents. Before attending SCU, Savannah worked extensive hours to attempt to meet her gap in aid. It was vital for her to "save up a lump sum of money working at Starbucks so that I don't have to work and can just focus on school." As Savannah thought forward to Sophomore year, she felt she had a good handle on her academic habits where she will be able to handle working a few shifts a week to pay part of her tuition.

John does not pay for tuition at SCU because of a religious scholarship. Even with this benefit, John and his parents still focused very heavily on the financial aspect of college during the search process:

I was kind of going to go to [institution name] because I had a sibling there and the missionary kid community at [institution name] is ridiculous...but, um, so I

just kind of was like, ah, this is where people go because they already know people and it's like really expensive. I just couldn't do that, so...after talking to my parents, they're like, you should consider and my dad like had charts, he's such a dad, but he had like charts and stuff and was like you should consider SCU because it's so much cheaper.

He decided to attend SCU because he would have less to pay overall. His only responsibilities are covering room and board, health and car insurance, vehicle maintenance, books and school supplies, and other personal expenses. To pay for these things, John has done "some kind of job over the years." Since he arrived in the United States before starting at SCU, he has been financially independent of his parents as expected. Being financially independent, he has struggled to balance working to pay for school and living expenses while needing to complete his schoolwork. While he assumed most college students have this similar experience, he says this lack of balance "can set me back in school" because he usually places more effort in school or working to pay for school.

Quinn did not hear a lot about college growing up. All they knew was going to high school, and that college seemed impossible. Anything they did hear about college was that it was costly and "something we [family] could never afford." Once they received the full-ride tuition scholarship, Quinn spent the summer saving up all the extra money they could get not to have to work during the school year. They also spoke to their development into being an adult:

I had to develop in a good way of like, being an adult. Ya know like independent [chuckles]. But for real, as a Hispanic, we're just really family-oriented, and

whatnot, and my parents now understand that I can't come home every weekend to be with them, but I also have to understand I can't depend on them financially because it's time for me to learn how to navigate my money and manage it. Now that my sibling is coming to SCU, they have to help her pay, so I have to figure out how to take care of myself.

Jack also thought deeply about finances during his college search. He reflected on assumptions he held and pieces of advice he received:

Yeah, money ... I was always told that you should try and graduate with no debt. I was also, I always heard about like, college is good. Like, you should go to college so you can do something meaningful. My mom went to some community college, and my dad did not. They have always encouraged me to get a degree. And yes, it was, I mean, it was talked about, my sister didn't go to college. It wasn't like forced on me, but I knew I wanted to. It was a personal desire. But I always heard college is super expensive.

This idea of leaving college with no debt was reinforced when he attended a summer camp two years before attending SCU. One of the counselors spoke about the number of student loans he had taken out and the stress related to repaying loans. Jack felt more convinced that he should do "everything in my power" to leave college with no financial debt. Jack was a commuter student when he started at SCU to reduce the amount of debt he would have at the end of his college career. He realized he was missing out on having the experience of a "typical college kid, and I have to be willing to kind of do that [take out loans]." He said that it was not realistic to hold the belief of leaving college without

loans “even though there is always the stress to have to have no debt when you leave college.”

The participants’ notions outlined in this section related to finances being essential to their transition to the institution. The participants had assumptions about how expensive college was and what accruing this expense would mean for them.

Conditionally admitted students typically do not qualify for extensive scholarships or grants because their GPA or ACT scores are low. It is essential to know and consider that the participants in this study were CA and came from low-income households. Therefore, compounding financial pressures resulted in making significant decisions because of financial needs. They also talked about how they had to work more than preferred to make ends meet.

### ***Institutional Culture as Fulfilling and Depleting***

As a Christian university, SCU has specific lifestyle expectations of students related to the code of conduct, attending religious services, and the institution's culture developed from its religious affiliation. Participants brought up the idea of institutional Christian culture frequently and associated it with their growth or faith development. The participants also shared the unique challenges related to attending a religious institution. Many participants spoke about wanting to attend the institution because of the idea of a Christian college. Quinn was new to the Christian faith in high school and wanted to participate in a Christian-affiliated institution that would foster and develop their faith. They reflected on this essential aspect but balancing it with financial issues during the college search process:

When I started looking at what college I wanted to go to, and one of the biggest things that I really wanted was that my faith was in college and I'd hear of [nearby institution name], like one of the biggest schools, and I heard and I initially I wanted to go there. Just because that was one of the only ones, I knew about. But then I was like, how am I going to pay for college? That was like one of the biggest questions for me. Yeah. Then I heard about the scholarship program for full-ride tuition ... that's when I realized there were other colleges, I could go to that had faith as their background.

Savannah had been bullied in junior high school for being outspoken about her faith and kept it hidden from her high school friends. She spoke about what it felt like to go to a new place where there were other people who openly believed what she believed:

When I went to SCU, I was like, *wow*. People just want to be friends with me for who I am. They love me for who I am. I was so insecure making friends there, because I didn't know that any of them are going to last or that they were truly going to love me for who I was, or that they were going to love me for my passion for my faith and stuff like that. I really regained that confidence when I started at SCU, and my confidence built up again, because I was able to make a lot of good friends, and I actually found my boyfriend there too.

Jack wanted to attend "a kind of college that was a Christian or religiously affiliated and that I could study theology at." When he saw the affiliation of SCU, he automatically said, "oh, it's [denomination], there is no way I am going to go there." After his time completing college credits at the institution during high school, he said:

I had already fell in love. I knew this place is amazing, but like, I remember stepping for, uh, on campus, and there was something different that I felt when I was around the community [pause] the culture here was so different.

Quinn, Savannah, and Jack all shared how the religious affiliation or the faith-based nature of the institution was essential to their search process. The participants' experiences helped me understand how their college search process was limited to being a religious institution and admitting them based on their academic profile.

Many participants focused on how they view the institutional culture now. John described the culture as spiritually invigorating by saying, "SCU has a thriving kind of like, presents opportunities for students who want to grow spiritually, and they're [opportunities] very like, they're easily as accessible I guess I should say." Bob felt that he has grown as a person since attending college and felt that the culture invited his opinions and thoughts:

I'm also not afraid to give my opinion now. I realize that, uh, people want to hear my opinion, and my opinion matters, so that's great. [*chuckles*] Definitely, that. I would say I am more secure in who I am and confident and realizing that people care about what I say.

Bob and John shared how the accessibility of spiritual development increased their confidence and was overall a positive aspect to their transition to the institution.

Participants were quick to add aspects of the culture that made it difficult to persist at the institution. SCU requires students to attend chapel Monday through Friday. Pending on a student's year in college, the institution gives "passes" not to attend chapel. First-year students have fewer passes than the rest of the student population. Savannah

pinpoints this policy of passes and the sheer number of times they attend chapel for spiritual development as “a damper on my first-year experience.” Going to chapel every day became difficult. She described herself as someone who typically loves going to religious services, spiritual development workshops, speakers, and other spiritual development activities when they are not required. By the end of her first year, she said, “I was just so sick of going that I was leaving early. I’m not even going to lie and say I didn’t. I was leaving early every single day.” Savannah noted that forcing students to attend chapel and participate in additional spiritual development was adverse. The requirements made her and her friends feel that it was another way the institution was “trying to control us.” She wished that quality would be the focus of chapel services rather than quantity.

Madeline also felt that the chapel requirements were “overwhelming, and there is just so much else I need and want to be doing than go to church all the time.” Jack also spoke to how chapel speakers can make the culture of the institution difficult:

The different voices are things that I wouldn’t always agree with, and that would like rub me the wrong way and make me anxious...it is like they had their own personal agenda that outweighed the general outlook of Christianity. Like, don’t use religion to get your own ideas out there, and then like the school should know better than that.

John spoke to finding it difficult seeing fellow students talk about how they abided by the expectations of the denomination and institution and then did the opposite. John also spoke to how SCU is “very gracious, which is good, but I also think sometimes

it can hurt them [students] more than it's helpful to them [students]." He went into depth about this idea:

I think people just easily abuse it. It's just like people, whether it be like, oh, I'm going to break some rule because I know SCU can be like, it doesn't matter. Just write a short essay about why you have changed as a person now, which happens all the time for people breaking the different rules. Like I can write a two-page essay about why I shouldn't be drinking or whatever... to some extent, it's really, yeah, it's sometimes it's detrimental to like the community ... and from like an academic standpoint. I just, I wish the standards across the board were a lot higher ... more consistent amongst, like, different departments.

Quinn spoke very directly to how the culture of the institution was not only difficult to be around but can feel toxic:

SCU was made by old white men back then and, like, old white men still are in leadership and, like, in power here, and they make our rules, you know? SCU says, like, we want more Black, Indigenous, and students of color and people like me who are first to even go to college but then like they expect me to come in and act white instead of like changing how the school works to make it better for me. [10 second pause] Maybe not better, but just like uh, you are just asking me to come in and, uh, act white, and I'm not okay with that. It's like toxic.

This idea of toxicity is something that Quinn also felt from peers. There is a track record of peers turning other peers into campus authority if they do not like someone. Quinn said that their peers use the rules to their advantage to "get us [students] in trouble." They also shared how they experienced repercussions of a "strong patriarchy sense of these are the

rules, the like typical masculine men rules that double down and then the other side of toxic good Christianity.”

Other participants expanded on the idea of the lack of freedom they have felt at SCU because of the campus culture and rules related to drinking, curfew, drugs, and sexual behavior. Henry talked about his friends:

So like, I have had friends where you have problems, and the school really doesn't do a lot to help you. I feel we have a system where it doesn't want to help you, and we get treated like children, and then it ends up hurting us more.

Savannah spoke to this feeling of toxicity from the institution toward students but also from students to other students:

Sometimes I wonder about that, because I have definitely recognized that at SCU ... that pockets of people stay together. Like, there's not a lot of intermixing and connection. There's also not a lot of modeling from the school either, right? Like how do you have conversations with people who are different than you? ... Like from the moment I arrived at school, a lot of people just assume that I'm Mexican, because that's usually what the assumption is with my skin color, and the white kids didn't like want to be friends with me. I ended up being friends with people that had the same skin color as me because they're the ones who were accepting me.

The institutional culture and its influence on the participants are essential to understand because they give insight into the participants' holistic experience as conditionally admitted students. While the connection between conditional admission and institutional culture is not my aim in this study, participants stated the culture influenced

their overall transition and experience. Therefore, understanding the participants' struggle with the culture, the positives, and negatives associated with the culture, and general interaction with the culture are important as these aspects can influence a sense of belonging and persistence.

### ***Parent Influence on Transition Stress***

Throughout the interviews, personal relationships relating to parents had a significant influence in causing or relieving college transition stress. David's stress related to his parents has been very influential on his academics and whom he feels like he should be:

8:00 a.m. [classes] are most difficult for me, especially if you're told to be like a morning person ... it comes from my parents ... They expect me to do random things. Like for instance, I have to get up every day. Not sleep in, especially because it's like get up, eat breakfast, do whatever you need to do, and stay active. Do not wake up at 11 am and expect breakfast. No, you have to be up by 8:00 a.m. *at least* [emphasis added] ... when I was living on campus, I didn't have to worry about all of this too much, but when I'm home now, then I have to worry about the constant nagging, get up on time, do stuff around the house. It's *boring* [emphasis added] and sucks, and I have other school things I need to do. I miss my independence.

David also reflected on the stress related to commuting when he first started college. Since his parents "wouldn't let" him live on campus, he was required to get up very early, take two busses, the train, and then walk to get to campus. He felt commuting made him "not a real student and that I missed out" on social connections and "real college life."

Being at home was a stark difference from when he convinced his parents to let him live on campus because he “had way less stress at the beginning and end of each day.”

Quinn reflected on how their parents had expectations that were out of the realm of possibility because they did not understand what the college environment was like:

They were [5-second pause] they expected me to like come home and like every week because we do live kind of close like 30 minutes away from school, but they expected me to go home or like call every day. And when I did not like when I couldn't call every day and when I couldn't go back every week, it kind of felt like I don't know if resentment is the right word. They just kind of felt like if I was like, if I didn't really care about them, and they kind of made me upset because, like, I was trying to find the balance of full-time college and ah, and dealing with all that.

John shared that his parents “are supportive academically, but you are kind of like on your own. My parents, like, they're there to help if they need to, but they mean, they'd rather not if they don't have to.” This lack of support led to transition stress which was spoken about earlier in this chapter in the section under financial needs met.

Madeline felt pressure from her parents to move back home after her first semester of college because of how expensive it was to live on campus. While she feels like she made the right decision, the decision was made “for my parents and for them to like have more money and stuff.” She also expressed that there was:

A lot of pressure from my parents [pause] because they like put big responsibility on me. So, like they don't need to let me out of the house without a big set of

rules anymore, they just have said you're an adult, and you can take care of yourself.

When Madeline did live on campus, she felt sadness "leaving my parents at home." The transition to the city was hard for Madeline because of the atmosphere of living in a metropolitan area where "the noise was hard to handle," and Madeline "missed the peace and quiet of my house and that my uh parents gave." Savannah noted that "them [parents] letting go of me was very hard and letting go of parenting me." She spoke of a defining moment where she had to sit them down over a break from school to remind them that she "was doing well at college and didn't need their help as much anymore." Jackie said that she "wouldn't be in school at all" if it was not for her parents insisting on continuing her education and focusing on the end goal of "earning a degree."

David, Quinn, and John's experiences hold implications for enrollment management practice to be aware of how external stressors may influence how they may feel part of the campus community. Madeline, Savannah, and Jackie's stories show how the experiences with parents can influence how students may impact the way they transition into the institution. Generally, the participants' experiences show how external forces can influence the transition from conditionally admitted students to an institution and feel fully part of a campus community.

### ***Transition Stress Influencing Overall Wellness***

Bob had difficulty with peers when he struggled with the stress of college and his mental health. He felt "more alone on the harder [mental health] days." The more challenging days typically surrounded the transition to college and adjusting to living in the city's environment. Bob specifically outlined being away from family, being

concerned about his academic status, and feeling overwhelmed because of his academics as three primary stress sources. On hard days, Bob found himself feeling more isolated and harder to connect with those he knew would “pull me out of my funk.” David expressed how sleep habits influenced his stress levels:

Oversleeping is a big one ... it could be that I feel like, I've done other things, and it makes it harder for me to go to class because I'm tired. Or it could be like, I should have, I should have gone to bed earlier. Like a little bit of FOMO (fear of missing out) or just being already *too* involved where it's like, oh, I have all this stuff is happening that I *can't* miss.

Jack echoed this challenge by not falling into the fear of missing out and not staying up until 1:00 a.m. frequently. He reflected on the “lack of longevity I had, as much as I did stay up late, I always did make sure to go to bed at some point. Like I knew I couldn't do this forever or else I couldn't function.” Similarly, John struggled with finding a balance between working to pay for school and having time to participate in his academics. He notes that the first thing to be sacrificed his sleep:

I usually do get good sleep, but like the days I don't really sucks. Yeah, and it's really hard. I don't know. I don't think there are too many other things that hinder me, but the sleep is the big one ... I would sleep for like five or six hours a day. Like, I'll do that for like a month or two. And I was like, yeah, I'm not gonna do this anymore. Yeah, but, um, that kind of sucked but working 15 to 20 hours a week of like full time and like leadership [activities] extra stuff ... that's doable. I think if you know how to manage your time well like I do now, it's not too bad.

This lack of sleep turns into a cycle of working too much, staying up too late to catch up on academics, feeling groggy the next day during class, not retaining the information, and then running from activities. Then, the cycle starts over again. He had begun to find a groove of the financial need so that this cycle does not happen as often as when he first started college.

Quinn started thinking about the transition to college as soon as they received their acceptance to SCU. They started working harder in the current class at the community college and had an increased motivation to finish the semester. With Quinn's academics and finances "taken care of," they focused on preparing to have an emotional transition:

I know that I was not going to live with them [parents] anymore and with my siblings because we are so family oriented. Like, initially like living off, like my family, like, I had to, like, be more mature about things like, you know, like, where I was like I had to [pause] I knew there was going to be such a big freedom coming. So, I had to emotionally prepare myself for that.

Madeline felt her transition to college was difficult. At the end of her first semester, she decided to move home and become a commuter student. Madeline had a significant amount of money left to pay for tuition and could not pay the gap in her bill if she kept living on campus. She had to figure out how to either work more, earn more money in a different job, or move home. Madeline shared her decision to move home:

Like when I see, like, how much I need to pay to do this [*9 second pause*] this [college] is really expensive. Like, okay, well, and then I heard that good things about being a commuter, like, to be a commuter, you can save some money. Yea

... rather than sitting in the dorm and you pay a lot of money, and you have to be tough [with your finances], you could move home. Yeah, and buying your textbooks and like, it's a lot.

She was thankful that this transition did not change her connection with her friends and made the spring semester a lot easier when classes transitioned to all virtual learning because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Quinn decided to focus on the emotional transition to college as they knew it would be difficult for their family since they are the first person to go to college. Bob, Jack, and John reflected on how their transition to college influenced their sleep and health habits. The lack of sleep directly influenced their academic pursuits, which increased stress related to reaching a GPA that would lift them off CA status. Madeline ended up moving home because the financial burden was too much to figure out while trying to do academically well enough to be lifted off CA status. The participants already experienced stress due to being first-year students, transitioning to a new environment, beginning college, and holding underserved identities. Their experiences imply strategies for enrollment management practitioners to assess and evaluate the effect of conditional admission status on student stress levels and decisions associated with this stress.

**Coping Skills.** Each of the participants talked about their coping skills related to college transition individually and without prompting. With extended conversation, asking for help, practicing good academic habits, self-care routines, and sleep were critical coping mechanisms that they identified. Bob kept a planner and a detailed schedule that helped him stay focused on his work. David had intense parental supervision, which was “frustrating” and “overbearing.” Jack and Savannah were both

homeschooled for part of their k-12 education. Savannah shared that during the transition to online schooling during the semester at home due to COVID-19, “it wasn’t the end of the world” because she enjoyed the self-paced work that she had done before. She also mentioned that it has been essential for her to take a mental note to ask herself questions about “okay, this is what’s wrong,” which is the emotion that I’m feeling. Like okay, mind and body, I got it. Just like discovering that, how to deal with emotions effectively and that they are okay has helped with dealing with college.” Jack shared similar benefits of being homeschooled, which made coping with the transition to college smoother.

Henry started paying attention to chapel more as the year progressed because it was helpful for him concerning relieving his stress levels:

I guess going to chapel more. It was just more stress-relieving, or I always go to chapel. I just sat up in the balcony and just was there, but it was nice because I felt closer to God all through the spring semester.

Madeline shared that a planner and fully participating in the Academic Enrichment course were most beneficial. Madeline attempted to participate in activities that allowed her to focus her energy on her wellness, like doing yoga or watching movies with friends. She found self-care to be critical during her first year of college:

Step away from doing all the studying all the time, even when you are trying to get lifted off [of CA status]. Yeah, your brain needs a rest. So those are the stuff I need to do in order for me to be happy and not be anxious or depressed. Like all the negative stuff, I just have to set aside of and go outside and doing fun things.

Jack focused on his spiritual life by having a routine that included prayer, asking for help, and being in the community with others. The aspect of community was

particularly crucial for him as it “really affects the way you go about life ... it affects you more than you know because we absorb what we’re around.” In this sense, he made it a point to note that being in a community of supportive friends was spiritually and holistically rejuvenating for a way of coping. The participants' coping skills are critical to understanding how the participants may have moved through a transition as viewed through Schlossberg’s (2011) transition theory.

### **Chapter Summary**

The critical incidents and phenomenological interviews have consistent themes that complement one another. These themes shed light on the essence of being conditionally admitted and the influence this admission status has on transition and persistence in higher education. The participants’ most memorable satisfactory and unsatisfactory experiences from the critical incidents were institutional policy, staff interactions, and transition support. The incidents shape the way students think about their academic abilities, sense of belonging, and overall attitudes towards the institution and higher education. These experiences also shed light and complement the four themes represented in chapter IV, categorized under the perception of academic ability, the influence of academic communication, institutional influences on sense of belonging, and transitional stressors. The themes from both data collection methods fit under each of the research questions for this study and provide insight into the experience of being a conditionally admitted college student.

The first research question broadly explored conditionally admitted college students' experiences at a small, private, Christian university. All four themes and critical incidents spoke to each participant’s experience at the institution and how their

conditionally admitted status did or did not influence their experiences thus far. For most participants, the awareness of the academic consequences had a direct influence on their academic effort. Each participant spoke to an academic challenge or setback they could come back from and academic successes, which boosted their sense of academic worth. The boost was complemented by affirming experiences the participants had with peers, faculty, and institutional staff. In the critical incidents, interactions with faculty and staff had the most satisfactory incidents of all three categories. The participants also spoke to the challenges in finding balance or difficulty with self-care during their transition to the first year of college. The critical incidents revealed that the transition supports intended to offset these stressors and aid in academic support was the most unsatisfactory category.

The second research question was about the transition to college and how it shapes conditionally admitted students' experiences with college environment stressors. Finances, first-year orientation, personal relationships, and confusion related to being conditionally admitted all added to the stress felt about the participants' college transition. First-year orientation was of most importance in the transition for these participants for two reasons. First, this was the first time most participants had spent time thinking about arriving at college and that moment's gravity. Second, it was the time many of the participants found out they were conditionally admitted. The participants frequently addressed frustration with lack of communication in various forms related to their academics, but specifically about their conditional admission and related to transferring credits. This lack of clarity on policy and process created undue stress that trickled into other aspects of their lives. This echoes the significant inconsistencies found within the document review. The institutional culture created significant barriers for the participants

personally and academically. Most participants pinpointed one or two aspects of the culture that they wished would change, creating more time in their schedules to focus on academics or their social lives.

The third and final research question probed into how institutional supports, interventions, or campus connections shape the decision of conditionally admitted student choice to persistence from the first to second year of college. Most of the participants had very different ideas of which institutional supports or interventions were beneficial. Some participants found great support and skill-building from CA supports, while others found it more of a hassle than anything else. By far, the most common shared support came from a faculty or staff member who showed audience care and concern for the participant as a student and a person. This by far outweighed any other structured institutional support offered to CA students. The participants also noted their peers and friends had a considerable influence on their sense of belonging and in the decision to stay in college. The next chapter will look at the implications of these findings and make suggestions for further research.

## **CHAPTER V**

### **DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND CONCLUSIONS**

This dissertation aimed to explore and understand the experiences of conditionally admitted first-year college students at a private, Christian university who were Black, Indigenous, a student of color, first-generation, or low-income. The research explains the essence of the participants' experiences as CA students and what causes them to persist at South City University (SCU). Understanding how environmental and transition stressors influence their experience and identity as conditionally admitted students was critical to this dissertation. This chapter interprets the findings using the empirical and theoretical literature in five sections. First, I discuss the themes from Chapter IV within current literature and student development theory. Second, I address the implications these findings pose for institutions and those who support conditionally admitted students, and I pass on recommendations for reaching and further research. The chapter ends with a final reflection and conclusion.

#### **Discussion**

Many findings from Chapter IV gave insight into the essence of being conditionally admitted for the participants of the present study. I will discuss the findings in five sections in this chapter in the context of the research questions. The first theme explores the idea of academic resiliency after experiencing personal or academic challenges. Second is the repeated experience of confusion related and unrelated to being

conditionally admitted. The third section explores stress experienced by the participants and various contributors related and unrelated to their conditional admission. Fourth is the importance of relationship building and coping skills related to relieving transition stressors. The last section provides recommendations the participants shared to improve conditional admission requirements, policies, and practices.

### **Academic Resiliency and Skill Development**

All participants offered insight into their own perceived disappointment related to their academic endeavors in their critical incident forms and individual interviews, specifically sensing pressure relating to academic failure or fear of failure. Seven participants shared their reflections related to scoring below 18 on the ACT, which was deemed not adequate by institutional policy and participants alike. Five of the participants spoke explicitly about their disappointment or embarrassment related to being conditionally admitted. When students perceived failure, they were disappointed in themselves and the situation, which resulted in stress related to the failure experience, which seems to affirm DeVilbiss (2014). In some variations, the students realized they were not alone in the experiences or had faculty, staff, or peers remind them they can achieve academic success, which connects to Wildman (2016) and DeVilbiss (2014). They learned from the experience and adjusted their behavior by implementing new skills or reaching out to the appropriate support for help which seems to connect to Cook's (2009) findings of an individual's perception of their locus of control.

Academic resiliency related to overcoming failure affirms Schlossberg's (2011) transition theory. Examples of academic resiliency included, but is not limited to, overcoming shame or embarrassment relating to being conditionally admitted; using time

management and planning skills to stay ahead of coursework; using writing resources after performing poorly on a paper; attending tutoring; and meeting with faculty even when nervous or scared. While I did not ask the participants to evaluate what type of transition their academic failure related to, most events were categorized as either anticipated or unanticipated by the participants. Anticipated events included completing the ACT or submitting a paper for class. Unanticipated events included receiving a poor ACT score or conditional admittance. In Fall 2020, all of the students returned to SCU, and none of them changed their major despite experiencing at least one failure related to their studies.

All the participants have added positive academic habits to their studying practices in response to their academic setbacks. Adding academic habits to their practice suggests the influence or degree to which the transition to or preparation for increased academic rigor created an alteration of daily life for the students, regardless of an anticipated or unanticipated event. These findings also seem to affirm Cook (2009) as the participants' assumption is that the setback or experience initiated action to change the outcome of a situation or expressed belief in their ability to succeed. Implementing new academic habits suggests that most students may have moved through the four Ss that influence the ability to cope with a transition which affirms Schlossberg's (2011) model. The students may have had adequate support and may have developed skills to keep moving forward in their academic careers.

Skill development is foundational in Clinedinst and Nichols's (2013) findings of conditional admission programs' best practices, and specific services that support CA students are featured in-depth by Stewart and Heaney (2013). The services outlined by

Steward and Heaney (2013) focused on skill development include academic advising, tutoring, specific academic curriculum, and other curricula as starting points for academic support for CA students. In the present study, all participants spoke about using resources and services that specialize in skill development through CA requirements or on their own. Some participants discussed working hard in the context of increasing their academic skill development and how this intersected with their identities. This finding extends Wildman's (2016) work about conditionally admitted students based on the identity work of Marcia (1966).

Wildman (2016) found shared themes with their participants of academic resiliency, hard work, confusion, and suggestions for the conditional admission program. The finding of hard work also extends DeVilbiss's (2014) work. In Wildman's (2016) and DeVilbiss' (2014) dissertations, participants shared experiences related to changes in their relationships with their families, growing into their sense of self, building confidence, and gaining more independence as a result of their participation in conditional admission programs. DeVilbiss (2014) used Schlossberg's transition theory Theory to explore the transition of conditionally admitted college students. While these two studies and the present study had different aims and theories structuring the work, participants in all three studies described many of the same experiences. My study affirms Schlossberg's (2011) theory in understanding conditionally admitted students' experiences and can help structure programs, support students in their transition to college, and alleviate this transition's stressors.

## **Confusion with Admissions Status**

All participants in this current study spoke about the confusion and stress they experienced related to being conditionally admitted, interacting with various college policies, and transitioning to the college environment. The confusion began before matriculating to the institution or during first-year orientation, which confirms Clinedinst and Nichols (2013) work. Six participants shared the difficulty they experienced in advocating for transferring credits from another institution or being disappointed by the policy excluding viable credits. Some of Cook's (2009) participants experienced confusion relating to their denial into an institution because of missing credits or confusion concerning requirements needed to enter college. Five of the participants in this study did not receive their designated admission letter. They realized they were conditionally admitted to SCU after they arrived on campus for orientation, which led to feelings of confusion and embarrassment. This affirms Logan's (2017) call for procedural knowledge for conditionally admitted students. Participants expressed general confusion with their transition to college related to the institution's rules or culture and navigating friendships and peers.

Affirming the findings I identified in the present research, most students in the Clinedinst and Nichols (2013) study did not fully understand their conditional admission terms, were confused by their admission letters, or did not thoroughly read the terms of their admission letters. Once the students arrived on campus, they were confused by their admission contracts' requirements. The feelings of confusion also left participants disappointed, embarrassed, confused, and angry, and their reactions are not unique. My study's findings point to experiencing confusion or other adverse reactions to being

conditionally admitted through critical incidents and interviews, which affirms existing research (Clark, 2009; Adebayo, 2008; Parisis, 2012; Wildman, 2016). These findings also affirm Logan's (2017) argument for procedural knowledge. Procedural knowledge refers to using methods of inquiry, skills, and techniques required to accomplish a task (Logan, 2017). Participants in this dissertation study lacked procedural knowledge relating to their transferring of credits or understanding their admission status and requirements of this status.

I did not expect the conditional admission documents reviewed for this dissertation study to show significant inconsistencies. The minimal GPA requirement to lift the CA status is 1.8 based on the CA policy but varies between 1.8 and 2.0 in the admissions letters. Some documents note that CA students may not take online classes, where others say they may proceed with approval from the Center for Student Enrichment. The GE 100 letters state that students must have 20 completed credits by the end of the second semester and that their academic advisor is the academic enrichment coordinator. Both of these requirements are not explicit parts of the CA policy. If all the participants had received their letters, the inconsistencies within those letters would have perpetuated their confusion. It is also critical to remember that the students selected for this study have historically underserved identities. Clinedinst and Nichols (2013) shared that institutions must express the conditions of enrollment to students clearly. Therefore, when SCU communicates inaccurately about their admission conditions, the institution places another barrier in front of students who are already experiencing barriers to accessing, attending, and persisting in higher education.

The conditional admission letters my participants received and the rhetoric of the conditional admission policy at SCU used deficit-minded language. Examples of this language include phrases or words like “those who do not meet requirements”, “must enroll in”, “are required to”, “are limited to”, “do not achieve”, “limit course load”, and “may be dismissed”. These letters and policies provide hints to the attitude that that institution may hold toward these students. Heaney and Stewart (2013) stated that deficit language can cause conditionally admitted students to feel shamed, diminished, and marginalized. The participants expressed feelings of feeling othered, shame for their status, and embarrassment when reading their letters or understanding their admission components, which confirms Heaney and Stewart’s (2013) work.

The admissions letters in this dissertation study threatened dismissal from the institution if the students did not meet the requirements, which affirms Heaney and Stewart's (2013) work. The authors stated that this language builds on a misconception that CA students are inherently at odds with a university mission that others rather than includes them. Additionally, many of the current participants reflected on their conditional admission as an opportunity to attend college they otherwise would not have had, which affirms findings by Cook (2009). Conditional admission policies and admission letters should boost CA students’ confidence who already hold marginalized identities rather than further undermine their sense of ability or self. These letters provide a one-time opportunity for an institution to share their voice and values by inviting them to achieve their goals rather than reach institutional expectations.

## **Stressors Influencing Transition**

The findings in this dissertation study affirm the work of Kuh et al. (2008), Garrett et al. (2017), and Bryant et al. (2014), who apply the idea of skill development and academic resiliency. The current study adds to this body of research by building on findings of skill development and academic resiliency concerning stressors experienced by the participants. Kuh et al. (2008) recognized the heightened risk for disruption in first-year college students with underserved identities and how the college environment and support implemented for college students can positively affect grades and persistence from the first to the second year at an institution. My participants reported stressors before matriculation and once they arrived on campus. The participants also expressed stressors from the environment in the first semester, which influenced their academic resilience (Kuh et al., 2008).

The participants shared their high-stress levels before and once they matriculated to SCU but reported lower stress levels as they became more acclimated to the college environment. This finding affirms Garrett et al. (2017) and Bryant et al. (2014), who found that the first semester of college can cause a high level of initial stress and then plateau towards the end of the first semester and into the second semester of college. More research is needed to understand to what extent the type of stress and situational understanding are factors of the students' personalities and what may be a result of being conditionally admitted. Participants also shared familiar sources of stress relating to feeling academic pressure to do well (Damer & Melendres, 2011), lack of sleep, personal relationships (Novotney, 2014; Pedersen, 2012), working extensive hours, and developing their coping skills. Participants shared similar feelings of not having enough

time for sleep, sleep being hard to come by, or giving up sleep first to complete homework or connect with peers causing additional stress. This complements Heckert et al.'s (1999) work of sleep being hard to come by with influenced participants stress levels and abilities to complete homework or connect socially. Many participants shared they slept around six hours per night which stunted their ability to perform adequately in coursework or feeling lethargic during the day. The finding complements Roberts and Duong's (2014) work of sleep deprivation or short sleep, defined as sleeping less than nine hours per night for emerging adults.

Many participants explained additional stress related to their finances, relationships with parents, transitioning to the institution, and the institution's culture. They also shared both positive and negative experiences concerning the faith-based nature of SCU. Five participants talked about the benefits of being in a spiritually fulfilling space, whereas four shared how the environment felt too controlling of their behavior. Specifically, participants used the word toxic multiple times to describe the faith-based environment's negative aspects, which I did not expect. During the literature review, I found a gap concerning conditionally admitted students' persistence at faith-based institutions. Many dissertations reviewed specific conditional admission programs or components to understand the student experience of persistence at specific institutions (Logan, 2017; Parisi, 2012; Wildman, 2016; Vanderberg, 2008; Vultaggio, 2009). None of these or other dissertations I reviewed focused on faith-based institutions and additional investigation of this phenomenon at faith-based institutions is needed to understand how the experiences of CA students differ or are the same at other institutional types.

All the participants spoke about stress related to intersecting identities that they hold. Some participants described how being low-income required them to work more than their peers, which compliments Harackiewicz et al.'s (2014) findings. Some participants spoke about how their ethnicity influenced their goals of attending college, how they thought they would perform once they arrived, and their belief in academic ability, which affirms Smedley et al.'s (1993) and Wei et al.'s (2010) work. Quinn spoke about their first-generation college student status and being a DACA student made them feel like they did not belong at SCU, which affirms the work of Gardner and Holley (2011). Savannah spoke about being misidentified as a White woman and her experiences with feeling not entirely accepted by her White peers, which seems to connect to Contrada et al. (2011). In each of these conversation points within the interviews, I did not ask them about their varying identities. Instead, I posed questions related to their conditional admission status, the process of applying for college, or college experiences. The students combined their conditional admission status as an identity along with their other identities to conceive of themselves, which extends Jones and McEwen's (2000) MMPI. The students brought forth identities with high salience concerning the core of who they are and viewed their identity as conditionally admitted students through this lens.

Maladaptive copings skills like increased use of alcohol, tobacco, or other drugs were not a finding in this dissertation study. Many studies show that as first-year students transition to higher education institutions, binge drinking (Larimer et al., 2006; Lo & Globetti, 1993) and general alcohol usage tend to increase (Baer et al., 1995; Leibsohn, 1994). First-year students who live on campus typically show increased levels of alcohol

and other drug use compared to peers who live at home or who do not attend college following high school (Johnston et al., 2000). It is possible that my participants did not want to disclose any alcohol, tobacco, or other drug use as any use is against college policy. The relationship with the students as a past faculty member could have also influenced any decisions the participants may have made not to disclose information.

### **The Power of Relationship Building**

Connection with others was shared repeatedly by participants. All participants generally discussed their relationships with peers, family, faculty, and staff as validating agents, which affirms Rendón's (1994) work. These validating agents significantly influenced the participants' ability to learn, gain confidence in being a college student, resources to be successful, and space to build authentic relationships. When validating agents supported CA students in these ways, the participants were emotional in their responses related to gratitude, feeling supported, and their self-worth, which extends Rendón's (1994) work. As participants shared their experiences, they reflected on the situation and how they emotionally responded or reflected upon what the experience meant to them now. The participants' varying experiences influenced how they felt about themselves, their academic abilities, and their sense of belonging to the SCU. The students' interactions align with feelings of appreciation, recognition, and respect with those relationships of most importance as described by Rendón (1994). The relationships with faculty proved to be most impactful out of the classroom. Rendón (1994) I did not directly ask how the relationships they brought up related to adopting the institution's dominant culture or turned inward to create a safe environment. Instead, I asked the participants about in-class and out-of-class experiences with additional probing to explore

how the experiences fit into the six components of validation. The six components of validation include experiences that are supportive and confirming, promote learning, facilitate healthy development, occur in and out of the classroom, are ongoing, and should be offered early in the student's college experience. The participants tended to describe out-of-class validation that was supportive and confirming, promoted learning, and aided in healthy development, which confirms Rendón (1994).

Examples of out-of-class validation in this dissertation study included encouragement from admissions counselors; grace and support from faculty during personal challenges; staff and faculty investment in student's academic and personal success; and peers providing emotional and academic support. Participants rarely described examples of in-class validation, even when prompted. Those who spoke to a specific classroom environment created by a faculty member who showed support through action and public words of affirmation or faculty following up directly after class about an in-class situation. The finding of out-of-class experiences having stronger influences on validation for conditionally admitted students extends Rendón's (1994) theory.

Students were quick to share in-class experiences that were not validating, which negatively influenced their academic self-efficacy and sense of belonging. These experiences included faculty not speaking up when racist and misogynistic words are said in a class by fellow peers and faculty not interacting with students in the classroom due to language barriers. These experiences contributed to a negative racial campus climate, lack of cultural sensitivity, sense of isolation, and racism felt by first-generation Black, Indigenous, and students of color in this study. This finding affirms Fischer's (2007) and

McCoy's (2014) work which suggested that negative racial campus climates can lead first-generation Black, Indigenous, and students of color to have increased feelings of isolation.

The current study affirms Schlossberg's (2011) transition theory (STT) model. The participants' experiences related to toxicity, a negative racial campus climate, and lack of cultural sensitivity are unanticipated events in the STT model. At the time of this study, no students had left the institution despite experiencing at least one experience related to racism or a negative campus climate, but all still indicated they were "in love" with or "loved" SCU. The finding suggests that the students understand the situation of the campus environment and self but can cope with the environment because of support and strategies used, which affirms Schlossberg's (2011) work. The participants shared implementing habits like asking for help, practicing good academic habits, self-care routines, and sleep as important coping mechanisms. This finding suggests that the participants may have moved through Schlossberg's (2011) four Ss that influence the ability to cope with the institution's environment and relationships that negatively influenced their experience.

### **Conditional Admission Improvements**

All participants brought up positive as well as negative feelings related to their conditional admission. Many participants also gave unprompted suggestions of what would have helped them without prompting as they understood their CA status and transitioned to the institution, which compliments Wildman's (2016) dissertation. A few of the students did not have strong feelings about the moment of being conditionally admitted, the support it provided, or if it made a difference in their transition or

persistence in higher education. The participants provided suggestions concerning additional support or confirmed that CA students need support rather than suggesting removing interventions. The findings suggest that none of the components need to be discontinued, which confirms Wildman's (2016) suggestions about reviewing the specific conditional admission program.

The participants' most common recommendation concerned relieving admissions confusion. The participants were unclear of their CA status and what that meant for them as a student, confirming Clinedinst and Nichols's (2013) work. Participants clearly expressed a need for the GE 100 seminar structure to adjust. Finding out they were conditionally admitted after they had arrived on campus brought up many negative emotions, including shame, embarrassment, anger, and confusion. The participants also expressed heightened pressure or stress related to the emotional response to realizing their admissions status when they arrived on campus or in the first few weeks of classes. During first-year orientation, these emotions came most commonly when students are most likely to experience higher stress levels than later in their first year. This finding adds to the body of literature relating to stress and first-year conditionally admitted student transition. Savannah had questions about how the institution conditionally admitted students. Once I explained the admission process, she understood but was "still annoyed." Savannah was not the only participant who asked me for clarity in the selection process or delivery of CA letters. The finding confirms Clinedinst and Nichols's (2013) work that more transparency in admitting students conditionally and explaining their status before they arrive on campus would help relieve some of the students' negative feelings and stress.

Another finding was that students are unique in their interpretation of what it means to be a conditionally admitted student and what supports are most helpful. Jackie felt that being conditionally admitted and connecting with the GE 100 faculty member helped her stay on track academically. Bob, Madeline, and Jack all brought up specific academic skills that they learned from being in the CA classes that helped their success. Examples included being on top of their schedule, using good time management skills, and using a planner. Other participants shared using academic supports like tutoring or the writing center to be most helpful. These findings complement Clinedinst and Nichols's (2013) work and their five main supports which aid in student success, retention, and persistence. Participants also expressed a desire for a peer support person or a mentor within the first semester as it could have helped them with questions they had about their conditional admission, the institutional culture, and general transition questions.

### **Implications and Recommendations for Practice**

This dissertation study's findings offer implications for institutional policy and the practice of professionals who work with conditionally admitted college students with underserved identities. Conditional admission policies and programs influence many offices in an institution of higher education. For this section, I have split the chapter into six subheadings, including admissions offices, student life offices, academic support, transition support offices and campus climate, and policymakers. I conclude this section by exploring removing conditional admission from higher education practice as a whole.

## **Admissions Offices**

Beginning at the start of a student's college search process, admission counselors who work with possible conditional admits have an opportunity to prepare students better. If students become aware of the experiences and the full requirements of being a CA student, they may make more informed decisions about accepting or declining an admission offer. By understanding the experiences of conditionally admitted students, admissions counselors can encourage students to begin preparing academically, emotionally, and financially for college. For instance, admissions counselors could share how nervousness or anxiety relating to being lifted from their admission status is normal and can positively motivate them to apply good academic habits or lean on academic supports.

Additionally, admissions counselors are the first line of communication with prospective students. The admission counselors must clarify with prospective students that their admission may be conditional, why the institution accepted them conditionally, the implications of this status once they arrive on campus, and how the institution may remove the status. Failing to show clear paths to enroll at the institution through clear communication with the student through admissions or registration personnel implies the institution expects the students to find and understand the information independently. Leaving students to fend for themselves can perpetuate the misunderstanding of their admission to the institution. Misunderstanding admissions expectations can lead to students signing formal admission contracts or paying deposits without fully understanding what is expected of them upon arrival at the institution (Adebayo, 2008; Parisi, 2012; Wildman, 2016). Therefore, providing both in-person communication with

admission counselors and traditional admissions acceptance information is critical for students to understand their enrollment terms fully.

### **Student Life Offices**

Housing professionals, mental health counselors, and retention professionals should consider monitoring CA students' emotional health and developmental needs to create an environment where the transition limits confusion and stress rather than contributes to it. On residential campuses, residence life is an essential aspect of support during the college transition by providing social support, clarifications on policy and procedure, and conduits to campus resources. During professional staff training and student training at the beginning of each academic year, staff members should learn on how to best support conditionally admitted students and who may be best to support these students in times of need. Mental health counselors on college campuses must be made aware of the admission requirements of CA students and share insight into how this experience may elicit stress that is different from the regularly admitted student. It is not appropriate to expect a student to explain their admissions status and their expectations. Instead, mental health counselors should be aware of this status and its expectations at the institution to provide appropriate support.

### **Academic Support Centers**

Academic support centers should also be aware of CA students' requirements to provide individualized assistance for students who present in their respected areas. Some programs may require students to participate in programs offered by academic support centers like tutoring, coaching, supplemental instruction, one on one academic appointments, or attending workshops. The participants in this dissertation study shared

that participating in such programming offered by the Center for Student Enrichment was beneficial to their academics, even if they went as part of their requirements. Academic support centers should be aware of CA student requirements and be actively involved in crafting recommendations for these students. Involvement could mean partnering with the lead of CA programming to aid in crafting course topics or assisting in reviewing requirements for CA students. Whatever the involvement may look at institutions, academic support centers should be aware of the unique circumstances and experiences CA students have to provide the best service and meet the needs of the students.

Faculty members who have conditionally admitted students in their classes must understand their influence on CA students and understand the admissions status components. It is especially critical for faculty members to understand how powerful out-of-class interactions and connections may be for CA students. Students in the current study felt validated more often outside of the classroom by faculty. The focus of out-of-class validation could mean faculty need more practice on implementing validating practices into their pedagogy or should take additional time to understand how their interactions outside of class can be more inclusive and validating. There are many ways faculty can increase their validating practices in the classroom. Some examples include taking the time to learn and use students' names, create a curriculum that reflects student backgrounds, verbally express to students that they are capable and that faculty believe in their abilities, and create classroom experiences where students can create knowledge with faculty and fellow peers (Rendón, Linares & Munzo, 2011).

Outside of the classroom, faculty should consider offering office hours outside of typical business hours and in a more casual setting on campus where students may feel

more comfortable. Faculty should also actively reach out to students to offer assistance, encouragement, and support instead of expecting students to come to them with questions (Rendón, Linares & Munzo, 2011). In whatever ways faculty increase their validation efforts, the effort to validate students should be consistent in and out of the classroom. Increasing validation efforts may cause students to feel increased confidence in themselves and their ability to succeed in college. Both aspects of in and out of class validation could create a climate of inclusion, support, and belief in all students; but be especially beneficial for CA students.

Professionals who provide transition support must also consider the campus climate and how it may influence conditionally admitted students. The institution and all its faculty and staff should have a working knowledge about their campus climate from a student perspective and be actively involved in creating an equitable and inclusive environment to historically exclude students. In this dissertation study, campus climate and racial inequities created direct implications for the conditionally admitted CA students at SCU, a small, private, Christian college. While research is needed to understand how campus climate impacts conditionally admitted students, staff, faculty, and administrators should work together to understand how the campus climate may impact CA students' intersecting identities before they matriculate the institution.

Key stakeholders for this work will vary pending on institution, student demographic, and funding. For SCU, these stakeholders include the Director of Retention, the Director of Multicultural Engagement, the Center for Academic Enrichment, the First-Year Experience Committee, the Academic Dean's Committee, the Director of Admissions, and the Director of Institutional Research. First, stakeholders

should review trends, characteristics, or risk factors of students accepted conditionally. The participants of the current study were mostly low-income, rural, students of color, and identified as men. For SCU, CA students typically have one or more of the following identities: Black, Indigenous, or people of color, low-income, men, or are from a rural area.

Second, consider what type of support systems are already in place at the institution and what is missing for students who hold those demographics. There are cultural affinity groups for social and transition support and residence life specific programming on SCU's campus to aid in the transition to the metropolitan area. The Center for Student Enrichment employs the faculty who teach the Academic Enrichment courses, and who provide tutoring, and academic skill-building workshops to aid in the academic transition to increased rigor in classes. However, SCU does not have specific financial literacy programming for low-income students or intersectional programming between offices to cater to students' unique needs with multiple identities they may hold. Students within affinity groups hold their campus programming events, and institutions should not rely on student groups to recognize a gap in services provided by the institution, figure out how to help their peers, and then facilitate a program to meet that need. Institutions should be facilitating this support so students can focus on themselves, their transition to the institution, their personal development, and their academics.

Third, key stakeholders should review the campus's most recent climate survey to understand gaps in institutional infrastructure and where the students see the need for increased support infrastructure. If the institution does not conduct a cyclical campus climate survey, stakeholders who work with institutional leaders should create a survey

that will glean insight into how students experience life at the institution. They should also consider who should be responsible for the administration of the survey, when the survey should be sent out, analyze the results, report results to the campus community and key stakeholders, what will be done with the results once reported, and how will you assess changes made based on the climate survey.

Lastly, stakeholders should consider what faculty and staff training happens on campus and what is missing to aid in cultural competence and student support. They should compare these pieces of training and continued conversations to campus climate surveys. Is the institution training faculty and staff in areas where students need extra support? If so, what does this say about the training? What does this say about the engagement and activation of skills by the faculty and staff? When stakeholders compare the current institutional training schedule to campus climate surveys, the practice can also show institutional leaders where gaps are and where to adjust. Stakeholders should consider reaching out to similar institutions of size and scope to compare faculty and staff training and student support structures to evaluate what the institution might be missing or doing well.

### **Policy Makers**

Policymakers must know how the rhetoric of policies and admissions letters influence conditionally admitted students. At SCU, the personnel include the Registrar's Office, the President's Cabinet, Director of Admissions, the Center for Academic Enrichment, and the Academic Dean's Committee. CA policies and letters must be clear and consistent to reduce confusion. Stewart and Heaney (2013) made this point by showing the variations between an admission letter for honors programs and a conditional

admission letter. The difference between these letters is the rhetoric of punishment, mandatory involvement, and negative consequences of being conditionally admitted.

The punitive language used in SCU's CA letters opposed most students' gratitude related to their conditional admission to the institution that provided an opportunity to gain college access. Policymakers should review their CA policy and admission letters to critique the language and how they express belief in their students. Words like *required* and *mandatory*, and *must* takes the choice out of a student's hands and reinforce the students' perceptions that they may be in trouble. Consider revising policies to use words that embody the institution's purpose for having a conditional admission program, and that shows the institution believes in the prospective students' ability. Language is powerful, and the wording of a letter related to conditional admission can build students up to seeing this as an opportunity for education or being disappointed in themselves before they even arrive on campus. Early and positive communication about being conditionally admitted can reduce confusion and increase positivity related to their status.

### **Removal of Conditional Admission**

Institutional leaders should consider removing conditional admission as a practice altogether. While this study has provided insight into how conditional admission shaped the experience of CA students, findings show that this status created additional stress, confusion, and worry to the participants during a transition to college. Institutions should already have transition supports like orientation, first-year experience courses, residence life programming, living-learning communities, peer mentors, academic support classes, or academic support center programming available to all first-year students that aids in the smooth transition to college for first-year students. These programs should be robust

enough to consider the diverse needs of the entirety of a student body, regardless of their admissions status.

Institutions should consider evaluating their current transition programming and CA requirements by questioning how the supports are different than support regularly admitted and why. Institutional leaders should consider the institution's mission and goals to evaluate how these practices embody and support the institution's values. Questions leadership should ask include how do institutional supports meet students where they are academically, socially, and developmentally? Would all students benefit from the support offered to CA students? If so, why are the supports only offered to CA students? What would happen if the institution combined CA course subject matter and support into first-year experience courses? If we remove a CA program, how can the institution use retention software, academic advisors, and other institutional support differently to identify students who are struggling early?

When asking such questions, academic support personnel, academic advisors, retention specialists, admissions, residence life, and current students should be present for the conversation to give context to how structural changes may influence student transition. For example, if an institution creates transition programs and services to prepare students for attending and succeeding in all aspects of college life, conditional admission programs are not necessary, add excess stress and barriers to thriving in college.

### **Limitations**

I used a qualitative methodology for this dissertation study to center the lived experiences of conditionally admitted students who have persisted in their second year of

college to reflect on their experiences in their own words. The limitations for this study included limiting participants to conditionally admitted students enrolled at SCU within their first or second year of college. Institutions vary in the type of student they admit. Wildman (2016) explained this variation as a conditionally admitted student at one institution might be regularly admitted. Other varieties in this sample group include the conditions placed on the students, the institution's services, and how the institution communicates to the students. I attempted to describe the conditional admission process and supports for those who matriculated to SCU so those reading from other institutions may recognize areas where their students may have similar and different experiences. I described additional cultural information about SCU for readers to understand the influence of the institution's religious affiliation and how this may show up in participants' responses that could differ from their students.

I only looked at students with underserved identities who were persisting in college at the time of the interviews. I did not invite students who took time off between their first and second years or left higher education completely to participate in this dissertation study. One reason for focusing on persisting students is in response to Rendón's (1994) theory of validation and attempting to understand who the persistence agents for this group of students were. Additionally, focusing on persisting students is a response to Schlossberg's discussion of transition, and they speak about moving in, though, and out of a specific experience. These two theories lead the researcher to focus on students who persisted at their institution but leaves the story incomplete. To fully understand the experience of being conditionally admitted, the voices of those who have left higher education are needed.

Some limitations are present due to using a qualitative methodology outlined in Chapter III in the section titled “Trustworthiness.” It is important to remember that the participants who responded and completed all the study steps may not accurately reflect the diverse perspectives of persistence of conditionally admitted students at SCU. I created the interviews to cause the participants to reflect on their experiences, which could be considered a limitation as the method relies on accurate retrieval of feelings, questions, concerns, and overall experience of being conditionally admitted.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

This section addresses recommendations for further study related to conditionally admitted students. I recommend replicating this study at or with other institutions with similar and varying to understand to what extent the experiences described are unique to the research site and what is common to CA students' experiences. My dissertation study has focused on CA students' experiences during a specific section of their time in higher education. Following students over several years or during their entire experience in higher education may provide new insight into how their understanding and experiences change over time. As other studies have indicated (Wildman, 2016), future research of CA students who do not persist in higher education would be beneficial. I crafted the current study to understand the experiences of students who had persisted, and yet those who do not remain in higher education are experiencing unknown barriers that are unknown. Without further study, the totality of understanding the conditional admission experience is incomplete.

Based on this study's findings, researchers should explore the experiences of confusion related to conditional admission in students; the influence of institutional

policy or procedure; and the experiences of peers, faculty, and staff on students who did not persist in higher education after being conditionally admitted. The current study focused on conditional admission components and how those components influenced these students' persistence, which helped broaden the current qualitative literature from viewing it as a unified whole. Additional research into various components of conditional admission supports are needed to understand what parts of CA supports are particularly effective and to hear how students experience and understand these components. Specifically, the current study highlights the idea of increasing academic confidence and developing relationships between students and their peers, institutional staff, and faculty. Participants discussed this within the interviews but only three related this to being conditionally admitted. These findings show a need for additional research in this area. The students in the current study also reported stressors before matriculation and once engaged with the campus environment in the first semester that influenced their academic resilience. More research is needed to understand the extent of the type of stress and how situational understanding a factor of the students' personalities is, and what may result from being conditionally admitted.

Another important note is that participants using the word toxic to describe the faith-based environment's negative aspects at the research site. I found a gap in the literature concerning conditionally admitted students' persistence at faith-based institutions during the literature review. Thus, future research on faith-based institutional culture influences the sense of belonging, student stress, and CA students' persistence. The participants shared implementing coping habits like asking for help, practicing good academic habits, self-care routines, and sleep as critical coping mechanisms to transition

to the institution and cope with the negative racial campus climate. The transition and coping mechanisms used suggest that the students may have moved through the four Ss that influence the ability to cope with the institution's environment and relationships that negatively influenced their experience. The current study also leaves room for additional research on how campus climates, conditional student strategies, and institutional supports specifically aid in moving them through college transition. The experiences of academic pressure manifesting in student's well-being warrant further investigation.

Lastly, this study focused on the broad transition of conditionally admitted college students using Rendón's and Schlossberg's (2011) theories. Research could benefit from extended and focused scope related to the four Ss of transition for conditionally admitted students. Each participant in this study shared their understanding of the situation, self, support, or strategies without knowing this theory was framing the study. It is not possible to affirm that transition to college occurs in this direct process with this study, but additional research would aid in understanding how CA students frame and cope with their transition to college.

Rendón's (1994) theory of validation explicitly shares six experiences essential to nontraditional student feelings of validation. This dissertation highlighted significant importance concerning interactions that are supportive and confirming, out of the classroom, and ongoing. Research will benefit from an extended focus on conditionally admitted students to understand if these findings are specific to individual participant characteristics or part of the essence of being conditionally admitted.

## Conclusions

This phenomenological inquiry aimed to understand CA first-year students' experiences at a small, private, Christian-affiliated university. This dissertation study sought to understand how conditionally admitted students' transition to college shapes their response to stress and choice to persist from their first to the second year. Research shows that student persistence rates are considerably lower for historically underserved student populations such as first-generation, low SES, and Black, Indigenous, and students of color (Collier & Morgan, 2008; Kuh et al., 2008; NSC, 2019). Further, failure to graduate or prolonged time to degree attainment can burden students financially via the cost of tuition and related educational expenses (Shulock & Koester, 2014). These student populations also experience more stress than their peers who do not hold underserved identities or are not CA students (Contrada et al., 2001; John-Henderson et al., 2013). Even with this knowledge, surveying the literature found no research focusing specifically on CA student experiences related to a potential stressor or the choice to persist in higher education.

I designed this study to answer the following questions: How do conditionally admitted students describe their experiences at SCU, a small, private Christian institution? What do they say about how their transition to college shapes their experiences with college environment stressors (e.g., GPA requirements, living in the residence halls, adjusting to a new environment)? Lastly, how do they perceive how the institution's student support systems (e.g., advising, instruction, counseling), educational interventions (curricular and co-curricular initiatives), or their relationships with others

on campus (e.g., faculty, staff, peers) influenced their persistence from the first to the second year of college?

Through criterion-based sampling (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), a collection of the second semester conditionally admitted students at SCU currently or previously enrolled in one of the Academic Enrichment courses were identified for this study. Using criterion-based sampling, I invited students from the 2019 cohort who remained on conditionally admitted status and were first-generation, low-SES, or a student of color to participate in the spring of 2020. I altered my original recruitment plan due to the COVID-19 pandemic since my study began after the stay-at-home state orders. Therefore, I ended up recruiting all participants via email, and the participants completed an informed consent form, the demographic survey, two critical incident forms, and completed two phenomenological interviews with semi-structured questions via Zoom.

I recorded each Zoom interview and transcribed them verbatim. I used open coding to focus on expected and unexpected conceptualizations related to conditionally admitted students at SCU's experiences. Open coding garnered abstract representations of events, objects, actions, interactions, or feelings that may assist in understanding the phenomenon of conditional admission better. The initial analysis resulted in 269 codes in which axial coding helped discover four larger themes throughout the various interviews (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Additionally, I completed document reviews to analyze documents using coding and category construction, providing themes pertinent to the phenomenon. The documents reviewed were the conditional admission policy; the conditional admission letters for CA first-year students in the seminar class; CA first-year

students in the 15-week class; CA first-year transfer students in the seminar class; CA first-year transfer students in the 15-week class; and the academic relief notification.

This study provided a glimpse into what encouraged the participants to persist in higher education as conditionally admitted first-year students with underserved identities. The current study indicated that providing clear and consistent communication about the conditional admission status may minimize CA students' confusion and stress levels. The research revealed that the participants felt validated more often outside the classroom with faculty. Focus on out-of-classroom validation for all students could create a climate of inclusion and support. The research also showed that rhetoric of punishment, mandatory involvement, and negative consequences might have direct influences on how students view their abilities. Negative rhetoric was also in opposition to the gratitude participants had of the opportunity to attend university. Early and positive communication about being conditionally admitted can reduce confusion and increase positivity related to their status. This current study suggested that conditional admission supports, like academic support; faculty involvement; and individual self-care practice, may help students move through their transition to college and as a CA student easier than without these practices. Through this work, I hope you have seen the value in the participants' words and experiences to the extent that you will look at conditionally admitted students with a newfound understanding that can serve and support them as they navigate their way in higher education.

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APPENDIX A  
ACADEMIC ENRICHMENT COURSE SYLLABUS

## **Academic Enrichment Course Syllabi**

Academic enrichment seminar

GE 100 Seminar, 0 Credits, Pass/Fail

Spring 2020

**Course Description:** In this seminar, you will learn steps to getting organized, gain the right mindset toward studying, and make your study sessions count. You will also learn steps towards tackling the elusive college paper along with additional academic information pertinent to a successful year at SCU. This is a required workshop for provisionally admitted students who do not meet the GPA admissions requirement and will be offered during the first week of classes.

You will be required to achieve a 1.8 GPA during your first semester or be enrolled in GE 101 during their second semester. It is highly recommended that you consider taking GE 101 during their second semester as a general elective. It will only assist in your academic success.

**Course Objectives:** In this seminar, you will be able to:

Identify campus tools and resources for mutually supportive relationships

Identify essential learning and study skills required for college-level work

Successfully navigate college policies and procedures

Understand the requirements of your provisional status

**Requirements:**

Attend a one hour seminar

Attend two check in meetings throughout the Spring 2020 semester

1<sup>st</sup> due before March 6th (Spring Break)

2<sup>nd</sup> due before April 10<sup>th</sup> (Easter Break)

Receive a 1.8 GPA after your first semester \*\* Failure to meet this minimum requirement will result in automatic enrollment in GE 101 for your second semester and remaining on PA status\*\*

**Campus Resources**

Center for Student Enrichment

Tutoring

Accessibility Services

Academic Coaching

Therapeutic Services

Academic Counseling

Career Services

Academic Advising

Exam Proctoring

Writing Consultations

Student Planner Library

Library Services (online resources/print resources) Online Databases

Student Workers/Quiet Study Spaces

Academic Advisor, professors, other students

College-Level Work

Time Management

Study Skills, Note-Taking, Reading a Textbook

Writing a Paper

College Policies

Attendance

Good Academic Standing

APPENDIX B  
CONDITIONAL ADMISSION POLICY

## Conditional Admission Policy

Conditional Admittance Students who do not meet the minimum GPA (2.2) and ACT (18) requirements are accepted conditionally. All students accepted conditionally must meet the following conditions during their first semester at South City University:

- Enroll and pass the required Academic Enrichment course or seminar (GE 100 or GE 101). This course is designed to help a student develop and improve the study skills he or she will need for college-level work.
- Registration is limited to 16 credits for the first semester and enrollment in online courses must be approved by the Student Support Center.
- Any student who does not meet the GPA required for good academic standing at the end of their first term will be placed on Academic Probation. If the student does not achieve good academic standing, 2.0 GPA, by the end of the second semester, they may be academically dismissed.

APPENDIX C  
RECRUITMENT EMAIL

Dear [participant name],

I am engaging in a research project for my doctoral dissertation. I have identified examining the experience of provisionally admitted first-year students at South City University. To this end, I will ask you questions related to your college applications process, your conditional admission to SCU, your academic experience, and your outlook for next semester of college.

To gather this information I would like to set up two personal interviews with you. They would be done VIA Zoom. If you would like to participate, please identify a time between Monday and Friday, 8 a.m. – 8 p.m. that works best for you. For your interviews, they will last about an hour in length. I will have a consent form for you to peruse and sign if you agree to engage in the project. You will also fill out two short questioners to tell me about a specific experience related to your provisional admission. Regarding the interviews, they will be taped, and the recorded information will be transcribed and put in report form. I hope that I will be able to present the information at a conference or in a refereed journal later on.

Please note that your participation is entirely voluntary and that your identity will be kept confidential at all times. Should I present the results at a conference or in a journal article, your name, the name of the organization, or South City University would not be mentioned.

I hope you agree to participate. Either way, please let me know if you would or would not like to participate.

Sincerely,

Sophia Engelman ([engelman.sophia@uwlax.edu](mailto:engelman.sophia@uwlax.edu))

APPENDIX D  
INFORMED CONSENT

SCU Approval ID: [redacted]

You are invited to participate in a research study about your experience as a conditionally admitted student and how this experience has influenced your persistence in higher education. The purpose of this study is to explore and understand the experiences of CA first-year students at a small, private, Christian affiliated university.

**Information:** We will conduct up to two interviews of 8-12 undergraduate students at South City University. Interviews will be arranged according to the participants' schedules and will take place in a location on campus or via Zoom which guarantees the confidentiality of information shared. All interviews will be recorded digitally and will last between 60 and 90 minutes. Before each interview, you will complete a critical incident form. Your total time commitment will be no more than four hours between the beginning and end of your participation. Interviews may happen anytime between March and December of 2020. Aside from interviews and critical incident forms, you will spend time communicating on e-mail with the researchers to check the investigator's interpretations of your contributions (member checks) once all interviews and incident forms are completed.

**Risks:** Risks are negligible. You may experience negative thoughts or feelings about your experience as a participant in the research. During the interviews, you may choose to skip any question that makes you uncomfortable.

**Benefits:** The information will be used to offer insight to institutions about how conditionally admitted college students. Participants will receive a total of \$50 in cash for their engagement in this study, \$25 immediately after the first interview and \$25 after completing the second interview. **Confidentiality:** A pseudonym will be chosen in place of your name on all written records, transcripts, and in the final report. Transcriptions will be kept indefinitely under lock and key. Should this research be presented in an article, or during a presentation, your name will not be mentioned, nor any other identifiable information.

**Contact:** If you have questions at any time about the study or procedures, you may contact the principal investigator Sophia Engelman at [email redacted] or [phone number redacted]

**Participation:** Your participation in this study is voluntary; you may refuse to participate without penalty. If you decide to participate, you may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty and without loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. If you withdraw from the study before data collection is completed your data will be returned to you or destroyed.

**Consent:** I have read this form and received a copy of it. The purpose of the study, the procedures to be used, the potential risks, the confidentiality, as well as the option to withdraw from the study at any time have been explained to me by the investigator. My signature below indicates that I freely agree to participate in this study.

Participant's Printed Name \_\_\_\_\_

Participant's signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Consent form date: April \_\_, 2020

APPENDIX E

CONDITIONAL ADMISSION FOR LETTER FIRST-YEAR SEMINAR CLASS

«TODAY»

«CONTACT\_NAME»

«CONTACT\_MAILINGSTREETLINE1»

«CONTACT\_MAILINGSTREETLINE2»

«CONTACT\_MAILINGCITY», «CONTACT\_MAILINGSTATECODE»

«CONTACT\_MAILINGPOSTALCODE»

«contact\_non\_us\_mailing\_country»

Dear «CONTACT\_FIRSTNAME»,

Congratulations on being admitted to South City Univeristy. To ensure your success at SCU, you have been admitted provisionally. Provisional admission is available for students who do not meet the academic admission standards listed below.

- A minimum unweighted Grade Point Average of 2.2
- A minimum ACT composite score of 18 or SAT total score of 850 (not including the writing portion)

Students whose GPA or test score falls in the provisional category will be required to meet the following conditions during their first year at South City:

- Enroll and complete the Academic Enrichment course (GE 100) seminar course during the first week at South City. This seminar is designed to help understand the study skills needed and required for college-level work.
- Limit course load to no more than 15 credits per semester during first two semesters, including no online courses.
- Obtain a minimum GPA of 2.0 after the completion of the first semester. Failure to meet this requirement will result in being required to enroll and pass the 2 credit GE 101 section of Academic Enrichment course the following semester. Students

who do not meet a cumulative 2.0 GPA requirement at the completion of two semesters will face academic dismissal.

- Participate in all required academic advising meetings.

Provisional academic standing will be lifted after two semesters if all requirements above are met and the student has successfully completed a minimum of 20 credits. Once this status is lifted, the student will not be limited in how many credits they can take. Our desire is to help students obtain the tools to be successful. The Academic Enrichment Coordinator, your Academic Advisor, and the resources in the Center for Student Enrichment are services provided to help students succeed academically at South City.

Again, congratulations on your acceptance. We look forward to seeing you on campus very soon.

Sincerely,

The Admissions Committee

South City University

APPENDIX F

CONDITIONAL ADMISSION LETTER FOR FIRST-YEAR STUDENT 15-WEEK  
CLASS

«TODAY»

«CONTACT\_NAME»

«CONTACT\_MAILINGSTREETLINE1»

«CONTACT\_MAILINGSTREETLINE2»

«CONTACT\_MAILINGCITY», «CONTACT\_MAILINGSTATECODE»

«CONTACT\_MAILINGPOSTALCODE»

«contact\_non\_us\_mailing\_country»

Dear «CONTACT\_FIRSTNAME»,

Congratulations on being admitted to South City University. To ensure your success at SCU, you have been admitted provisionally. Conditional Admission is available for students who do not meet the academic admission standards listed below.

- A minimum unweighted Grade Point Average of 2.2
- A minimum ACT composite score of 18 or SAT total score of 850 (not including the writing portion)

Students whose GPA or test score falls in the provisional category will be required to meet the following conditions during their first year at South City:

- Enroll and pass the 2-credit Academic Enrichment course (GE 101) course during the first semester at SCU. Enroll and pass the 1-credit Academic Enrichment course (GE 200) course during the second semester at SCU. These courses are designed to help develop and improve the study skills needed for college-level work.
- Limit course load to no more than 15 credits per semester during first two semesters, including no online courses.
- Obtain a minimum cumulative GPA of 2.0 after the completion of two semesters.

- Participate in all required academic advising, tutoring, and coaching sessions (assigned individually by the Academic Enrichment Coordinator).

Conditional Admission standing will be lifted after two semesters if all requirements above are met and the student has successfully completed a minimum of 20 credits. Once this status is lifted, the student will not be limited in how many credits they can take. Our desire is to help students obtain the tools to be successful. The Academic Enrichment Coordinator, your Academic Advisor, and the resources in the Center for Student Enrichment are services provided to help students succeed academically at South City.

Again, congratulations on your acceptance. We look forward to seeing you on campus very soon.

Sincerely,

The Admissions Committee

South City University

APPENDIX G  
CONDITIONAL ADMISSION LETTER FOR FIRST-YEAR TRANSFER STUDENT  
SEMINAR CLASS

«Today»

«contact\_fullname»

«contact\_mailingstreetline1»

«contact\_mailingstreetline2»

«contact\_mailingcity», «contact\_mailingstatecode» «contact\_mailingpostalcode»

«contact\_non\_us\_mailing\_country»

Dear «contact\_firstname»,

***Congratulations!*** We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted to attend South City University for the «CONTACT\_ENTRY\_TERM\_\_R» Semester.

You are a great fit for South City! You are working hard on your academics, you value your relationship with God, and you're getting ready to dive in to college life. We're so excited to welcome you to campus, and because of your hard work we are able to award you with the «tablestart:ReportData» **SCU Academic Scholarship** in the amount of «**Four\_Year\_Total** \# **Currency**» «TableEnd:ReportData» over the span of up to eight semesters\*.

South City is ready to offer you a quality education—one with professors who care about your journey, opportunities for spiritual growth, and real preparation for life after graduation.

Now that you're accepted, take a moment to celebrate! You can also explore the handout included with this packet to move forward in your enrollment process with South City University. Visit [southcity.edu/admitted](http://southcity.edu/admitted) for additional details and set up your new account!

Username: «contact\_scu\_student\_username»

Set-up Code: «contact\_unet\_setup\_code»

Questions?

We're happy to help. Please email us at [admissions@southcity.edu](mailto:admissions@southcity.edu) or call 800.289.6222 (612.343.4460 locally).

Congratulations again on your acceptance to South City University. We look forward to seeing you soon!

Sincerely,

[name redacted]

Director of Admissions

*\*Please note that this scholarship will be distributed semesterly at South City (per\_semester\_amount) per semester) and is renewable for up to eight semesters of regular SCU attendance by maintaining a 2.0 cumulative GPA at South City. You must be enrolled for a minimum of 12 credits to receive this scholarship.*

Congratulations on your acceptance to South City University. On behalf of the Center for Student Enrichment, we are excited for your arrival. We work with the Admissions Office to determine your admittance status. You have been admitted provisionally. Conditional admission is available for students who do not meet both of the academic admission standards listed below.

- A minimum unweighted Grade Point Average of 2.2
- A minimum ACT composite score of 18 or SAT total score of 850 (not including the writing portion)

Students whose GPA or test score falls in the provisional category will be required to meet the following conditions during their first year at South City:

- Enroll and complete the Academic Enrichment course (GE 100) seminar course during the first week at South City. This seminar is designed to help understand the study skills needed and required for college-level work.
- Limit course load to no more than 15 credits per semester during first two semesters, including no online courses.
- Obtain a minimum GPA of 2.0 after the completion of the first semester. Failure to meet this requirement will result in being required to enroll and pass the 2 credit GE 101 section of Academic Enrichment course the following semester. Students who do not meet a cumulative 2.0 GPA requirement at the completion of two semesters will face academic dismissal.
- Participate in all required academic advising meetings.

Conditional academic standing will be lifted after two semesters if all requirements above are met and the student has successfully completed a minimum of 20 credits. Once this status is lifted, the student will not be limited in how many credits they can take. Our desire is to help students obtain the tools to be successful. The Academic Specialist, you're Academic Advisor, and the resources in the Center for Student Enrichment are services provided to help students succeed academically at South City.

Again, we look forward to seeing you on campus very soon. If you have any questions about these courses or would like additional academic advising regarding your first semester at South City University, please do not hesitate to contact the Center for Student Enrichment at 612.343.5000 or [CSE@southcity.edu](mailto:CSE@southcity.edu).

Sincerely,

[name redacted]

Assistant Director, Center for Student Enrichment |  
South City University | southcity.edu

APPENDIX H  
CONDITIONAL ADMISSION LETTER FOR FIRST-YEAR TRANSFER STUDENTS  
15-WEEK CLASS

«Today»

«contact\_fullname»

«contact\_mailingstreetline1»

«contact\_mailingstreetline2»

«contact\_mailingcity», «contact\_mailingstatecode» «contact\_mailingpostalcode»

«contact\_non\_us\_mailing\_country»

Dear «contact\_firstname»,

***Congratulations!*** We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted to attend South City University for the «CONTACT\_ENTRY\_TERM\_\_R» Semester.

You are a great fit for South City! You are working hard on your academics, you value your relationship with God, and you're getting ready to dive in to college life. We're so excited to welcome you to campus, and because of your hard work we are able to award you with the «tablestart:ReportData» **SCU Academic Scholarship** in the amount of «**Four\_Year\_Total** # **Currency**» «TableEnd:ReportData» over the span of up to eight semesters\*.

South City is ready to offer you a quality education—one with professors who care about your journey, opportunities for spiritual growth, and real preparation for life after graduation.

Now that you're accepted, take a moment to celebrate! You can also explore the handout included with this packet to move forward in your enrollment process with South City University. Visit [southcity.edu/admitted](http://southcity.edu/admitted) for additional details and set up your new account!

Username: «contact\_scu\_student\_username»

Set-up Code: «contact\_unet\_setup\_code»

Questions?

We're happy to help. Please email us at [admissions@southcity.edu](mailto:admissions@southcity.edu) or call [phone redacted]

Congratulations again on your acceptance to South City University. We look forward to seeing you soon!

Sincerely,

[Name redacted]

Director of Admissions

*\*Please note that this scholarship will be distributed semesterly at South City («tablestart:ReportData»«per\_semester\_amount» «TableEnd:ReportData» per semester)*

*and is renewable for up to eight semesters of regular SCU attendance by maintaining a 2.0 cumulative GPA at South City. You must be enrolled for a minimum of 12 credits to receive this scholarship.*

Congratulations on your acceptance to South City University. On behalf of the Center for Student Enrichment, we are excited for your arrival. We work with the Admissions Office to determine your admittance status. You have been admitted conditionally. Conditional admission is available for students who do not meet both of the academic admission standards listed below.

- A minimum unweighted Grade Point Average of 2.2
- A minimum ACT composite score of 18 or SAT total score of 850 (not including the writing portion)

Students whose GPA or test score falls in the provisional category will be required to meet the following conditions during their first year at South City:

- Enroll and pass the 2-credit Academic Enrichment course (GE 101) course during the first semester at South City. Enroll and pass the 1-credit Academic Enrichment course (GE 200) course during the second semester at South City. These courses are designed to help develop and improve the study skills needed for college-level work.
- Limit course load to no more than 15 credits per semester during first two semesters, including no online courses.
- Obtain a minimum GPA of 2.0 after the completion of the first semester.
- Participate in all required academic advising, tutoring, and coaching sessions (as assigned individually by the Academic Specialist).

Provisional academic standing will be lifted after two semesters if all requirements above are met and the student has successfully completed a minimum of 20 credits. Once this status is lifted, the student will not be limited in how many credits they can take. Our desire is to help students obtain the tools to be successful. The Academic Specialist, you're Academic Advisor, and the resources in the Center for Student Enrichment are services provided to help students succeed academically at South City.

Again, we look forward to seeing you on campus very soon. If you have any questions about these courses or would like additional academic advising regarding your first semester at South City University, please do not hesitate to contact the Center for Student Enrichment at [number redacted] or [CSE@southcity.edu](mailto:CSE@southcity.edu).

Sincerely,

[name redacted]

Assistant Director, Center for Student Enrichment |  
South City University | [southcity.edu](http://southcity.edu)

APPENDIX I  
ACADEMIC RELIEF NOTIFICATION

Hi [insert student name]!

Congratulations! After your academically successful [fall/spring] semester, you are no longer considered a Conditional Admit (CA) to South City University. After this [fall/spring] (insert year) you will be able to select online and in-person classes at ease and without CA credit limits.

Now that you are no longer a Conditional Admit, remember that the resources available for you still remain. Feel free to access the Center for Student Enrichment, tutoring, Career Services, and other supports as frequently as you wish or need.

Best,

[academic specialist]

APPENDIX J  
FIRST FULL INTERVIEW SCRIPT

In order to understand your experiences as a conditional admission student, I am going to ask you about high school and your college application and decision process to come to SCU. This interview is being audio recorded so that I can accurately transcribe our conversation to analyze later for my research. Before we begin, do you have any questions?

1. Think back to when you first started your college search and walk me through your process of visiting, applying to, and choosing to come to SCU.
  - a. What were things you heard about college growing up?
    - i. Probes: From parents or other family? From friends? Teachers? Church leaders?
  - b. How did you prepare for college?
    - i. Academically in high school? For your ACT or SAT? Financially?
  - c. Please describe your college search process.
    - i. How did you learn about your college options? How did your high school academics or ACT score effect your search process? Or did it? What was the process of applying to colleges like? What was it like receiving acceptance or rejection letters?
  - d. How did you choose or decide to come to SCU?
    - i. How did your conditional admission letter affect this decision?
  - e. Tell me about your last summer before college.
    - i. What did you do to get ready? Did you attend Summer Orientation? Tell me about that experience.
  - f. Tell me about your experiences during your first semester of college beginning with your first time on campus for the fall semester.
    - i. Welcome week? First day of class?
2. What was it like to be admitted as a Conditionally Admitted Student?
  - a. How did you first learn about being admitted CA?
  - b. What were your initial thoughts about being a CA student?
    - i. What were your initial thoughts about the CA expectations? Classes, no online classes, limited credits.
  - c. How did your first experiences at SCU (SCU days, Summer Orientation, Welcome Week)

- affect you?
- i. How did these experiences confirm or change what you thought about being accepted conditionally to SCU?
- d. Please describe your involvement in academic support in your first semester.
- i. Besides being admitted, how else did you interact with these supports? (academic support courses, academic advising, academic coaching, tutoring)? How did you interact with your faculty members?
  - ii. How were these supports helpful in your first semester? What obstacles did being a CA student put in your way? How could the supports be more helpful?
- e. How did it feel to be a CA student?
- i. In what ways do you think being a CA student was different than not being a CA student?
- f. Tell me about your experiences in your first semester Academic Enrichment courses.
- i. What was helpful? What was not helpful? What adjustments would you recommend?
- g. Tell me about your academic experiences outside of the Academic Enrichment course in the fall of 2019.
- i. To what extent were classes easier or harder than you expected? What classes from your first year stick out to you most and why? How did you do academically in your first semester?
- h. Please tell me how you see the Academic Enrichment courses experience influencing your sense of self academically?
- i. Confidence? Skills-wise? Support wise? Transition wise?
3. What were your experiences like socially in your first semester of college?
- a. How easy or hard did you find it to make friends? How have your relationships changed? How did your friendships from high school change as you started college?
  - b. Please share how your relationships with family developed or changed as you started college.
    - i. How did your family support or not support you, as you started school? How did any changes meet or defy your expectations for how you

thought these relationships would change?

- c. Please describe your financial situation during your first semester in college.
  - i. How did you pay for school? What was your experience with financial aid? What is your experience with working and attending school?
4. If you could write a letter to a person at SCU who means the most to you in this first semester at SCU, who is it and what would you say?
5. If you could write a letter to an office at SCU who has provided you with the most support or assistance, what office would it be and what would you say to them?
6. What else has been significant about your first year at SCU that I haven't asked you about?

Thank you very much for meeting with me today and sharing your experiences as a student. Once I complete all of the first round interviews and have them transcribed, I will email you with a copy of your transcript and a summary of our conversation. We will then set up a time to meet from the second interview. In the meantime, if you think of anything that you forgot to mention today, please jot a note for yourself or record a reminder on your phone so we can talk about it next time we meet. Any last questions or thoughts for today.

APPENDIX K  
FULL SECOND INTERVIEW SCRIPT

Thank you for meeting with me again today. Once again, this interview is being recorded. Do you have any questions or comments before we begin?

- 1) First, was there anything that came to mind after we met last that you want to share?
- 2) I'd like to hear your thoughts on the interview transcript and interview summary I sent to you.
  - a) Were you able to read through the transcript and summary? What were your initial impressions?
  - b) Is there anything about the first interview that you would like to correct or clarify?
  - c) Did you feel like I had a sense of your experience thus far as a CA student at SCU? What am I missing?
- 3) I have a few things I would like to be clear on:

[Use this section to clarify or elaborate on specific issues brought up by this participant during the first interview.]

- 4) Tell me about your experiences in college since the fall semester.
  - a) Walk me through your process of declaring a major.
    - i) How did you decide on a major? If you switched majors, tell me about that process.
  - b) Tell me about some of the academic success you have had.
  - c) Please tell me about some of the academic setbacks you have experienced.
  - d) Who or what has been helpful to you in this semester.
    - i) What or who are the specific people, programs, services, or resources that have helped you stay at SCU and be successful. What are some of the things you have done or habits you have developed that have assisted your success in college?
  - e) Who or what has been a barrier or obstacle to you in college?
    - i) Who or what are the specific people, programs, services, or resources that have made it a challenge to stay at SCU and be successful? What are some of the things you have done or habits you have developed that have made it harder to be successful?
  - f) Describe what college has been like for you emotionally.
    - i) How has how you deal with your emotions changed over the last year? What do you or have you done when your emotions have become overwhelming? Who or what have you found to be emotional supportive?
  - g) Tell me about your friendships and other non-family

relationships and how have they changed since starting at SCU.

- i) How has your friendship group changed and why?
- h) Please tell me how your relationships with family developed and changed since starting at SCU.
- i) Please describe your financial situation since you started at SCU.
  - i) How are you doing financially? How are you paying for school now?
  - ii) What else is significant about the last semester that I have not asked you about?
- 5) How have your impressions about being conditionally admitted changed over the last year and what lead to those changes?
  - a) How do you think your college experiences have been different than had you not been a CA student?
  - b) Please share what you feel have been the most important influences and effects being a CA student and the supports that come along with it, has had on you and your college career so far.
  - c) If you had a friend or sibling who was a senior in high school and they were accepted to SCU as a CA, what would you tell them and why?
  - d) What else would you like to say about being a CA student?
- 6) What do you want other people – friends, professors, university staff, counselors (high school), college counselors (admissions), and family – to know about you and your college experiences?
- 7) What else about yourself or your experience as a CA college student would you like to share with me today?

Thank you very much for meeting with me again today. In a few weeks I will send you the transcript of today's interview. If you could let me know if there are any inaccuracies, I would appreciate it. Any last questions or thoughts for today?

APPENDIX L  
DEMOGRAPHIC SURVEY

1. Are you of Hispanic or Latinx descent? (Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, South or Central American, or other Spanish culture)
  - a. Yes/No
2. Regardless of your answer to the prior question, please check one or more of the following groups in which you consider yourself to be a member:
  - a. American Indian or Alaska Native (A person having origins in any of the original peoples of North and South America (including Central America), and who maintains tribal affiliation or community attachment)
  - b. Asian (A person having origins in any of the original peoples of the Far East, Southeast Asia, or the Indian subcontinent including, for example, Cambodia, China, India, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, Pakistan, the Philippine Islands, Thailand, and Vietnam)
  - c. Black or African American (A person having origins in any of the black racial groups of Africa.)
  - d. Hispanic or Latinx (A person of Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, South or Central American, or other Spanish culture or origin, regardless of race.)
  - e. Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander (A person having origins in any of the original peoples of Hawaii, Guam, Samoa, or other Pacific Islands.)
  - f. White (A person having origins of any of the original peoples of Europe, the Middle East, or North Africa)
3. Age
  - a. 18/19/20/21/22/23/24/25
4. Gender
  - a. [short answer]
5. ACT score
  - a. [short answer]
6. Current GPA
  - a. [short answer]
7. College major
  - a. [short answer]