

# The Inconvenient Truth About Institutional Engagement: A Qualitative Look at Transitional Perceptions of First-Year University Students.

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## Abstract

Through a qualitative case-study, the author explores the transitional experience of first-year university students as they journey from initial acceptance through to the end of first semester. Within this transitional period students formulate relationships, the socio-cultural connections that carry them through the educational experience and beyond. Institutional engagement strategies serve to influence these important socio-cultural connections ostensibly to create opportunity for access, contribute positively to academic success and support social connection. Through semi-structured interviews, students told their stories. Results were sorted into four categories: 1) perceptions of authentic relationships, 2) perceptions of isolation and segregation, 3) perceptions of a lack of institutional consistency, and 4) perceptions of helplessness. Multi-cultural engagements designed to support diversity, equity and inclusion surfaced in various and sometimes surprising ways. Most notably students spoke about their reality of experiencing segregation and barriers to inclusion. The author examines the findings highlighting implications for policy and practice.

**Keywords:** Diversity, Inclusion, Engagement, Social Interaction, Retention, Connection, Community

## Introduction

In the United States, school through the 12<sup>th</sup> year is compulsory. The transition from compulsory schooling to university is a complex interweaving of internal motivations and external influences. (Lenz et al., 2013; Manago, Taylor, & Greenfield, 2012; Permzadian & Credé, 2015; Spady, 1971; Tinto, 1987). This study is focused on that transition, the time from acceptance to university to the end of first semester. The greatest percentage of students who choose to dropout, (here the term dropout is student-initiated separation from the institution) do so during this transitional period. Spady's (1971) separation theory and Tinto's (1987) integration theory provide the foundational framework for analyzing and understanding first-year student persistence, or from an institutional perspective, first-year student retention. Spady's separation model focuses on individuals' decision to permanently separate from a social group. Tinto's integration model equates student persistence and success with connection to, or integration in, the specific university culture. Culture exists within the context of social connection. Formal and informal relationships matter, deep authentic relationships make a difference. Lenz, Holman, Lancaster, and Gotay's (2013) Relational Cultural Theory (RCT) long used in feminist research, holds that authentic relationships are at the heart of cultural influence. Authentic relationships with peers, faculty, advisors and staff, foster connection resulting in a greater propensity for students to successfully navigate the complex challenges of

the first-year transition (Lenz et al., 2013). A university education is a social endeavor, and both academic and social connections influence student success (Spady, 1971; Spann & Tinto, 1990; Tinto, 1987, 2012; Turner & Thompson, 2014). A university community then must go beyond structural inclusion, interconnected and trusting relationships should be the goal. Through a lens of RCT combined with Spady's (1971) theory of separation and Tinto's (1987) theory of integration one can begin to understand the lived experience that is a student's transition to university.

Research reveals university engagement strategies to be positively correlated with creating a perception of connection as well as fostering academic success leading to retention (Permzadian & Credé, 2015; Pike, Kuh, & McCormick, 2011; Turner, 2016; Turner & Thompson, 2014). However, that positive correlation is not always true. Hickinbottom-Braun and Burns (2015) warn that market-place practices may lead to inappropriate curriculum decisions that ultimately lead higher education away from its traditional purpose. "The role of the university has transformed from educating citizens to preparing workers" (Hickinbottom-Braun & Burns, 2015, p.155). This misplaced emphasis can lead both parents and students to view university education as simply a means to unlock earning potential, thereby diminishing the value of education in and of itself. They go on to state, and I agree that, institutions and students alike would be well served to focus efforts on both academic support and building social connections.

Researchers have demonstrated that students' connection to their institution is one important factor that contributes to student academic success as measured by retention and improved grade point average (GPA) (Aquino, 2011; Clark & Cundiff, 2009; Kiser & Price, 2008; Permzadian & Credé, 2015; Pike et al., 2011; Turner, 2016; Turner & Thompson, 2014). Universities have recognized that engagement strategies play a role in creating community and influencing connection, yet those engagements do not seem to be influencing better graduation rates. In fact, graduation rates in the U.S. have remained mostly stagnant over the past 50 years (Furr & Elling, 2002; Kiser & Price, 2008; NCES, 2015; Permzadian & Credé, 2015). The stagnant graduation rates indicate that university's traditional engagement strategies may not be functioning as intended thereby failing to create connection or to promote improved academic success. Furthermore, university transition programs (traditions, engagement strategies, success programs, and school culture) may actually diminish student engagement, create a barrier, or produce a divisive or unwelcoming perception in the minds of traditional first-year students (Duggan & Williams, 2010; Hickinbottom-Braun & Burns, 2015; Permzadian & Credé, 2015).

Some demographic groups are more vulnerable to transitional stress than others. Young men, particularly Black men of African descent are less likely to persist in the university setting, at predominately White institutions (Aruguete & Hardy, 2016; Duggan & Williams, 2011; Moreira & Telzer, 2015; Turner, 2016). Greater numbers of underrepresented minority (UREP) students are attending college yet there is a persistent achievement gap (Dika & D'Amico, 2016). This achievement gap is not limited the United States' university system. Universities in the United Kingdom also struggle with this gap. Advance HE (n.d.) reports data from the 2015/16 academic year, Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) students had a 15.6 % gap in attaining a

diploma compared to White students. Comparing the work of Benn 2002 and Dika and D'Amico 2016, it is evident that UREP students face the same challenges today that were present in 2000 (Benn, 2002; Dika & D'Amico, 2016). Failure to persist or thrive in the university setting is not just a UREP student problem, Carlson (2016) highlighted that in general, millennials, students born between early 1980s through the late 1990s, tend to lack the quality of resiliency necessary to overcome failure.

The lack of academic success can be attributed to a myriad of causes; low self-efficacy and/or individual perception of attributional limitedness can lead to academic paralysis and failure to thrive. According to Moreira and Telzer (2015), distance, coupled with college enculturation, can strain familial and peer relationships which can add depression to the list of concerns for first-year university students. Transition also brings challenges of time management, distraction, desire to connect, and new academic expectations into this *mélange* (Aruguete & Hardy, 2016, Permezian & Credé, 2015). Aruguete and Hardy's (2016) research indicates millennials are inclined to possess a sense of hopelessness. When academic success is perceived to be beyond personal control, students tend to blame external sources, poor instructor practices, poor or incomplete advising, or university policies for failure (Aruguete & Hardy, 2016). I would tend to agree with Carlson, Aruguete and Hardy, and name this phenomenon circumstantially constrained. This could be true for students that fail just one class or for students that dropout all together. Aruguete and Hardy go on to claim, and I would echo, that examining motivational profiles of first-year students is critical to understanding students' responses to university activities and associated incentives for retention. Investigating the lived experience of first-year university students' engagement with university activities, helps to fill in the gaps in understanding how students perceive University activities, and therefore determine if said activities are useful in motivating and retaining students.

For organizational purposes and to facilitate the study, I broke the transitional journey into three time periods, spring-summer engagement, move-in engagement, and first-semester engagement. Across the spectrum, institutional engagement served to intersect with perspective or first-year students with the intent of influencing connection, supporting academic success, or relieving transitional stress/anxiety. All along the transitional journey, specific engagements were identified by participants as having either a positive or negative impact on their transitional year.

### *Spring-Summer Engagement*

Spring-summer engagement, encompassed all contacts or points of intersection between the university and perspective students preceding arrival on campus. College fairs, High School visits, informational mailings or social media posts, informal and formal campus visits, music and athletic try-outs, and scholarship competitions, are all examples of this type of engagement. Participants identified four specific engagements that were influential in their decision to attend a 4-year University, informal alumni contact, campus visits, contact with a faculty member and/or staff, and social media connections.

### *Move-in Engagement*

Move-in engagements serve to facilitate the move-in experience, orient students to campus community, and transition students into the university. Formal orientation, campus job fairs, activity forums, initiations, informational sessions, meals, celebrations, and rituals like Fall Convocation all fit this category. Special programs designed to engage students with particular responsibilities or people groups with particular needs are included in move-in engagements. Pre-move-in engagements are connective programs that allow students to move-in to the dorms early. Athletic teams use a pre-move-in strategy to get the team ready for the season. Some scholarship programs, diversity bridging programs, and international student programs bring students on campus early. Ostensibly, these programs are designed to improve access, relieve transitional stress, foster connection, and create a sense of belonging.

### *First-semester Engagement*

First-semester engagement comprises the remainder of the first semester, including first year seminar, advising meetings, student success team, intercultural connections, clubs, teams, evening speakers, academic classes, food services, and other formal and informal points of contact. Most of the student participant comments can be organized within three broad categories of engagement: Student Life (dorms, Resident Directors (RD), roommates), Academic stress (classes, faculty, student success, study habits), and Diversity and Inclusion initiatives (Intercultural Centre, Multicultural events, and student life).

## **Methodology**

### *Present Study*

The goal of this qualitative, exploratory, embedded, single-case study, was to understand how first-year students perceive institutional engagement strategies. Ethical approval was granted by Concordia University's institutional review board (IRB), as well as the IRB for the location of the study, Whitworth University (WU). Using Relational Cultural Theory, the semi-structured interview guide was built upon the foundation of establishing an authentic relationship. Questions in the guide offered the opportunity for participants to tell their story while considering the framework offered in Spady's and Tinto's work. A thematic analysis of 11 student interviews revealed the most influential engagements. The study was designed to focus on student perceptions (personal stories) of institutional engagement strategies, in order to get an idea of institutional impact and how engagements might support connection to the university. The results highlight how students experience engagement strategies (university sponsored activities) throughout the first-year transition. Revealing a paradox, some students perceived institutional engagement strategies as connective while others viewed the same strategies as divisive. Intimate knowledge of this lived experience contributes to the understanding of students' motivational profiles and why connection plays such a crucial role in supporting retention.

I analysed the transcripts of the open interviews, thereby gaining insights into the first-year students' social and academic environment. I deduced that there is a correlation between how institutional strategies affect students' motivation, and why some students perceive engagement strategies as connective while others view the same strategies as divisive. While individual stories were informative, the coalescence of all the interviews served to paint a picture of the transitional experience for the cohort. The purposive sample gave independent voice to various diverse sub-groups within the population, thus leading to a deeper understanding of the phenomena (Babbie, 2013; Creswell, 2013; Yin, 2014).

Stratified purposive sampling was used to ensure a diverse representation of the student body. This process ensured that sub-groups had a voice. The 478 first-year students were sorted into demographic groups, then students from each group were randomly invited to participate. 12 Participants were accepted into the study, ultimately 11 students participated. Table 1, contains demographic data of the participants. Throughout this work reference to quotes and ideas will be connected to each student's pseudonym.

*Table 1: Detailed Study Demographics*

Pseudonym	Race	Academic Stress	First Generation
<b>Female</b>			
Kate	Black/African		No
Ada	Black/African		No
Teri	Black/African	Yes	Yes
Brandi	White	Yes	No
Donna	White		No
Pat	White		No
Sara	White/Asian		Yes
Lois	Hispanic		Yes
<b>Male</b>			
Fred	Black/African		No
Dom	Hispanic/Pacific Island		Yes
Dan	White	Yes	Yes

Data for the study were comprised of interview recordings; notes, and transcripts. WU offers many engagements that were not mentioned in student interviews, this study only addresses comments for those engagements that students identified within their interviews. The intent was not to critique engagement strategies or to provide an assessment of effectiveness, but rather to examine consistencies and contradictions between institutional intentions and first-year student perceptions.

Each participant's story had its own unique perspective. When merged, the stories painted a collective picture, thereby illuminating the lived experience. Interviews started with relationship building. A shared cup of coffee, researcher transparency, and trust building served to usher in an environment of safe conversation. Some participants appeared sceptical; some eager, each with a story. The intent was to guide as little as possible and allow perceptions to flow naturally out of the influential experiences that each participant chose to share. The research guide ushered students from first contact with the university through the transitional journey to the end of first semester.

Whilst analysing the transcripts I coded the text using a combination of descriptive and in vivo coding methods (Yin, 2014). I developed the initial descriptive codes from the literature on engagement strategies and their expected or intended outcomes. I developed the in vivo codes by charting emergent unexpected patterns identified in the student interviews. I then evaluated the codes and patterns of occurrence to identify relationships. I used network visualizations to build themes across the spectrum of responses, which will be discussed in the results section.

## **Results**

### *Spring-Summer Experience*

Students with a connection to an alum all reported that the alumni's encouragement and sense of pride in their alma mater fostered connection. Whether it was the desire to have what was witnessed in the alum, or simply that a person they trusted endorsed the University, the reported perception was one of hopeful belonging and positive connection. For Donna, alumni influenced her decision. She witnessed both professional and personal connections of alumni that spanned three decades. She chose WU, seeking similar long-term meaningful relationships and professional success.

For students without an alumni connection, the relationship with the institution functionally began with acceptance to the university. From acceptance to move-in, participants reported multiple points of contact, each overwhelmingly positive. Ada remarked "I got to sit in on a professor's class—that was absolutely fabulous" (Ada, Personal Communication). Engagements as simple as birthday cards, registration emails, or Facebook posts all encouraged connection. "I got a birthday card over the summer. . . that meant a lot to me" (Teri, personal communication, April 13, 2017). I discovered that University visits were viewed as positive and connective. Some were student initiated, while others were invitational university sponsored visits. Participants reported that visits fostered connection and inculcated a sense of belonging.

A multicultural visit convinced Dom that the University setting would not be like his local high school. Dom was impressed with the racially interconnected community he witnessed, it "was like, wow, this is really diverse" (Dom, personal

communication, April 6, 2017). WU would be a place to which he could connect and belong. During that visit, that Dom met his roommate. Dom credits his roommate with getting him through the first semester. Teri's story was different; she wanted to attend a diverse school and WU was low on her list. However, the multi-cultural visit revealed a value for diversity. The appearance of an inclusive/interconnected culture convinced Teri she belonged. During Kate's visit, the Intercultural Centre provided comfort, safety, connection, and answers. It was here, with the staff, that Kate reports she found authentic relationships and perceived that she belonged.

Lois and Ada found connection through music auditions. Set up as a scholarship opportunity, the audition was not necessarily meant to build a relationship, but for these two it did. Ada (April 10, 2017), a music major, remarks "I think the music director really had a huge impact on my decision" (Ada, personal communication). The director made a strong connection and convinced Ada that she belonged. Lois (April 10, 2017), not a music major, remarked that the scholarship competition was both "intimidating . . . [and] . . . incredible" (Lois, personal communication). Through this engagement she too found belonging. Lois indicated that her visit and the chance to experience a class was influential as well. "I got to sit in on a professor's class—that was absolutely fabulous" (Lois, personal communication). Faculty-to-student connection played a positive role in developing the student's perception of belonging.

Athletic recruiting led to connections as well. Standing on the field, running with the team produced feelings of belonging and encouraged Donna and Dan to commit. Donna went on to compete and intends to continue throughout her university experience. Even though Dan did not make the team, he perceived the experience to be connective.

All participants, regardless of ethnic/racial background or socio-economic status, perceived spring/summer engagements to be effective in building their connections with the institution. Participants viewed the university as an academic community enriched through the arts, athletics, and special interests. University culture appeared to be comprised of an interwoven tapestry of diverse peoples, sharing ideas, sharing life, and growing together.

### *Move-in Experience*

Student participants identified the move-in day experience, orientation, and student life activities as influential within the first three weeks of school. However, this is also the place where past perceptions and expectations collided with reality. Most students reported feeling an initial sense of isolation. Fred (April 4, 2017) expressed his perception of isolation thusly, "I just felt like I didn't have any friends. I was surrounded by people but I didn't feel close to them" (Fred, personal communication). Five participants reported early move-in to be connective. Donna, an athlete, felt the connection with her coach, fostered earlier, now grow to include the team. Teri and Dom both participated in the bridges early move-in program designed for UREP and first-generation students. Teri (April 13, 2017) perceived

connection, “I guess that was good, it got me ready to start the year, got me more familiar with the program... I met a lot more people” (Teri, personal communication). Fred and Kate moved in with other international students. This head start, fostered institution-to-student and peer-to-peer relationship. Kate remarked that the Intercultural Center is still the place where she feels most connected to the university. Fred (March 3, 2017) perceived this experience as connective as well, “I felt, wow, Americans are nice, you know? I was stoked . . .” (Fred, personal communication).

The other six participants arrived on move-in day. Donna (April 4, 2017) who had moved in early, remarked “once everybody else showed up, it just seemed loud, busy” (Donna, personal communication). Participants were seeking authentic relationships and searching for a place to fit. Participants experienced the same community-developing orientation, rituals, traditions and programs. It was at this point that negative perceptions of the transitional experience emerged.

Perceptions of orientation were polarized. Sara and her roommate decided to take the university by storm and fully participate. “I just got to put myself out there . . . so my roommate and I stuck together and went about and we made it our goal to introduce ourselves to as many people . . .” (Sara, personal communication, April 18, 2017). Ada found orientation to be empowering, “It was so exciting, really (nervousing)” (Ada, personal communication, April 10, 2017), she found new life in setting her own curfew, her own priorities. Donna liked the community that formed, “I did pick up on the that community sense immediately” (Donna, personal communication, April 4, 2017).

Not every student found orientation to be positive. Some students found the activities to be exhausting, they felt that they could not keep up with the social events and the required orientation meetings. “I did not participate in [some social activities], I was so tired out by [bridges]” (Teri, personal communication, April 13, 2017). Others were just put off by the experience, perceiving events to be puerile. Kate felt isolated during Inititradition (a student-led component of orientation designed to foster school spirit, dorm identity, and peer-to-peer relationships) “because everybody was out doing things and I didn’t really feel like I wanted to do that kind of stuff” (Kate, personal communication, March 14, 2017). Brandi (March 7, 2017) perceived that the Inititradition experience seemed inauthentic. “There’s a lot of opportunities but for me it feels very orchestrated, hey, make friends, make friends and that’s very like, AHHH, to me” (Brandi, personal communication). Fred (March 3, 2017) perceived isolation “I kind of felt alone. Lots of people knew my name . . . but no one really knew me” (Fred, personal communication). Sara (April 18, 2017) a commuter, did not feel comfortable enough to participate in the social side of orientation, “I could’ve joined any dorm and commuted, but I didn’t want to” (Sara, personal communication).

### *First Semester Experience*

As the semester progressed students reported positive perceptions of resident advisors (RA), professors, and advisors. Perceptions of academic support teams were mixed. Students recognized the value and need for academic accommodations and interventions, but pride made it hard to accept. When offered accommodations, Dan (April 6, 2017) stated that “I didn’t want to ... I felt like ... I was cheating myself”; ultimately he accepted support and found the help he needed (Dan, personal communication). Brandi viewed the notice that she was failing and the offer from student success as negative and judging.

General Education (GE) courses contributed to students’ perceptions of futility. GE courses form the foundation of skills and experiences for all students. Courses in a variety of disciplines; written and oral communication, social science, quantitative reasoning, natural science, world languages, and the like. It is common practice in the United States to accept GE credits from other institutions as well as dual credit (compulsory and community college courses that count for university credit) programs. Students perceived GE courses to be credit fillers, courses without purpose. Students reported being advised to not waste time with GE courses, to get into major courses as soon as possible. Some students were counselled to take GE classes at a community college, indicating that the GE courses at University XYZ had no peculiar value.

Social issues punctuated academic stress. Kate initially thought her single dorm room was wonderful but found that it left her isolated. Fred, after a month of roommate conflicts, expressed feelings of liberation when his roommate left. Friend groups emerged and relationships formed. In general, this sample of students did not perceive the campus to be ethnically/racially intermixed but rather, eight of the participants described his or her friend group as racially/ethnically homogeneous. Three participants described friend groups as racially intermixed. Lois and Ada, each of mixed racial background, found themselves in friend groups that included other students of mixed race. Both perceived that group to be diverse, however, these are homogeneous groups in similar ways that other friend groups were described. Teri described a friend group that included pacific islanders, Hispanic, Japanese and white students. The other students described friend groups in homogeneous terms, students of colour tended to remain separate from white students. Kate (April 14, 2017) perceived separation and isolation to be caused by the institution “so, I feel like I should have had more of a chance to meet other students—American students and not [just] international students” (Kate, personal communication).

Participants reflected on initial academic success, peer relationships and the culture of the campus. Issues of diversity and inclusion took the forefront of student observations. Students perceived the first semester experience as contradictory to the expectations inculcated by pre-move-in engagements. Engagements that were perceived as positive early on, now were perceived as barriers to belonging. Students perceived a structural separation within the community. Deeply held pre-

judgements began to surface as each reflected on diverse group settings, both formal and informal. While all students remarked that they felt safe on campus, each highlighted places or circumstances where they could not be themselves or did not feel as if they belonged.

Each participant reflected on first semester challenges. Teri felt like she needed to change her major. Dan wanted to get back on top of poor first semester academic performance. For Dom the sense of belonging, cultivated pre-move-in, permeated his first semester. When faced with academic and social challenges Dom's positive peer relationship, his place in the family so to speak, emboldened him. "I don't know if I would have made it . . . if not for my roommate" (Dom, personal communication). Fred came all the way from Africa, against his parent's wishes, he felt he had to persist. Lois couldn't imagine being anywhere else, Sara had her eyes fixed on the career; for her, university was just the means to an end. Brandi did not feel like she belonged but stayed out of obedience to her parents. Ada found that her connection with the music department emboldened her resilience. Donna indicated that she was a perfect fit for this university culture. Pat's relationship with her RA made all the difference, led her to persist and set her eyes on a future role in student life leadership.

### *Sub-Group Comparisons*

While perspectives overlapped myriad sub-group identities. It is notable that there was disparity of perception within the aggregated UREP category. Specifically, American Black students of African Descent's perspectives differed from other racial/ethnic subgroups and from International Black student perspectives. For example, Fred (March 3, 2017) found it disconcerting that peers, faculty, and staff all felt it necessary to educate him on his personal response to bias or prejudice. He does not want to be controlled by the actions of others, so he holds to a perspective that social behaviours and individual actions were of little consequence. Feeling offense, he thought, would give power to the action, that was power that Fred wished to retain.

Further investigation revealed that, at least with regard to diversity, equity and inclusion issues, each individual offered a unique perspective founded in personal experience and racial/ethnic identity. It would be inappropriate to aggregate all underrepresented (UREP) minority students into a single category. Student participants reflected on personal identity, relationships to the university and involvement in institutionally sponsored engagements. Table 2 highlights, some of the disparate perspectives that emerged from analysis of participant interviews, as applied to student perspectives on diversity, equity and inclusion related issues.

Table 2: Comparisons of general perceptions from study results by demographic groups

Perspectives	American Black Students of African Descent	UREP Students other than Black of African Descent	Black International Students of African Descent
On institutional treatment of students.	Expressed an <b>expectation</b> of special consideration.	Impressed by institutional efforts to build <b>connection</b> .	Assumed <b>not entitled</b> to any special status
On community identity.	Value in personal identity over community identity. <b>Individual</b>	Valued community identity over personal identity. <b>Corporate</b>	Valued being part of the community at an American University, <b>but felt separated</b>
On Campus events	<b>Felt excluded or uninvited</b> unless the event was designated as specifically African American or multi-cultural. <b>Valued differentiated events</b>	Put off by exclusive events, <b>Valued inclusive over differentiated events</b>	Expectation that they would learn from experiencing American Culture in various forms. <b>Open to new ideas, valued inclusive over differentiated events</b>
On diverse groupings	View that diversity included all perspectives except White, which was seen as diminishing diversity. <b>Exclusive Attitude</b>	View diversity as people contributing disparate views, regardless of race/ethnicity. <b>Inclusive Attitude</b>	Valued all perspectives as part of the diverse voice. <b>Inclusive Attitude</b>
On ethnic/racial interconnectedness	Accepted being a <b>separate</b> group, indicated either a desire to be separate or that racial separation was <b>inevitable</b> .	Viewed campus as not interconnected <b>desired connection. dismayed by separation</b> .	Viewed campus as not interconnected <b>desired connection</b> .

White student perspectives of diverse groupings and ethnic/racial interconnectedness varied. Donna (April 4, 2017) seemed to see no particular value in diversity, while Pat (April 4, 2017) put high value in racially/ethnically diverse groupings. Brandi (March 7, 2017), defined a diverse group as one where students expressed viewpoints that were counter-establishment, societally normative perspectives were not considered to be part of a diverse perspective. Dan (March 7, 2017) felt excluded from diverse settings.

## Discussion

This study supports Lenz et al.'s (2013) views on relational cultural theory, as applicable to all college students. Relationship, institution-to-student and peer-to-peer, appears to be the primary factor that influences a student's desire and ability to persist in higher education. Relationships foster connection, and connection fosters fit or belonging. Consistent with Spady's (1971) theory of separation, students that experienced either academic or social stress were tempted to give up and drop out. However, relationships provided the strength to overcome that temptation and persist. An atmosphere conducive to a successful transition can be enhanced with

purposeful engagement strategies that are sequenced to move students through the transition and into a connected learning community.

It appears that diversity, equity, and inclusion are major themes that impact engagement across all facets of the learning community. Current engagements, at WU have led to a student perception of the learning community as small groups of diverse students navigating through a sea of white. Pat (April 4, 2017) offered a picture of what the learning community might look like if students genuinely valued one another. "It would look really diverse, it would be just everyone with everyone. It wouldn't be cliquey, ... that's what I think" (Pat, personal communication). What Pat described would be an interconnected community built on hand-to-hand, interdependent relationships. If universities intend to grow learning communities built upon relationships that go beyond tolerating to valuing diversity, institutional engagement cannot stop with creating access and connection, it needs to go beyond structural inclusion, to dynamic interdependence and community interconnectedness.

The network analysis of codes revealed that student responses generally fit into one of four categories. I used these categories to thematically organize and describe my findings:

1. Authentic Engagement: perceptions of authentic relationships
2. Contradictory Engagement: perceptions of a lack of institutional consistency
3. Differentiated Engagement: perceptions of isolation and segregation
4. Circumstantially Constrained: perceptions of helplessness

### *Authentic Engagement*

Interviews revealed that authentic relationships produce a perception of connection. Students valued peer-to-peer and institution-to-student connection, validating the importance of connection, consistent with Jacob and Archie's (2008) findings and sustaining Lenz, Holman, Lancaster, and Gotay's (2013) supposition that RCT is appropriate for broad application to all college students. Institution-to-student connection begins with first contact and is fostered through both virtual and face-to-face contacts leading up to move-in. Participants identified the student-advisor relationship as most impactful. Student perception of peer-to-peer relationship importance, supported Corwin & Cintron's (2011) findings that institutions should focus on relational groups rather than transforming individuals.

Peer-to-peer connections are intentionally fostered through the orientation process, although some participants view this as contrived and therefore inauthentic. Data revealed that student-selected friend groups were generally racially homogeneous. Most described friend groups as dorm-mates, although some stated that they were closer to friends that shared their academic major. Friend groups that were based on common interests or like majors, such as nursing or music, transcended racial/ethnic boundaries, dorm-based friend groups did not. Interest-based friend groups have common slang, group rituals, and exclusive language much like a

racially or ethnically based friend group, confirming Venuelo and Salvatory's (2016) posit that cultural behaviour is not restricted to racial/ethnic based groups. Students perceived friend groups as essentially closed, it is very difficult to transition between friend groups.

Students need to be prepared for both benefits and challenges of peer-to-peer relationships. Even participants that had negative roommate experiences recognized the power that such a relationship carried. Perceptions were consistent with Adams's (2012) observation that students must be prepared for the social or non-cognitive demands of the transition to college life. Adams's research revealed that while cognitive factors influenced a student's resiliency, socio-cultural factors had a greater impact. Participants that struggled academically reported that peer support was of paramount import.

### *Contradictory engagement*

Lived experiences that contradicted the communicated institutional intent produced a perception of a lack of institutional consistency, leading to long term divisiveness. Participants identified three areas of concern. The first was general education (GE) classes. Students perceive some GE courses as a barrier to education. Communications with advisors and professors unintentionally led students to believe that GE classes were not important, just a box to check. This is indicative of what Hickenbottom-Braun and Burns (2015) warned. When market-place practices drive curriculum selection inappropriate curriculum and institutional motivations may be leading higher education away from its traditional purpose, thereby diminishing the value of the educational journey, promoting the belief that higher education is a necessary burden, a means to an end.

The second example of an engagement perceived as false was reported primarily by UREP students. It surfaced when the lived experience did not fit with the expectation levied in the recruitment process. Recruitment efforts led UREP students to believe that they would be living in a racial/ethnically interconnected community. Despite institutional engagement, UREP students expressed a perception of being outside the culture of WU consistent with Castro's (2012) findings. Table 2, above identifies and categorizes disparate perspectives that can help one understand individual and corporate responses to institutional efforts to build community.

The perception of the lived experience was not the interconnected community that students were led to believe would be present. This perceived lack of racial/ethnic interconnection in the broad campus community left students dismayed. Multi-cultural visit and bridging programs essentially painted an idealistic picture of the campus that was inconsistent with the lived experience. This inconsistency created a perception of institutionally designed segregation.

A third example occurred in the move-in phase in the context of orientation. Students perceived Ininitradition, a component of orientation designed to foster school spirit, dorm identity, and peer-to-peer relationship, as a negative experience. Interviews revealed that students perceive these activities as puerile, sometimes embarrassing, and wasted time. Students selectively participated or avoided participation all together.

These examples of perceived lack of consistency serve to confirm Dika and D'Amico (2016), assertion that institutional transition programs (traditions, engagement strategies, success programs, and school culture) intended for connection may actually create a divisive or unwelcoming perception in the minds of first-year students. Creating opportunity for access does not necessarily lead to inclusion. Unintended consequences are often difficult to spot and may seem unrelated to the good institutional work that is being done. Systemic broad consideration of transitional engagement in a global context could serve to identify such consequences and create an opportunity to change processes appropriately.

### *Differentiated engagement*

Interviews revealed that the unintended consequence of targeted or differentiated engagement can be separation, eventually leading to student's perception of purposive structural segregation. Participant perceptions confirmed that WU exhibited a social structure similar to the problematic social structure that Benn (2002) and Baber (2012) described as a community that consists of separate people groups simply existing within the same space.

While research indicates that differentiated engagement strategies could engender first-year student persistence across cultural, socio-economic, student interest, and gender divides (Baber, 2012; Dika & D'Amico, 2016; Duggan & Williams, 2011; Rigali-Oiler & Kurpius, 2013), such engagements can be divisive. Participants perceived that some existing engagements served to highlight and perhaps even widen the divide between UREP and white students. Results listed in table 2 reveal that American Black students of African Descent may desire separate events designed specifically for them to celebrate a corporate identity, while Hispanic or Asian students may favour opportunities to experience other cultures. However, all participants indicated that they had experienced institutionally sponsored events or aspects of events to which they felt uninvited or unwelcome. These perceptions may diminish or serve to prevent dynamic campus-wide interconnection.

Benn (2002) and Baber (2012) both described processes of enculturation, identifying shortfalls of the attempt to enculturate diverse learners into an institutional culture. It would appear that differentiated engagements may also limit the growth of an interconnected learning community. Participants identified a desire to fit into the learning community, but none of the participants indicated a desire to conform in order to fit in. Student perceptions lead one to think about a plant graft. The process of grafting allows the grafted plant to keep its very nature, while it supports the trunk through photosynthesis, the graft draws its very life from the trunk. Institutional

engagements should be designed around developing these kinds of symbiotic relationships.

### *Circumstantially constrained*

Students expressed a perception of helplessness in two forms. Attributional helplessness served to limit dreams and academic possibilities. Influential helplessness prevented students from seeing a possibility that they could be an instrument of local change. Participant mindsets appear to be reflective of Castro's (2016) observation that millennial students tend to lack grit, in terms of both academic and social challenges.

Perceptions were consistent with Dika and D'Amico's (2016) research that early academic success may increase retention, or at least contribute positively to resiliency. Early academic success appears to be an important factor in promoting institution-to-student connection thereby, bolstering grit and establishing fit and belonging. Helping students overcome academic barriers can lead to empowerment and a change in attributional mindset. Students that were struggling academically, seemed to have a more difficult time finding a place to fit. This did not appear to be related to academic support to conquer a single particularly hard class. Rather, students remarked more powerfully about finding the right program or major and academically fitting in. Another expression of this phenomena, confirms Aruguete and Hardy's (2016) observation that a perception of fixed cognitive attributes leads to academic paralysis. Further, it appears that this sort of paralysis extends beyond academics to the socio-communal aspects of university life.

Student perceptions indicated that social connections played a role in both fit and resiliency. Students recognized that they themselves are transformed by experiences, consistent with Baber's (2012) assertion that a student's identity is not fixed rather it is transformed by the lived cultural experience. However, influential helplessness manifested itself in the fact that participants perceived themselves to be ineffective as transformation agents particularly with respect to peer attitudes. Students' attitudes toward bias and prejudicial behaviours were reflective of Castro's (2012) observation that millennial students value multi-culturalism yet lack awareness of issues surrounding diversity and inclusion. Student behaviours and relationships reflected the chasm that is currently evident in the greater society. All participants, regardless of race, ethnicity, or gender appear to be concerned about equity and equality, but felt relatively powerless to affect even local change.

### *Limitations*

The study was conducted at one mid-sized private institution; therefore, the findings are not generalizable. However, the study does possess transferability, for similar mid-sized institutions. The study was limited to the perception of continuing second semester first-year students, it represents only the positive perspective, belonging to those that persisted. Within America and internationally it has become increasingly apparent that civil discourse within diverse cultures is strained. At the focus of this study was a university that intends to grow, a distinctive interconnected community

of diverse learners so as to positively impact the global community. Study note: two participants left the institution after completing their first year, both cited a lack of racial/ethnic interconnectedness as part of the reason to leave.

### *Implications for Policy and Practice*

The results of this case study provided insight into how participants perceived institutional engagement throughout the transitional period. Conventional engagement has been shown to improve retention, but has not necessarily the educational experience or social connection, nor has it challenged societal diversity and inclusion norms. UREP students expressed similar perceptions to those expressed in studies 10 and 20 years ago.

The knowledge gained from this study may assist with the further development of engagement strategies, supports, and interventions, that can be systemically implemented to increase early academic success, increase institution-to-student and peer-to-peer connection, and improve campus-wide racial/ethnic interconnection; all leading to greater retention. Development of effective engagement strategies and properly sequencing said strategies throughout the transitional year, may better position students to take full advantage of the educational opportunity and serve to reduce or remove the persistent challenges faced by UREP students while cultivating a dynamic interconnected community. With a better understanding of how students perceive institutional engagement, and why connection is important to resilience; educational leaders are well poised to craft institutions of the future. Higher education leaders should consider the following recommendations:

1. Redesign demographically-targeted early-move-in programs to include the full cross section of the campus community. With the following purposes:
  - a. Establish a cohort-wide, racially/ethnically interconnected community, beginning with the first encounter.
  - b. Use challenging activities or connection to authentic community service to push students beyond personal comfort zones and to engender positive interdependence within the first-year cohort.
  - c. Eliminate embarrassment as a means of pushing students beyond personal comfort zones.
  - d. Support sub-group needs through follow-on differentiated engagement.
2. Campus visit engagements should include a representative cross section of student demographics to more closely reflect the expected experience of the first semester.
3. Campus should consider implementing intercultural competency events that serve to foster ethnic/racial interdependency and develop hand-to-hand relationships between students of the prevalent culture and UREP students.
4. Consider revamping general education coursework in light of University mission.
  - a. First semester course work should be purposefully selected to improve scholarly engagement and lead to early academic success.

- b. GE requirements should be aligned with institutional mission and vision.
5. Reconsider diversity and inclusion practices in light of institutional mission.
- a. It might be possible for small to medium sized universities to construct a mission and vision centred culture that transcends the racial/ethnic norms of the greater society thereby developing an extra-ordinarily interconnected community.

Future studies in first-year success should look beyond mere retention; the future of traditional universities may well depend upon developing educative processes that meet the needs of current and future students while meeting the goal of educating community leaders and culturally competent global thinkers. A mixed methods study of research scientists, employers, political, and community leaders could shed light on important characteristics and positive attributes of global citizens. This knowledge could help structure higher education institutions that will lead into the next millennium.

As noted in the limitations, the current study provides but a snapshot. The study does not purport to be evaluative in nature. A mixed-methods longitudinal study following a cohort through the university experience would more deeply unpack the effectiveness of engagement strategies as well as chart how student perceptions change as one matures through four years of university.

Current diversity and inclusion practices start from the perspective of highlighting differences, noting inequities, thereby creating groups of “others”. This process appears to be divisive, creating a problem to be addressed later in the educational process. Dika and D’Amico (2016) note that UREP students face “unique and persistent challenges” (p.369). Those same challenges were present at the turn of the century as noted in Benn’s (2002) study. Further qualitative study of communities built on positive interdependence and mutual accountability could shed light on a transformative mindset for racial/ethnic interconnectedness.

## **Conclusion**

This qualitative case study explored the first-year students’ perceptions of institutional engagement during the transitional year, starting with acceptance to the university and concluding with the end of first semester. A semi-structured interview encouraged each participant to tell his or her story, thereby highlighting the institutional engagements that truly influenced the student’s journey. The results were categorized into four themes, that may produce actionable goals for higher education leaders. These four themes function interdependently to weave the tapestry of the transitional experience.

1. Authentic Engagement: perceptions of authentic relationships produce a sense of connection.
2. Contradictory Engagement: perceptions of a lack of institutional consistency produce mistrust

3. Differentiated Engagement: perceptions of isolation and segregation can produce division within the learning community.
4. Circumstantially Constrained: a student's perception of helplessness can lead to social or academic paralysis.

Some areas of improvements were identified in the social and academic environment. Current college students respond to authentic relationships. Guidance and mentorship is only effective once a relationship is established. Perceived contradictions damage relationships. Current college students are collaborative, creative, and innovative, not prone to conform. Properly sequenced engagements can foster relationships and cultivate fit or belonging, grafting students into the community. A graft is appropriate because once grafted into the community students form a symbiotic relationship with the institution. This allows for the student to maintain his or her identity and yet be part of something bigger, that is the learning community, the institution. Interconnectedness/interdependence may then be fostered through purposefully created opportunities for hand-to-hand connections between individually diverse students. It is this type of positive interdependence that will serve to grow both student and institution.

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