RETHINKING STUDENT TRANSITIONS

How Community, Participation, and Becoming Can Help Higher Education Deliver on its Promise

DALLIN GEORGE YOUNG
BRYCE D. BUNTING

PRAISE FOR "RETHINKING STUDENT TRANSITIONS"

"This book is a much needed and long overdue reframing of transitions that will serve student success and support institutional effectiveness and impact. Steeped in research but still highly accessible to all practitioners, educators, advocates, and scholars, the "transition as becoming" model that Drs. Young and Bunting provide is highly inclusive of "new traditional" student populations, widely applicable to all academic and personal transitions, and poised to truly transform the way we conceptualize, discuss, and study student transitions."

- ***Jennifer R. Keup**, Vice President of Urban Initiatives, APLU; Executive Director, Coalition of Urban Serving Universities; and Senior Fellow, National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition*

"Yes! At the exact moment higher ed is grappling with effectively meeting the needs of our multi-faceted students, Young and Bunting shepherd us into the next theoretical era with their finely tuned perspectives. Soon to be a staple in graduate programs and professional development circles, be prepared to think deeply and be rewarded with practical guidance."

- ***Janet L. Marling**, Executive Director, National Institute for the Study of Transfer Students and Associate Professor of Education, University of North Georgia*

"As administrators, faculty, and staff help college students navigate important experiences and decisions, now is the time for new resources on student transition theory. This book meets that need by pairing relevant and practical concepts with a community-focused approach to prepare professionals for myriad future discussions of students' transitions."

- ***Amelia Parnell**, President, NASPA – Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education*

"It is far past time to reimagine the theory and practice of college student transition. Young and Bunting have done just that, advancing a perspective rooted in meaningful community participation that is sure to be generative for researchers and administrators alike."

- ***Rachel A. Smith**, Assistant Professor of Higher Education and Student Affairs, Iowa State University*

RETHINKING STUDENT TRANSITIONS

How Community, Participation, and Becoming
Can Help Higher Education Deliver on its Promise

DALLIN GEORGE YOUNG
BRYCE D. BUNTING

Cite as:
Young, D. G., & Bunting, B. D. (2024). *Rethinking Student Transitions: How Community, Participation, and Becoming Can Help Higher Education Deliver on its Promise*. University of South Carolina. National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition.

ISBN: 978-1-942072-69-0
ISBN (ePub): 978-1-942072-70-6
ISBN (eBrary): 978-1-942072-71-3

Published by:
National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience® and Students in Transition
University of South Carolina
1718 College Street, Columbia, SC 29208
www.sc.edu/fye

Production Staff for the National Resource Center:

Project Manager:	Rico R. Reed, Associate Director
Copyeditor:	Todd Money
Design and Production:	Stephanie L. McFerrin, Graphic Artist Sammy Lopez, Graphic Artist Makayla Rippy, Graphic Artist
External Reviewers	Nia Haydel, Complete College America Mark Allen Poisel, University of Central Florida Adrianna Kezar, University of Southern California

Library of Congress Control Number: 2024932375

About the Publisher

The National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition was born out of the success of University of South Carolina's first-year seminar ("University 101") and a series of annual conferences focused on the first-year experience. The momentum created by the educators and advocates attending these early conferences paved the way for the development of the National Resource Center, which was established at the University of South Carolina in 1986. As the Center broadened its focus to include other significant student transitions in higher education, it underwent several name changes, adopting the National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition in 1998.

Today, the National Resource Center collaborates with institutional partners in student success, student affairs, and academic units as well as with institutions, organizations, and affiliates across the country and around the world in pursuit of its mission to advance and support efforts to improve student learning and transitions into and through higher education. The Center achieves this mission by creating opportunities for the exchange of practical and scholarly information, facilitating the discussion of trends and issues in our field, and providing thought leadership. Its primary areas of activity include:

- convening conferences and other professional development events such as webinars, workshops, and online learning opportunities
- publishing scholarly practice books, research reports, guides, a peer-reviewed journal, and an electronic newsletter
- generating, supporting, and disseminating research and scholarship
- maintaining several online channels for resource sharing and communication, including a website, listservs, and social media outlets

The National Resource Center is the trusted expert, internationally recognized leader, and clearinghouse for scholarship, policy, and best practice for all postsecondary student transitions.

Institutional Home

The National Resource Center is located at the University of South Carolina's (USC) flagship campus in Columbia. Chartered in 1801, USC Columbia's mission is twofold: to establish and maintain excellence in its student population, faculty, academic programs, living and learning environment, technological infrastructure, library resources, research and scholarship, public and private support and endowment; and to enhance the industrial, economic, and cultural potential of the state. The Columbia campus offers 324 degree programs through its 15 degree-granting colleges and schools. In fiscal year 2023, faculty generated $243.9 million in funding for research, outreach and training programs. USC is among the top tier of universities receiving Research and Community Engagement designations from the Carnegie Foundation.

CONTENTS

PART 3:
CONNECTION, APPLICATIONS, IMPLICATIONS, AND EXPANSIONS

PART 4:
CHARTING A PATH FORWARD

TABLES

PREFACE

The eighth and concluding chapter of this book begins with a simple statement: *This book is a snapshot in time*.

And that is true. This book represents the culmination of discussions, presentations, conference papers, more discussions, rejected article submissions, more discussions, research teams, and some better news on the article submission front that started back in 2017. As anyone who has taken part in the "academic hustle" can attest, the process of working with an idea, refining it, and constructing a compelling argument that allows it to see the light of day can be a bit of a rollercoaster ride with many highs and lows—and, if it's a good one, maybe a few loops and corkscrews.

Yet, this book is not a snapshot of the timeframe that encompasses *that* rollercoaster ride. It's a snapshot of the one that followed. Dallin was lamenting his frustration to Jennifer Keup, his friend and colleague and the executive director of the National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition, after we had written and submitted several drafts of our initial paper on the topic to academic journals with improvements to the manuscript, but no acceptances for publication. After expressing her empathy for the challenges of publishing a so-called "thought piece," Jennifer, in a clear and direct way, asked, "Why don't you just write the book?"

Truthfully, we had envisioned writing a book, but before embarking on such a work, we felt we needed to have something vetted by our peers, adhering to the hallowed traditions of refereed publication that have served as the bedrock of science since time began. But, since that wasn't working, we really didn't have a good reason for not writing one. So we considered Jennifer's advice and mapped out what a book should, would, and could look

like, pieced together a proposal, and submitted it to the National Resource Center for consideration. That's when this snapshot began.

Along with that came a new rollercoaster ride. There have been new highs and lows; unexpected twists and turns; long, nervous inclines (usually occurring just before writing deadlines); points that caused our stomachs to turn a little; and stretches of pure nerdy exhilaration. Without further belaboring the rollercoaster metaphor, it is fair to say our (re)thinking of the rethinking in this book has caused us to challenge and expand our own thinking. Searching for, collecting, reviewing, evaluating, synthesizing, and writing new information naturally forces you to reconsider, scrutinize, and cultivate perspectives. It is our hope that writing this book will be just one of many processes that hold such promise as we continue to grapple with conceptualizations of college student transitions.

So, to situate this snapshot in time, we offer three perspectives in this preface: (a) a discussion of what brings the two of us to this topic, (b) a recognition of our respective positionalities, and (c) the acknowledgement of those who have helped get this book to where it is.

What Brings Us to This Topic? Why Are We Writing This Book?

With this section, it is our intention not to hit readers with a barrage of bona fides about why we are qualified to write this book. Rather, it is more important to know who we are and what brings us to this work. We want to share what it is about our experiences that has led us to this point and why we are interested in the topic of student transitions.

One of the first things each of us did when we started this work was to engage in some reflexive writing about what brought us to the topic of wanting to better understand and clarify the definitions and conceptualizations of college student transitions. What follows is each of our narratives, outlining the factors that brought us to the topic, as well as our motivations for writing the book. We start with Bryce's narrative.

Bryce Bunting: What Brings Me to This Topic? Why Am I Writing This Book?

Looking back on my somewhat circuitous trajectory through higher education, first as a student and then as a professional, the idea of transitions has been a prominent theme in all of my experiences. I've nearly always been in some sort of transition or been thinking about the transitions of others. I transferred twice as an undergraduate. At my last undergraduate institution, I became a peer mentor and learned how to support new college students as they joined our campus community. And each of the professional roles I've had since graduating—orientation professional, administrator in a first-year program,

professor, scholar–practitioner—somehow have tied back to the same question: "How can I help people (especially new members of communities) have a positive experience here and learn how to be successful?"

I first began thinking about transitions as a transfer student, although I wouldn't have used the term transition then. I had left a small, private liberal arts college for a large, public research university. After just a few weeks at my new university, I found myself feeling angry, frustrated, discouraged, and becoming increasingly cynical about the higher education enterprise. I wondered why I was so miserable and felt so disconnected. For probably the first time ever, I consciously reflected on why transitions lead some to flourish but others to flounder.

At my first institution (Mars Hill College, now Mars Hill University), I was a student–athlete and had a built-in community waiting for me when I arrived. I quickly formed relationships and found meaning in being part of a team and representing my school. Keeping a daily journal allowed me to regularly reflect on how I was growing and who I was becoming. I was also a student athletics trainer, a position that provided nearly daily opportunities to integrate my academic and social experiences; in the training room, I could apply what I was learning in my classes while spending time with people I considered friends.

In short, I felt part of my communities, was able to contribute to and participate in meaningful ways, and because I was reflecting each day in my journal, I could see myself growing. I loved it there, and I felt like people loved having me there.

Leaving Mars Hill College was hard, and I struggled with the decision for months. I felt like I was severing ties with friends, giving up my identity as an athlete, and losing membership in two communities I loved—my soccer team and my athletics training friends and mentors. However, my academic interests had shifted, and the tuition at a small liberal arts school was expensive.

So, arriving at the University of Utah—a large, public research institution—was jarring. I was living at home again, which felt like backward progress. I wasn't involved on campus. I had no friends in my classes and felt unknown to my professors. I drove to campus in the morning for class, went to the library to study after class, left the library for work, then returned home and repeated the pattern the next day. Before the start of that semester, I think I took a campus tour of some kind and met with an academic advisor to map out a graduation plan. However, I always felt isolated, like an outsider watching everyone else have a great time. Not surprisingly, I transferred again.

After a year at my third stop—Brigham Young University, a large, faith-based undergraduate research institution—I was encouraged to apply to be a peer mentor in the university's Office of First-Year Experience.

The experience of becoming a peer mentor would be the single most impactful thing to happen to me. In this role, I received training and mentoring that provided a new, more critical lens through which to make sense of my own transition experiences. I found a community of peers fully committed to their own learning and to helping other students become good learners, and I became immersed in work that connected me with campus resources, faculty members, and leadership opportunities. Additionally, I had a front-row seat for the transition experiences of the students I was assigned to mentor, and then structured opportunities to reflect on and dialogue about how student development and learning theory could be applied to help those students succeed. Peer mentoring was like a paid apprenticeship, and it opened the door for my eventual work as a higher education professional and scholar.

When I reflect on key experiences since then, a similar pattern emerges. For me, transitions presented opportunities, not just for developing new knowledge or skills, but to be transformed and have my identity (re)shaped by the experiences of joining a new community and becoming a full-fledged member of that community. I believe deeply and personally that transitions have transformative potential because, quite simply, it happened to me. I also experienced (on a relatively small scale and not at all to the degree many students do) the pain and discomfort of a "failed transition," one in which I felt lost and never really connected with my campus community.

Dallin Young: What Brings Me to This Topic? Why Am I Writing This Book?

For me, the seeds for the ideas that have sprouted and flowered while writing this book were planted before I ever became a student affairs professional, even before I knew there was such a thing. In high school, I was fortunate to have opportunities to take concurrent enrollment classes and earn credits through nearby Snow College. Being a precocious and somewhat achievement-oriented young person, I took advantage of as many of these opportunities as I could, even enrolling in a full load of courses the summer between my junior and senior years of high school. When I arrived at Utah State University as a first-year student, I entered with junior class standing because of my accumulated Snow College and AP credits.

Scheduling my first quarter was straightforward. I took two first-year seminars, one a general university-wide student success course and the other an introduction and orientation to the college of engineering. After filling in the rest of my schedule with a math class, a drafting class, and the first class in the required biology sequence for my declared major—pre-biological and agricultural engineering—I had it all figured out.

The second quarter was a bit rockier, however. Because I had essentially taken all the typical general education courses, it made the most sense to focus on the required

engineering courses, which meant I would take ENGR 200, or Engineering Mechanics: Statics. This is where the first problem presented itself. Typically, students took ENGR 200 alongside a Linear Algebra course during their second or early third years, but my sequence was out of whack, as I was still two quarters away from Linear Algebra. So for my ENGR 200 experience, I had to solve systems of equations by hand while the rest of the class performed magic on their calculators.

Because I was younger than everyone else taking the class and had a good group of friends between my roommates and classmates from the previous term, I made no friends and joined no study groups from the class and therefore had no idea there was a much easier way to solve these equations. So, despite a pretty good showing in the balsa wood bridge-building competition, I got a D in the course (sorry, Mom).

Of course, I did not think about this as an issue related to my transition at the time. I had no framework, language, or concepts to lean on to help understand or describe my experience. In fact, only recently have I started to think about how my transition experiences as an undergraduate have shaped my professional interests. Those experiences in which I felt like I belonged, namely my roles in student leadership as a resident assistant and through the Residence Hall Student Association, became the constants throughout my experience.

Sometime after my second year, I had a moment of reflection, deciding I was not happy with becoming an engineer (I had switched over to electrical engineering by then) and feeling I would not be happy if I were doing that 20 years later. Conversely, and not long after, I walked past the office of a housing administrator whom I had gotten to know as a student leader and thought, "If I had that kind of job in 20 years, I would feel good about it."

Fast forward those 20 years, and here I am, writing about these experiences. What I have presented does not yet explain what brings my attention to transitions or why I felt the need to write this book, however. The answer to those questions comes from my experiences (a) as a housing professional working in first-year communities, (b) as an instructor in a first-year seminar, and (c) as a researcher focused on supporting students in transition.

Before my life as a researcher and faculty member, I saw myself as a "housing guy," but even then, I was concerned about how to make the residential experience as meaningful a learning opportunity for students as any of the rest of the collegiate experience. As an area coordinator for the First-Year Community at California College of the Arts (CCA), I saw young and talented artists looking for ways to get their work shown. One afternoon, I received a postcard from a student inviting me to their senior gallery show. I asked my two colleagues with whom I shared a workspace, both of them CCA graduates, where students learned to curate their own shows. Did they take a class on it? Did they have opportunities to practice it?

It turned out that the first show the students were required to put on was also the last one: the senior show. So, I decided to take what little space we had in the building to create a small gallery dedicated to first-year student art. Students could gain practice in thinking about what art to display and how to present it to the public.

Throughout my role as a housing guy, I was making choices akin to those of a first-year experience professional without yet adopting that identity. After CCA, I moved east to take a job as a residence life coordinator over two residence halls in a complex referred to as "the Towers" at the University of South Carolina (USC), where I was excited to work in what was then called a "freshman community." I was fortunate enough to be on a committee to reimagine and strengthen an early form of what is now widely known as a residential curriculum for first-year students, to participate in a rudimentary form of early alert for the students in housing, and to become a University 101 first-year seminar course instructor.

It was while working with students in all these ways that I started thinking more explicitly about their transition. So many students in the Towers at USC were looking to find a place to fit in, to explore their growing independence, to figure out what it meant to be a student at a university, and who they wanted to be. While I was trying to be the best housing guy for these students, I started to become a student of transitions. I even used Schlossberg's transitions theory to put together a training module for my resident advisors to get them to think about how they could help support students using the 4 'S's: Self, Strategy, Support, and Situation (All these years later, and I can still do that from memory!).

Later, after earning a doctorate to pursue a career as a researcher and (hopefully) a professor, I took a position directing research activities at the National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition, and again I was fortunate to be an instructor for the University 101 course at USC. At one point, students in my three-hour credit-bearing class that counted toward their academic credential asked me why I was assigning more challenging work and requiring more hours of service from them than their friends in other sections of the course. They even went to RateMyProfessor.com to warn other students about being in my class for taking it too seriously!

Looking for insight, I brought up these reactions to a couple of my co-workers who were also engaged with first-year students. One of my colleagues, who was perennially nominated for the Award for Outstanding Teaching in U101, faced something similar every semester: Students were upset that he expected more from them than their friends were experiencing in other sections. The other colleague, who was teaching sections of English 101 at the same time, required students to do a lot more than either of us did, for the same three graded credit hours. Moreover, she shared that her students did not complain about being asked to do a lot of writing.

I started to wonder why that was: "What is it about these courses and students' expectations that lead to these complaints?" Later, I heard a colleague, who is a philosophy professor, share the idea that "a complaint is a cry for meaning." So, what was the meaning the students in my U101 classes were looking for that I was not communicating when I was asking them to do the things I had read about as important forms of academic engagement?

Further rumblings in my mind around the notions of transitions were inspired by two experiences happening within short succession of each other. The first came during a meeting of the Association for the Study of Higher Education. The session focused on studies of student transitions, and David Vacchi, one of the participants, shared some work he was doing on student transitions for veterans. On my way out of the session, I stopped to tell David how much I enjoyed hearing his findings, including his assertion that we needed to rethink transitions for student veterans.

"Schlossberg doesn't work for student veterans," he shared. "We need a new transition theory."

In 2014, he and Joseph Berger explored and expounded on that idea in a paper. Not long after that, Jennifer Keup, the executive director of the National Resource Center, stopped by my office and, after sharing some frustration with a manuscript she was reviewing, said: "The theoretical framework [on transitions] in this paper just wasn't doing anything for them. … We need to come up with a new transitions theory!"

Well, here we are.

Positioning Ourselves in Our Work

As you read through our personal narratives, you may have had similar experiences, held comparable ideas, and wondered about practice like we did. It is highly likely you have other reasons for caring about student transitions, based on your own experiences and background. You might also have known someone whose transition story is very different from your own, and recognize it is every bit as valid a perspective on the college student experience.

Because of this, we want to be very clear and open about who we are and how that informs our perspective. To that end, we have each crafted a short positionality statement that orients us socially in the conversation. These statements are not offered as apologies for who we are or as excuses for any oversights on our part, but rather as introductions to our subjectivities. Writing these early in our process was intentional, as we wanted to ensure we were also aware of how our subjectivities informed our choices while we searched, interrogated, analyzed, synthesized, and reorganized the theoretical bricolage we present in this book.

Bryce Bunting's Positionality

It is important to recognize my biases and privilege. I am a White, college-educated male, born to White, college-educated parents. Though I have experienced some degree of challenge through personal experiences with transition, I have largely been part of systems and institutions designed for people like me. I have never faced any degree of systematic oppression or exclusion at any point in my life. Thus, while I can listen to the stories of others (both personal narratives as well as more formal research narratives) to understand and empathize with what it might be like to experience transitions from a position of marginality, I cannot ever really understand that experience. Consequently, I will always be, to some degree or another, blind to the experiences of large groups of the higher education population.

Dallin Young's Positionality

I am an abled, White, heterosexual, cisgender male who grew up in rural central Utah. I was raised in a family where education was important, and around me were symbols and messages that higher education was important. All of my parental figures had received post-secondary education, including my mother, who returned to college to complete her bachelor's degree while she was raising three boys and giving birth to a fourth. I was raised in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints faith tradition, which provided a foundation for many of my principles of ethics, justice, and care.

My college experience largely took place in the 1990s and was marked by a number of transitions: concurrent enrollment, traditional first-year enrollment at a large state university, stopping out for two years, returning after the break, changing majors, academic probation, and withdrawal and readmission. In addition, my educational experience involves traditional student affairs preparation at both the master's and doctoral level with training on the history of higher education and student affairs administration, student development theory, organizational theory, and administrative practices.

These experiences form powerful frames that organize, shape, and inform my understanding of the social world. Yet, understanding them also provides a base from which I can recognize and empathize with others. I am committed to processes of learning so that I can become more aware of how my positions dictate how I perceive and present in the world.

Acknowledgements

This book would not have been possible without the contributions of others who have supported us. We are grateful to those who gave helpful feedback on early drafts of the initial work that led to this book, including Harrison Kleiner, Christina Yao, Matt

Sanders, Rachel Smith, Jean Henscheid, and John Gardner. Thanks to Ka'lah Paige, who was instrumental in helping us organize and corral all the references. We're grateful to the members of the transitions theory systematic review research team who helped us comb through so many journal articles: Alana Hadley Long, Aaron George, Mark Jestel, Kevin Crawford, and Jessica Moore. We would like to thank the leadership team at the National Resource Center: Jennifer Keup, Rico Reed, and Lauren Writer, who not only gave us the opportunity to publish our work but provided crucial developmental feedback on our proposal that shaped the book's direction. We're grateful to the reviewers for their thoughtful, insightful, and challenging feedback. This book would not be as good as it (hopefully) is without your perspectives. We're especially grateful to Stephanie McFerrin who undertook the herculean task of moving mountains to expedite the design and production of this book.

We would also like to acknowledge our friends, families, students, and colleagues who have had to hear us talk about this work in some form or fashion for the past year. Thank you for your patience, grace, and contributions. We could not have done it without your support.

Onward ...

It is with hopeful audacity and optimistic longing that this book came to life. One of the most audacious choices we made involves its tone. After writing the first chapter (not Chapter 1, by the way), we had a long conversation about how we should communicate these ideas in a way that would honor their importance and demonstrate the depth of study that we undertook to arrive at these conclusions, while also remaining accessible and holding your attention. We hope you find the results at least somewhat entertaining and insightful.

Thus, what follows is an invitation to reimagine college student transitions. We do not think much reimagining will be required to see our descriptions of the theory–practice in the lives of students and higher educators, however. While not everyone will agree with the conclusions we have come to, we hope that our critics will at least find these ideas provocative and will spark a conversation on what it means for students to transition to higher education. All we ask is that you give these ideas a chance.

PART 1:

BUILDING A CASE FOR A REIMAGINING OF TRANSITIONS

Chapter 1 | Why Rethinking Transitions Matters

Why a rethinking and reimagining of college student transitions? One of the hallmarks of a field focused on education and learning—particularly one with the audacity to label itself higher education—is a willingness to regularly reflect on the field's current state and identify needed refinements. An examination of the story of "transition work" in higher education highlights that (a) scholars and practitioners have engaged in a somewhat consistent and ongoing pattern of reflective reformation and (b) these reimaginings have helped move the thinking and practice about college transitions forward in important ways.

Indeed, the modern movement associated with supporting college transitions grew out of a critical examination of the "sink-or-swim" attitude toward student success in higher education that had prevailed up to that point. Beginning in the 1960s, institutions started to prioritize accessibility, opening their doors to a broader segment of the American population, one that included older students, low-income students, and students from a variety of minoritized populations. Over the ensuing decades, however, pressures for accountability in higher education made institutions attend to the fact that accessibility was not just about admitting a more diverse student population. Institutions needed to find better ways to help students be successful once they arrived on campus. Consequently, in the 1980s and 1990s formalized efforts to study and better understand college transitions began in earnest, with a particular focus on the first year.

Since then, a proliferation of evidence suggests student success is dependent not only on what happens in the first year, but on a host of other transition experiences, including

the sophomore year experience, the senior year capstone experience, the transfer student experience, the experiences of "swirling" students, and the transition from college to career. Not to be outdone, a growing chorus of voices have joined in to claim that "the third year is crucial and doesn't get the respect it deserves" (Mintz, 2019).

As we will discuss in greater depth in Chapter 2, researchers and practitioners have defined transitions in a variety of ways. Some describe transitions as simply *movement* from one setting or phase to another, with an accompanying need to *adjust* to or find *stability* in an unfamiliar environment. Others see college transitions through a slightly more developmental lens, placing an emphasis on helping students acquire new skills and perspectives deemed essential for success in their new circumstances.

While we see practical value in the perspectives offered by these common conceptualizations of college transitions, we argue that transitions are not just opportunities to induct students into a new setting or help them develop new skills and abilities. Instead, we will argue throughout this book that transitions hold transformative potential and are opportunities to support students in a more fundamental, pervasive, and ongoing kind of *becoming*.

Accordingly, we think about transitions as the process by which students become full and contributing participants in their various communities—their classrooms, their disciplines, their residential environments, and the campus at large. Similarly, we assert that institutions are most effective in supporting student transitions when they do more than just "orient" students and, instead, prioritize giving students access to the experiences, tools, conversations, and relationships that offer authentic membership in the community. Epitomizing this membership are opportunities for students to engage with others—faculty, peers, administrators, and anyone else actively involved in the intellectual life of the university—as full participants in meaningful activities that matter both to the student and to the institution.

Why This Book? Why Now?

This book aims to deepen understanding of *why* attending to transitions—all the various transitions that make up the college experience—will be even more essential in coming years. More importantly, it provides guidance for *how* we can better define, describe, analyze, and support transitions in ways that acknowledge the shifting higher education landscape and the increasingly diverse students on our campuses.

Let us be clear: Higher education has benefitted tremendously from the important theories on college transitions developed over the past 50 years. A few of these include foundational works such as Tinto's theory of academic and social integration, Schlossberg's transition model, Weidman's model of undergraduate socialization, Laanan's model of transfer capital, Attinasi's description of the importance of "getting in" for Mexican

Americans during their first year, and Schooler's Native American transition theory. Additionally, thought leaders such as Betsy Barefoot, John Gardner, Sylvia Hurtado, George Kuh, Ernest Pascarella, Terrell Strayhorn, and Patrick Terenzini, among many others, provided critical foundational understanding that has illuminated the challenges and developmental needs of students in transition.

However, as Upcraft et al. (2005) argued nearly 20 years ago, colleges and universities must be "willing to make major changes in their approach to learning if they [are] to serve students in the 1990s and beyond" (p. 1). In concert with these researchers, we argue that "major changes" similarly are required in our current thinking and theorizing about transitions if we are to support *today's* college students in the current higher education landscape. Ultimately, the corpus of theoretical frameworks commonly used to make sense of the phenomenon of college transitions has important gaps that have largely gone unacknowledged by researchers and practitioners alike. As we will work to demonstrate, traditional approaches to college transitions fall short in several ways:

- they do not acknowledge the pervasive and ongoing nature of college transitions;
- they are inadequate for promoting inclusion and belonging for an increasingly diverse student population;
- they tend to conceptualize transitions as merely individual or personal concerns; and
- they fail to leverage the potential for transformation and becoming in transitions.

As a way of orienting the reader to our main critiques of the current theoretical landscape related to college transitions, we will briefly discuss these key gaps here.

The Ongoing Nature of Transitions

Much of the scholarship and practice focused on college transitions is grounded in paradigms of transition framed as induction, movement, adjustment, or development (Gale & Parker, 2014), placing a focus either on helping students adjust during specified periods of time or helping them successfully complete particular developmental tasks. However, college transitions are more than just episodic, time-bound punctuations that begin and end in concert with the whims of the registrar and their calendar. In fact, such a view risks arbitrarily elevating some transitions while minimizing others. Instead, we call for a more nuanced understanding of the college experience as a protracted series of transitions that flow into, out of, and through one another. From this perspective, transition is not an isolated event occurring at a small number of pre-determined points in a student's college experience. Rather, students experience a series of interconnected and ongoing

transitions that open the door for a process of continual learning and becoming (more on this in a moment). Indeed, we assert that transitions are inseparable from learning, participation, and becoming.

Consequently, we often conceptualize transitions as problems we need to solve, rather than as educative—or even essential—learning opportunities that facilitate deep and meaningful learning. Indeed, Tobbell & O'Donnell (2005) described transitions as natural aspects of engaging in new communities and that "to understand [them] as a problem is to reify and separate knowledge from context" (p. 10). Similarly, student support units frequently characterize their work using phrases such as "removing challenges," "easing transitions," and "accommodating students," suggesting transitions require an approach separate from our planned learning processes.

In short, we often view transitions as something to "get through" so students can return to the relative calm of the "normal" college experience and continue with the process of real learning. We argue, instead, for a reconceptualization of transitions—one that recognizes that learning, transition, and navigating unfamiliarity are all pathways to the deep and lasting learning we promise students they will experience when they arrive on our campuses.

Transitions as Pathways to Inclusion and Belonging for Today's Students

While challenges in transition can be the source of important learning, the fact remains that, for historically minoritized students, we have too frequently created or tolerated systemic challenges that hold no educative value. Further, though traditional transition theory and frameworks provided critical early understanding of the importance of attending to the needs and challenges of students in transition, these frameworks grew out of a time when higher ed institutions' primary focus was on educating a relatively homogenous group of Americans. More simply, 20th century theoretical frameworks generally describe what the college transition looked like for a largely White, financially stable, and otherwise privileged population of students. This has tremendous implications for current efforts to advance diversity, equity, and inclusion across college campuses.

The reality is that the search for innovations that improve educational quality and equity and support success for all students is partly dependent on the theoretical seedbeds from which innovations spring. Though persistence and retention rates have improved slightly overall, ultimately, too many students still stop out, and concerns regarding equity gaps across various demographic groups still exist (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2022). Thus, we still have a great deal of work to do. Consequently, any conversation about transition is inherently one about access, equity, inclusion, and

belonging. When institutions fail to support students in transition, they perpetuate inequities and maintain the status quo.

Further, the traditional approaches to supporting transition described previously in this chapter often inadvertently push students to the margins by "involving [them] in the [campus] community in some ways while keeping them at arm's length in others" (O'Donnell & Tobbell, 2007, pp. 317–318). We find it somewhat ironic that a significant degree of institutional efforts to orient, welcome, and support students in transition rely on a model that essentially separates students from the larger campus community, then engages them in practices and activities that are not part of the practice of that broader community.

To help illustrate this problem, consider a familiar driving metaphor. Nearly every reader has used an on-ramp to transition from a surface street onto a freeway or expressway. This simple innovation allows a driver to enter the freeway's ongoing high-speed traffic flow in a somewhat gradual, safe, and natural way. Of course, there can still be challenges in merging from the ramp to a formal traffic lane and increasing your speed to integrate with the flow of traffic, but the on-ramp provides a relatively natural method of doing so.

In contrast, imagine the frustration, confusion, and danger that would ensue if your on-ramp ended with a 90-degree turn onto what is essentially a different road just before the intersection point with the freeway. While the on-ramp might have allowed you to observe the speed and direction you would need to adopt to merge onto the freeway, it hasn't actually placed you on an effective trajectory to allow you to become part of the ongoing flow of traffic.

To show what we mean here and why it is important, we point to a common refrain in the literature about programs that support sophomore student success. The critique frequently follows this pattern: Students who return for their second year of college are confronted with the challenges that come with attendance, but as the institution turns its attention to a new group of incoming first-year students, sophomore students report feeling abandoned. The supports they grew accustomed to are no longer in place, thereby simply postponing their real transition to the second year (Hartman & Young, 2021; Schaller, 2010; Schreiner, 2018; Skipper, 2019; Young et al., 2015). Frequently, we have heard this phenomenon informally referred to as the first-year experience simply "moving the cliff" of retention from the first to the second year. Therefore, as transition support was only concerned with moving students from one sense of stability to a new one (i.e., from pre-arrival, through arrival and adjustment at college, to stability by the conclusion of the first year), a sense of abandonment or the experience of "barely surviving" (Schreiner, 2018, p. 9) indicates the interventions offered in the first year were situated in that place and time and did not provide durable or ongoing benefits to the students who received them.

We do not love the term "college onboarding," but, for simplicity's sake, if the way we "onboard" students to new experiences in college occurs on a distinctly different road and requires distinctly different skills and practices, students' transition onto the "main road" (e.g., after their first-year experience) may involve some damaged fenders.

All of this highlights the need to differentiate between what we term *productive peripherality* and *miseducative marginalization*. Productive peripherality in college transitions provides an appropriate degree of scaffolding and safety as students navigate the unfamiliarity and risk that come with transitions. In contrast, miseducative marginalization is what we might describe as "overly protective," in that it provides so much insulation and separation from the broader campus community that students are denied access to the people, practices, conversations, and resources (the on-ramp as it were) essential to helping them become fully participating members of their campus community. This marginalization is particularly problematic for first-generation students and students with minoritized identities because it further obscures the hidden curriculum of higher education and serves as another barrier to the forms of participation most likely to lead to full membership in the campus community. Navigating this tension between peripherality and marginalization is a key consideration for anyone interested in supporting students in transition.

Transitions Are Not Individual Endeavors

Though transitions involve learning about oneself, discovering new abilities, developing pride in one's competence, and exploring a new *possible self* (Markus & Nurius, 1986), they are not merely individual matters. Transitions intersect with issues of community, membership, and access.

The past few decades of research have provided nearly indisputable evidence of the necessity of fostering belonging among college students. Students are more likely to persist, be retained, and thrive when they feel a sense of belonging in their community (e.g., Means & Pyne, 2017; Nunn, 2021; Silver, 2020; Strayhorn, 2018) and are offered opportunities for meaningful participation and involvement with others on their campus (e.g., Astin, 1984; O'Donnell & Tobbell, 2007; Quaye et al., 2019; Vetter et al., 2019).

However, much of the scholarship on college transitions narrowly defines *community* as the social ties that develop in traditional transition programs (e.g., new-student orientation, first-year learning communities), in first-year seminar courses, or through students' informal social interactions with peers. A sense of belonging in a social community is just one of a variety of ways in which students can experience the benefits of community during times of transition. Our hope is to expand readers' conception of this term beyond traditional notions of social community (Nunn, 2021) to a more inclusive and encompassing view of the variety of communities that students could connect with

during transitions. Ultimately, those interested in student transitions have an obligation to collaborate with colleagues on our campuses to design spaces that offer varied forms of community and belonging to students from a diverse range of backgrounds and identities.

We hope this book and its focus on community and relationships will spur productive conversations about the role of community in transitions; what "counts" as community; how to support students in making new community connections while honoring ties to prior communities (particularly familial and cultural); and how *joining* a community might be different from *participating* in that community.

Transitions as Transformation and Becoming

This brings us to the main premise of our book and our major critique of existing approaches to college transitions. As we have alluded to already, transitions are not just momentary disruptions in the college experience requiring students to adjust to a new way of doing things. Further, transitions are more than the first few weeks of a new "phase" in the lifespan of a student—for example, the beginning of the second year, the first semester after declaring a major, or the six months a student on academic suspension might be required to spend away from school.

Transitions are times of potential transformation.

To realize this potential, however, those of us charged with researching and supporting these transitions need a new theoretical lens to guide our work.

We chose to write this book because we have seen and experienced how transitions can facilitate becoming. You likely have, too. You probably know college students who, across their various transitions, have not just achieved specific aims or learning outcomes identified by their institution, but have experienced a more comprehensive and durable kind of becoming that has impacted their lives well beyond the classroom. We have also discovered evidence of this transformative potential scattered across the research landscape (e.g., Bunting & Williams, 2017; Gorgorió, 2002; Sanders, 2018; Yanchar et al., 2013). In the end, our hope is to convince readers that the various transitions making up the college experience can, together, prepare students for future personal challenge and change, as well as prepare them to be full participants in future communities—their homes, cities, jobs, and social circles. From this new philosophical ground, with its elevated perspective, we can engage in a new kind of conversation about transitions, one focused on supporting students as they navigate the challenges of transitions, while also leveraging the potential for transformation and becoming that are inherent in these same challenges. So, as we have articulated already, transitions are not problems or crises, but times of potential transformation.

Transitions: A New Theoretical Framework

Clearly, the writing of this book and exploration of these questions make for an ambitious undertaking. However, our review of the literature on transitions has ultimately left us feeling what we've come to describe as *optimistic longing*.

Yes, there are gaps in current theorizing, and we long for theory that helps better describe the experience of an increasingly diverse population of college students. However, we feel optimistic about the potential for a reconceptualization of transitions in higher education because of what we see happening in pockets of innovation around the world, including good work by our colleagues in South Africa, Australasia, and Europe, as well as here in the United States. On these campuses, we see canny and thoughtful practitioners rethinking practices and programs, along with innovative interventions that support diverse students in transition and move beyond simplistic goals of induction toward transformation and becoming. We will highlight examples of approaches we have labeled as "becomingist" throughout the book.

Additionally, clusters of theories scattered across the literature point to the transformative potential of college transitions and suggest that other practitioners feel a resonance with the perspective of transitions as becoming. Accordingly, we have attempted to outline the foundations of a reconceptualized theoretical framework for student transitions in higher education based on previous theoretical work, including situated learning and legitimate peripheral participation in communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) and transitions as "becoming" (Ecclestone et al., 2010; Hamshire & Jack, 2016; Gale & Parker, 2014; Sanders, 2018). Thus, our current work might be best described as *theoretical bricolage* (Kincheloe, 2011), in that we have taken a critical and rigorous approach to creating a new theoretical conceptualization of transitions by weaving together key elements and perspectives of existing theoretical models of college transition. Together, these diverse but conceptually coherent "bricks" come together to provide a new, more critical, and more practical lens for pursuing future avenues of inquiry and evaluation of practice related to how we support college transitions.

Most importantly, our hope in writing this book is to provide new tools—both theoretical and practical—for improving the learning of students across the many transitions that make up the college experience. Moreover, we advocate rethinking transitions in order to move beyond approaches that perpetuate gaps or narrowly focus on transitional events that are most convenient to the institution. To that end, we are more concerned with the underlying features of student transitions that guide institutional responses than we are about specific programmatic approaches that lend themselves to a one-size-fits-all approach to transitions. The field of higher education has fallen short by naively defining transitions as periodic and isolated elements of college. This assumption has led to the false belief that we can design uniform programs or tactics to support

students in transition by merely familiarizing them with policies, practices, resources, and expectations. Doing so limits the transformative potential of transitions and fails to acknowledge the reality that today's students take a variety of paths as they navigate their personal transitions. In rethinking the ways we approach transitions, we have a chance to close these gaps and help students leverage their opportunities for becoming inherent in the college experience.

Our book provides guidance on how to balance challenge and support by introducing three key *modes of transition*: community, participation, and becoming. We have grounded our thinking about these modes and their role in transitions in the assumption that becoming a college student is not altogether different from the experience of a novice entering any new community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). Specifically, entering a new community involves a shift from peripheral forms of participation toward increasingly advanced forms of participation with the community's more experienced members. More succinctly, new students become experienced learners as they both acquire the knowledge and skills needed to navigate their various communities and, more importantly, participate in these communities in ways that signal membership and offer significant opportunities to contribute to the work of the institution. Even more simply, students learn to do college by *doing* college, albeit with a particular set of supports, experiences, and opportunities. This book is our attempt to convince practitioners and thought leaders of the importance of attending to issues of community, participation, and becoming when it comes to these transition experiences.

Who Is This Book For?

While we hope this book makes it into the hands of a wide variety of folks with an interest in student transitions, we have envisioned a couple of primary audiences for our work. First are higher education practitioners who seek to understand and improve the experiences of students in transition. This group includes transition program personnel, particularly those in decision-making positions for the design and execution of programs, administrators responsible for student success on campus, and researchers with an interest in studying the experiences of students in transition.

More broadly, we hope this book will hold appeal and utility for a group of readers we have termed "thought leaders." While this terminology might be both grandiose and vague, it helped us focus on people we think will serve as principal consumers of the work. Perhaps the primary group of thought leaders who form the audience for the book are higher education and student affairs graduate program faculty, particularly those who teach courses on student development theory, student success, or college student environments. These faculty are critical to sharing and shaping the prevailing professional perspectives in the field, and their power and influence cannot be overestimated. Indeed, the theories,

models, frameworks, and philosophical orientations faculty choose to highlight and make visible to graduate students will shape the thinking and practice of the field immeasurably.

The second group of important thought leaders are transition program directors. These individuals set the agenda for the day-to-day practice of the programs they administer. Having these thought leaders adopt the principles and orientation emphasized in the book will both improve practice and influence the thinking and practice of the colleagues with whom they work, including the graduate students they supervise in practicum and internship experiences. Consequently, we have labored to write a volume that blends theoretical reconceptualization with plenty of discussion of the practical application of those ideas.

Ultimately, supporting students in transition is not about a single person, program, or policy. Rather, it hinges on institutions' ability to create communities that (a) offer students belonging (Nunn, 2021) and (b) invite not just passive "engagement" via observation and proximity, but also invite (or even require) students to join the campus community by actively contributing to its practices. Therefore, really, this book is for anyone with a stake in supporting transitions.

How Is This Book Structured?

In keeping with the overarching goal of providing a reconceptualization of college student transitions to inform both scholarship and practice, we have organized the book around a core set of questions, each of which is explored in a distinct section:

- (Part 1) Where are the gaps in current approaches to college transitions? Why do we need a reimagined theoretical foundation?
- (Part 2) What are the essential components or modes of an approach to understanding supporting transitions as a process of becoming?
- (Part 3) How can this reconceptualization be applied in practical ways across a variety of transitions in higher education? What are the implications for practice, policy, and research?
- (Part 4) What is the path forward? How might this model need to be revised or expanded?

These questions provided general guidance as we conceptualized the book, and framed the organization and content of the chapters that outline the basis and the consequences of our arguments.

In this opening chapter, we have attempted to make a case for the need for new transition theory and why now is the right time to begin articulating its reconceptualization. In Chapter 2, we provide an integrative overview of the landscape on research and

scholarly practice literature on transitions by identifying and critiquing general ways that transitions are defined in higher education literature. We then introduce a new conceptualization and definition of "transition as becoming."

Part 2 of the book focuses on outlining a new theoretical point of view on transitions. In Chapter 3, we review the fundamental aspects of *situated learning, legitimate peripheral participation* (Lave & Wenger, 1991), and *transition as becoming* (Gale & Parker, 2014) as both a foundation for new thinking of transition theory as well as a conceptual bridge between current approaches to supporting transitions and the new framework outlined in this book. In Chapter 4, we introduce three main "modes" of transition—community, participation, and becoming—and make the case for why a focus on these elements of transitions is so important. These modes are at the core of the new theoretical framework described in the book and are the central focus of the chapters that follow.

Part 3 expands our discussion of the practical application of this theoretical framework. In service of our aim to maximize the book's practical utility, Chapter 5 is devoted to a discussion of how these *modes of transition* can guide the process of designing, implementing, and assessing transition programs and initiatives. In Chapter 6, we describe the dynamic interplay between these three modes of transition and provide more examples of practices that leverage these modes and illustrate the power of *community, participation,* and *becoming.* Chapter 7 is devoted to a discussion of key implications of the theory for institutional leaders. These include recommendations for how campus leaders can apply this framework to invisible sites of transition, including gateway courses, developmental education, high-impact practices, and academic probation.

Finally, in Part 4 and Chapter 8, we chart a course forward and offer a concluding integrative overview of our proposed theoretical approach. We then outline needed revisions and improvements to our framework and map out directions and recommendations for future research and inquiry into these ideas.

An Invitation to Readers

Writing a book like this is risky, in that some readers may be hoping to find a one-size-fits-all strategy, intervention, or program to address the challenge of student transitions in a seemingly magical way. Consequently, we want to make clear: Any concrete strategy or example you might encounter in what follows does not suggest this particular strategy or application of our framework will be appropriate for all students or for every institution. Providing sure-fire or guaranteed interventions was never our intent, and readers searching for such treasure will be disappointed.

Instead, what we hope to convince you is that the most high-impact approaches to supporting transitions—those that open the door for transformation—need to attend to the three modes of transition introduced in Chapter 4 (i.e., community, participation, and

becoming). Consequently, we encourage readers to take a critical and context-conscious approach to implementing and applying the ideas we present. As authors, we see our role as one of introducing you to a new set of theoretical tools you can deploy and adjust to fit the unique challenges and opportunities of your space. Ultimately, we hope the reconceptualization of transitions outlined in the book provides a new lens through which to think about, make sense of, and support transitions in higher education.

Consequently, we invite you to primarily focus on understanding the modes of transition we have introduced, consider their application in your own practice, then regularly reflect on and discuss with colleagues how these ideas might inform (a) new scholarship on college transitions and (b) the design or redesign of transition programming on your campus. Supporting students in learning and becoming requires an integrated, holistic, and campus-wide approach that engages all stakeholders. These efforts should be responsive to the multiplicity of global, institutional, and historical factors that influence transitions, as well as the local challenges, opportunities, and needs of your students.

To enhance the practicality of the book and its ideas, we conclude each chapter with a short section titled *Crucial Considerations* (see below). Here, we articulate questions we hope will promote reflection, dialogue with colleagues, evaluation of existing practices, and considerations for ongoing contemplation about how what has been presented in the preceding chapter shapes our thinking about supporting transitions.

Ultimately, rethinking transitions involves much more than developing a single premier program or high-impact intervention. Rather, the greater task for those who support students in transition is to find ways to bring together a constellation of research-based and theoretically grounded practices that, together, comprise an environment that offers belonging by actively inviting students to participate in the process of becoming at both the personal and institutional level.

While we hope this book does lead to the development of new programs, interventions, and practices designed to support students in transition, we are just as eager to simply spark dialogue and debate around the ideas we have presented. So, if after reading this first chapter you already have questions, concerns, new wonderings, or sparks of insight—we have done our job. Happy reading! We look forward to the conversations that result.

Crucial Considerations

The following questions can help guide or initiate conversations with key players on your campus and serve as starting points for implementing change:

- What are the current needs, opportunities, and challenges associated with transitions on your campus? Where are you hoping to make changes or refinements?

- What theoretical frameworks are you and your colleagues relying on to guide the transition programming on your campus? How well are these frameworks serving you? Are there ways in which they fall short?
- How might you balance challenge and support during times of transition?