

EXPLORING FACULTY ENGAGEMENT AND TRANSFER STUDENT CAPITAL IN AAS
DEGREE PATHWAYS

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ABSTRACT

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This qualitative study explores how faculty engagement influences students' vertical transfer experiences in Associate in Applied Science (AAS) programs. Although AAS degrees were initially designed to prepare students for immediate employment, an increasing number of AAS graduates now pursue bachelor's degrees for career advancement and economic mobility. Despite this shift, AAS transfer remains hindered by fragmented articulation policies, inconsistent advising, and limited faculty involvement in the transfer process. Drawing on Wang's (2017) Loss/Momentum Framework and the concept of Transfer Student Capital, this study examines how faculty behaviors, teaching practices, and relational interactions affect students' understanding of and access to transfer opportunities.

Using a phenomenological design, the study collected and analyzed narratives from AAS degree holders in North Carolina to identify moments when faculty interactions either supported or hindered transfer momentum. Findings show that faculty engagement acts as both a catalyst and a barrier: positive relationships with core faculty boost confidence, provide direction, and strengthen belief in transfer possibilities, while disengaged or uninformed faculty reinforce structural obstacles. Recent research (Belk Center, 2022; CLTRR, 2025; Nichols & Deal, 2025) highlights similar gaps, indicating that AAS students face significant credit loss and unclear pathways despite their increasing share of total transfers.

These results demonstrate that relational and structural factors jointly shape AAS transfer outcomes. The study's implications emphasize the need for equity-minded faculty development, expanded access to transfer-focused courses such as ACA 122, and greater inclusion of AAS pathways in statewide articulation policies. Together, these strategies can help institutions create transfer-receptive cultures that promote both academic momentum and workforce mobility for non-traditional and place-bound learners.

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To my students, past and present, your stories, dreams, and determination inspire me daily. You remind me why access to education matters and why I am committed to improving opportunities for all non-traditional learners.

Finally, this work is dedicated to all the Black women who have ever felt unseen or unheard.

Your resilience, strength, and brilliance are the foundation of so many stories yet to be told. Please know that you are worthy, you are powerful, and you belong in every space your dreams lead you to.

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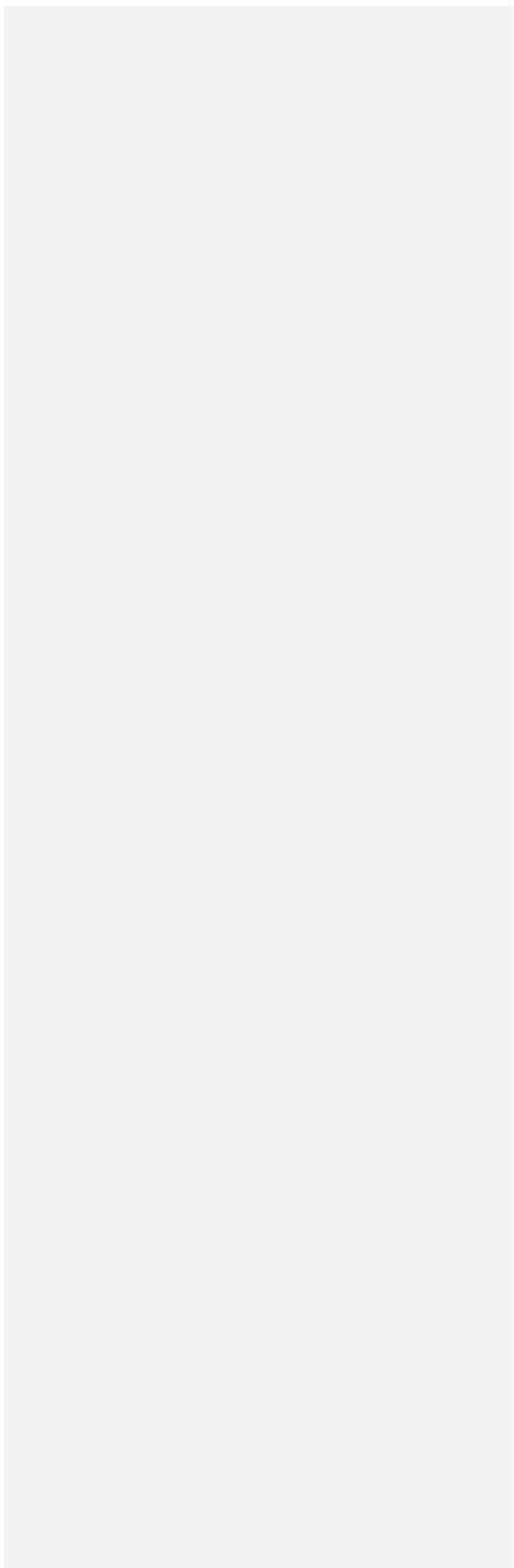
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Transfer pathways are essential for increasing access to higher education and improving economic mobility (Lumina Foundation, 2023; Shapiro et al., 2017). For many students, especially those earning Associate in Applied Science (AAS) degrees at community colleges, transferring to a four-year college is a crucial opportunity for career growth and higher earnings. However, the transfer pathways for AAS degree holders often face many obstacles, including credit transfer issues, lack of institutional support, and systemic barriers that mainly impact adult learners (D'Amico et al., 2024; Jenkins & Fink, 2016). Despite these challenges, faculty members frequently play a significant role in shaping students' academic confidence, helping them navigate programs, and setting long-term goals. Faculty involvement can either motivate students to continue their education or discourage them and stop their progress.

Grounded in Wang's (2017) momentum framework for community college student success, this study examined how AAS students perceive faculty engagement about their vertical transfer aspirations, to understand how faculty support, or its absence, affects student momentum in the transfer process. Wang (2017) defined momentum as the outcome of both instructional and motivational support, highlighting key areas such as teaching and learning, curricular clarity, and student motivation. The framework identifies critical stages in the student journey, including college readiness, progress through programs, and teaching and learning, where institutions either support or hinder student success. These stages are referred to as momentum points, which facilitate student advancement, and loss points, where students are more likely to become discouraged or drop out of the system altogether.

Faculty engagement refers to instructors' active involvement in fostering students' academic success, sense of belonging, and progress toward educational goals, including transfer readiness. In community colleges, particularly for students in AAS programs, faculty engagement encompasses instructional support, mentorship, informal advising, and information about transfer pathways. Engaged faculty serve as institutional agents who provide relational and informational support, helping students navigate course selection, understand articulation agreements, and build confidence in their ability to succeed at a four-year institution. Research suggests that when faculty are proactive in encouraging transfer, especially for students in traditionally terminal degree programs like the AAS, it can significantly improve students' momentum and clarity in pursuing baccalaureate degrees (Chindia et al., 2024; Fink & Jenkins, 2021; Karp, 2011; Wang et al., 2021). Faculty engagement is therefore not only instructional but also developmental, shaping students' aspirations and expanding their access to vertical transfer opportunities.

The proposed study examines the Teaching and Learning component of Wang's momentum framework for community college student success. It emphasizes how faculty-student interactions, classroom practices, and academic engagement influence student outcomes. For students enrolled in AAS programs, who often encounter unclear or limited transfer options, faculty can play a critical role in either confirming students' transfer potential or unintentionally reinforcing the idea that further education is out of reach.

Using this framework, the study will explore how faculty behaviors, communication, and engagement practices influence either momentum or setbacks in students' vertical transfer experiences. This perspective is especially helpful for understanding the experiences of AAS

students, whose programs were not originally designed with transfer in mind and whose success may rely on proactive, supportive faculty involvement.

Background of Study

Community colleges have played a vital role in expanding access to higher education, particularly for students from historically marginalized and non-traditional backgrounds. Associate in Applied Science programs were created to meet regional workforce needs by providing students with practical skills for immediate entry into the workforce (Bragg, 2001). However, more AAS degree recipients, especially adult learners, are now striving to continue their education through vertical transfer to four-year institutions to pursue better career prospects and economic mobility (Carnevale et al., 2012; D'Amico et al., 2024).

Despite growing statewide and national efforts to reform transfer policies, many initiatives still focus on traditional transfer degrees like the Associate in Arts (AA) and Associate in Science (AS). For instance, in 2025, North Carolina State University announced the Wolfpack Connect partnership with all 58 North Carolina community colleges, creating a guaranteed admission pathway exclusively for AA and AS degree completers. This decision highlights a persistent structural inequality by excluding students in AAS programs from opportunities similar to those available to students in four-year colleges, even though evidence shows that more of these graduates are seeking to transfer to four-year colleges. By limiting formal transfer options to students on traditional academic paths, policies like this reinforce the perception of the AAS degree as terminal and contribute to systemic barriers that this study seeks to expose.

Vertical transfer, which involves moving from a two-year to a four-year institution, is one of the most important and well-established functions of the American community college system. These colleges serve a broad mission that includes workforce training, academic preparation, and

transfer, with more than half of all transfer students in the United States following the vertical pathway (Causey et al., 2020; Taylor & Jain, 2022). As open-access institutions, they act as gateways to higher education for students seeking short-term credentials as well as those pursuing a bachelor's degree (Cohen et al., 2013; Darby-Hudgens, 2012). While the vertical transfer pathway is widely promoted and supported for students in traditional transfer programs such as the AA and AS, it remains much less accessible for students in applied programs like the AAS, where transfer has not historically been a primary goal.

The recent changes in enrollment patterns align with broader national goals, such as the Lumina Foundation's Goal 2025, which aims to increase the percentage of Americans with high-quality postsecondary credentials to 60% (Lumina Foundation, 2023). Achieving this target requires addressing the needs of non-traditional students, including adult learners who now make up a significant portion of community college enrollment (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2023; American Association of Community Colleges [AACC], 2022). Many adult learners pursue AAS degrees while balancing competing demands such as employment, caregiving, and financial responsibilities, necessitating flexible, well-supported academic pathways (Council for Adult and Experiential Learning [CAEL], 2023). However, these pathways face distinct challenges. AAS programs are often perceived as terminal and lack clearly defined transfer options, discouraging students from planning for a bachelor's degree.

Recent policy developments in North Carolina show how these distinctions are maintained at the state level. The 2025 North Carolina State University Wolfpack Connect initiative guarantees admission for students who complete AA or AS degrees at any of the state's 58 community colleges but excludes those who earn AAS degrees. This exclusion highlights the unfair design of current transfer systems that often marginalize applied science students.

Although AAS students make up nearly one-fifth of all community college transfers in North Carolina (Nichols & Deal, 2025), they still face inconsistent and fragmented transfer options. In Wang's (2017) Loss/Momentum Framework, this policy-level inequality is an institutional *loss point*, where systemic design weakens students' academic momentum and limits equitable access to transfer opportunities.

Recent research continues to reveal that AAS degree pathways, initially designed for direct entry into the workforce, have evolved into a major yet underrecognized route for bachelor's degree seekers. In North Carolina, AAS students now represent nearly one-fifth of all community college transfers to the University of North Carolina (UNC) System (Center for Leading Transfer Research and Reform [CLTRR], 2025; Nichols & Deal, 2025). Despite this growth, the lack of inclusion in the Comprehensive Articulation Agreement (CAA) leaves AAS students navigating hundreds of bilateral transfer agreements that vary widely across institutions (Belk Center for Community College Leadership and Research, 2022). This fragmented system leads to significant credit loss, an average of 28 semester hours, or roughly two full terms of coursework, costing students time, money, and momentum (Nichols & Deal, 2025). Many AAS students are adult, rural, and place-bound learners who enroll to improve their economic stability and career mobility yet face inequitable access to transfer information and advising support (Center for Leading Transfer Research and Reform [CLTRR], 2025). While state workforce projections show increasing demand for bachelor-prepared professionals in business, information technology, and social services, AAS degree holders remain disproportionately excluded from streamlined transfer options that align with these high-growth fields. Together, these studies highlight a growing misalignment between policy design and student behavior. AAS students are

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transferring at higher rates than ever, but without systemic support to ensure efficiency, equity, and credit integrity.

Additionally, colleges must prepare for the broader demographic shift often referred to as the *demographic cliff*. Beginning in 2025, the number of college-age students is projected to decline significantly, reducing overall enrollment and posing financial and operational risks for institutions nationwide (Nadworny, 2025). Despite their goals, AAS students often face significant barriers to transferring. These include limited credit transferability, unclear or missing articulation agreements, and advising systems that are frequently not designed for AAS students (DeSantis et al., 2021; Jenkins & Fink, 2016).

Unlike their counterparts in AA or AS pathways, AAS students often find that their credits do not meet the requirements for a bachelor's degree, leading to wasted time and increased costs (Atwell & D'Amico, 2021). Adding to these difficulties, adult learners, who are more likely to enroll in AAS programs, are disproportionately affected by inflexible transfer systems that were not designed with their needs in mind (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2020; Taylor, 2022).

Systemic barriers contribute to what scholars refer to as the *transfer maze* (Campaign for College Opportunity, 2017). This term describes the fragmented, confusing, and often opaque process students must navigate to move from a two-year to a four-year institution. The maze includes inconsistent articulation agreements, unclear degree pathways, limited access to accurate advising, and frequent credit loss, factors that disproportionately impact students in applied science programs whose coursework is often not designed for transfer.

A complicated and inefficient process discourages many community college students from pursuing a bachelor's degree. National data show that while 80% of community college

students intend to transfer, only about 32% succeed, and fewer than half complete a four-year degree within 6 years (Jenkins & Fink, 2016; Shapiro et al., 2017). For AAS students, success rates are even lower, ranging from 51% to 62%, with many needing extra credits to finish a bachelor's degree due to misaligned curricula and a lack of transfer-friendly program design. While much of the literature has focused on structural barriers like articulation agreements and advising systems, fewer studies have examined the role of faculty engagement in shaping AAS students' perceptions of and access to vertical transfer opportunities. Faculty often serve as the most consistent point of contact for students and can influence the classroom. Through teaching, mentoring, and informal advising, faculty can significantly impact students' academic identity, confidence, and understanding of transfer pathways (Cummins et al., 2022; Tinto, 1997). However, in AAS programs, faculty may unintentionally reinforce the idea that transfer is neither possible nor suitable, given the curriculum's workforce-oriented design (Bragg, 2021; Schudde et al., 2020).

Wang's momentum framework for community college student success (Wang, 2017) provides a valuable perspective for analyzing these interactions. It highlights critical moments in the student journey where institutions can either promote progress toward completion or create obstacles through barriers and inaction. The Teaching and Learning domain of this framework is especially relevant to faculty involvement, as it shows how teaching methods and student-faculty interactions affect educational outcomes. When faculty offer encouragement, guidance on transfer processes, and validate students' potential, they help maintain momentum. Ignoring transfer goals or unintentionally reinforcing stereotypes about terminal degrees can lead to setbacks. With increasing student enrollment in AAS programs and growing interest in continuing education, understanding how faculty engagement affects students' ability to navigate

vertical transfer pathways is crucial. Although efforts to support bachelor's degree completion have expanded, they often overlook the unique characteristics and challenges of AAS programs and their students. This gap in literature presents a missed opportunity for meaningful institutional reform.

Recent data from the UNC Charlotte Transfer Research Team further highlights the urgency of addressing vertical transfer barriers. In Fall 2021, nearly 10,000 students transferred from North Carolina community colleges to UNC System universities, yet only 39% followed a *primary feeder* pathway, a local, commonly used route, while the remaining 61% navigated more complex, fragmented pathways (D'Amico, 2022). Among these students, the proportion transferring with an AAS degree has steadily increased, rising by 71% from 2010 to 2021. Notably, over 26% of transfer students from North Carolina's most economically distressed counties earned an AAS credential, highlighting the need to support students whose programs were not initially designed with transfer in mind. This underscores the importance of examining faculty engagement as a key factor that may either facilitate or hinder students' ability to progress through a system that lacks universal clarity and coordination.

The proposed qualitative study aims to fill the gap by exploring the perceptions of AAS students and degree holders regarding how faculty engagement influences their transfer experiences. Emphasizing student stories, the study aims to highlight moments when faculty either acted as catalysts for progress or became sources of discouragement and setbacks. These findings will improve understanding of how community colleges and their faculty can better support vertical transfer, especially for non-traditional learners in workforce-centered programs.

Problem Statement

Despite increased attention to transfer reform, students in Associate in Applied Science (AAS) programs still face lower bachelor's degree completion rates, greater credit loss, and fewer clearly defined transfer options than their peers in Associate in Arts (AA) and Associate in Science (AS) programs. These disparities continue because statewide articulation agreements often exclude AAS degrees, leaving students to navigate a patchwork of local and bilateral agreements that lack consistency and transparency. However, policy barriers alone do not fully explain these inequities. Recent studies and emerging data suggest that relational engagement, specifically the guidance, encouragement, and transfer of knowledge from faculty, can influence whether students maintain momentum or face setbacks during the transfer process. The issue addressed in this study is the limited understanding of how faculty engagement impacts AAS students' ability to navigate vertical transfer pathways, especially for adult learners in workforce-focused programs. Exploring this relationship offers an opportunity to identify structural and relational factors that either hinder or promote educational equity and bachelor's degree completion for AAS students.

Purpose of the Study

This qualitative case study examines how faculty engagement affects students' transfer experiences in associate in applied science (AAS) programs. Using Wang's (2017) momentum framework for community college student success and the concept of transfer student capital (TSC), this research will explore AAS students' perceptions of how faculty behaviors, communication, and support either promote their momentum toward transfer or create additional obstacles. The study also investigates how faculty interactions contribute to the development, or limitation, of students' transfer student capital, including their awareness of articulation agreements, confidence in pursuing further education, and access to transfer-related guidance.

Findings from this research aim to inform institutional practices, faculty development, and policy reforms that improve vertical transfer outcomes for non-traditional learners in workforce-oriented programs.

Research Questions

The proposed study is guided by the principles of Wang's momentum framework for community college student success, with particular emphasis on the Teaching and Learning domains, which focus on how classroom practices, faculty-student interactions, and academic engagement influence student persistence and progress. The research questions aim to explore how students in AAS programs experience faculty engagement and how these experiences affect their ability to pursue a bachelor's degree.

The central research questions are:

RQ1: How do students enrolled in AAS programs describe their interactions with faculty about their educational and transfer goals?

RQ2: In what ways do AAS students report experiencing momentum or loss in the transfer process as a result of faculty engagement?

RQ3: In what ways do AAS students describe faculty as contributing to or limiting the development of their transfer student capital?

Theoretical Framework

The proposed study will utilize Wang's (2017) model of momentum for community college student success as its theoretical framework. Developed through an extensive review of academic momentum literature, Wang's model provides a comprehensive structure for exploring how community college students develop and maintain progress toward their educational goals. The framework will be beneficial for examining the experiences of students in AAS programs,

whose academic paths often do not align with traditional transfer routes and may lack adequate institutional support (Bragg, 2021; D'Amico et al., 2024).

Wang (2017) conceptualized momentum as the result of both internal and external forces that influence student success. These forces are organized into three key domains: curricular structures, classroom teaching and learning, and students' motivational attributes and beliefs. The model also accounts for *counter-momentum* forces, barriers stemming from institutional, structural, or personal challenges that can interrupt students' forward progress (Wang, 2017). Additionally, Wang described *carry-over momentum*, which includes students' prior academic, motivational, and life experiences that shape their engagement in postsecondary education (Wang, 2017).

The proposed study will focus specifically on the teaching and learning domain of the momentum framework, which emphasizes faculty-student interactions and instructional practices. In AAS programs, where faculty often serve as the primary point of contact for students, their engagement can play a critical role in either supporting or discouraging students' transfer aspirations (Cummins et al., 2022; Schudde et al., 2021). Faculty behaviors, whether through encouragement, informal advising, or classroom messaging, will be examined as potential contributors to student momentum or friction.

The momentum model also offers a valuable perspective for examining the experiences of non-traditional learners, many of whom juggle school with work, caregiving, and other responsibilities (Council for Adult and Experiential Learning [CAEL], 2023; National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2020). These students often depend on faculty interactions in the absence of specialized advising or transfer resources. Faculty may act as transfer agents by affirming students' educational goals, providing support, and delivering access to transfer-related

information (Dowd et al., 2018; Fay et al., 2022; Wang, 2020). By applying Wang's (2017) framework, this study will explore how AAS students perceive faculty engagement as either promoting momentum toward transfer or contributing to setbacks. The model's emphasis on students' lived experiences, its grounding in the realities of community college education, and its focus on faculty and institutional influences make it an appropriate and practical foundation for this research.

Limitations

This study has several key limitations. First, it only includes students currently enrolled in or who have recently completed an AAS program at a community college. It does not include students in transfer-focused degrees, such as the AA or AS. Second, the study focuses solely on student perceptions and does not incorporate interviews with faculty, advisors, or institutional leaders. This choice supports the study's aim to understand how students experience and interpret faculty engagement, rather than how faculty view their role in supporting transfer. Third, the theoretical framework guiding the study is Wang's Momentum Framework for community college student success, specifically the Teaching and Learning domain. Using a single domain of the framework limits the analytical focus to classroom-based faculty interactions and instructional practices. While this focus is appropriate for examining faculty engagement, it does not fully account for other factors that influence AAS students' transfer momentum, such as academic advising, program structure, institutional policies, financial barriers, or statewide articulation systems. As a result, the findings may not capture the full complexity of transfer challenges experienced by AAS students. The framework helps illuminate the instructional factors that contribute to transferring student capital. However, it limits the study's ability to address broader systemic or institutional forces that also shape students' transfer pathways and

outcomes. Finally, the study uses a qualitative case study method, prioritizing depth over breadth. Consequently, the results are context-specific and should not be generalized to all AAS students or institutions.

Some limitations are beyond the researcher's control. Due to the qualitative design and targeted sampling, the study's results cannot be generalized to the larger population. However, the study aims to achieve transferability by providing rich, contextual insights that may apply to similar educational settings. Additionally, the study depends on self-reported data, which can be affected by memory bias, selective recall, and personal interpretation. This may limit the completeness or accuracy of participant responses. Focusing solely on the student perspective, though intentional, also restricts triangulation by excluding the views of faculty, advisors, or administrators. Finally, the findings might be shaped by the specific institutional context, including unique policies, practices, or campus culture. Therefore, caution should be exercised when applying conclusions to different institutional environments.

Definition of Key Terms

Articulation Agreements. Documents that reflect the agreed-upon practices and policies emerging from the negotiations between two-year and four-year colleges at the academic program or institutional level to facilitate the transfer process (Anderson et al., 2006).

Associate in Applied Science (AAS) degree. A two-year, career-focused degree designed to prepare students for direct entry into the workforce. While not initially intended for transfer, some students with AAS degrees pursue bachelor's degree pathways (Bragg, 2021)

Associate in Arts (AA) degree. A transfer-intended degree emphasizing coursework in the humanities, social sciences, and liberal arts. The AA is typically aligned with the first two

years of a bachelor's degree in non-STEM fields (Community College Research Center [CCRC], 2022).

Associate in Science (AS) degree. A transfer-intended degree with a stronger focus on mathematics and science. The AS prepares students for STEM fields, defined as science, technology, engineering, and mathematics, or for health-related bachelor's programs at four-year institutions (CCRC, 2022).

Community College Faculty. Faculty who teach at community colleges, including both full-time and part-time instructors, are primarily focused on teaching students at the two-year level (Twombly & Townsend, 2008).

Community College. Any institution regionally accredited to award the Associate in Arts or the Associate in Science as its highest degree. That definition includes the comprehensive two-year college as well as many technical institutes, both public and private (Cohen et al., 2013). Community colleges may also offer a baccalaureate degree option for place-bound students (Bemmel et al., 2008). In this study, community college refers to a two-year, nonprofit, publicly funded institution.

Enrollment Cliff. A predicted decline in traditional college-aged students beginning around 2025 due to demographic shifts, is expected to significantly affect college enrollments and prompt institutions to recruit adult and non-traditional learners (Southern Oregon Business Journal, 2023).

Loss. The various obstructing forces and sources of frustration that impede a student's progress toward their educational goals. These barriers may stem from personal, academic, or institutional contexts, including *counter-momentum friction* and *carry-over momentum*.

Students may experience this loss across five key areas: curricular clarity, effective instruction, motivational support, advising, and institutional structure (Wang, 2017).

Momentum. Community college students' academic and enrollment behaviors, experiences within the classroom, and motivational attributes and beliefs (Wang, 2017).

Transfer Maze. The complex and often inefficient process students face when transferring between institutions. It may involve unclear pathways, credit loss, and a lack of alignment between sending and receiving institutions (Campaign for College Opportunity, 2017).

Transfer Pathway. A structured route that enables students to move from a two-year institution (i.e., community college) to a four-year institution to complete a bachelor's degree (Jenkins & Fink, 2016).

Transfer Student. A student who moves between different types of higher education institutions, especially from a two-year community college to a four-year institution (Miller & Hillis, 2006).

Transfer Student Capital (TSC). Refers to the knowledge, skills, and social resources students acquire, particularly in community college, that help them navigate the transfer process to a four-year institution (Laanan et al., 2010; Pérez & Ceja, 2009).

Terminal Degree. A degree is designed to prepare students for immediate entry into the workforce rather than further academic study. In community colleges, Associate in Applied Science (AAS) programs are traditionally considered terminal degrees because their curricula emphasize occupational skills and do not ensure credit transferability toward a bachelor's degree (Cohen et al., 2013; Cockriel, 1979).

Vertical Transfer. The process by which a student transfers from a two-year institution to a four-year institution to pursue a bachelor's degree, typically after completing an associate degree (Shapiro et al., 2017).

Professional Significance

The findings of this study hold significant implications for community colleges, universities, and workforce agencies working to enhance upward mobility for students in AAS programs. As more AAS students show interest in continuing their education, institutions must recognize that these learners are not outliers but a growing part of the transfer population. Recent research in North Carolina indicates that AAS graduates now make up nearly one-fifth of all community college transfers to the UNC System (CLTRR, 2025; Nichols & Deal, 2025). Despite this trend, AAS students still lose an average of 28 credits when transferring, equivalent to two full semesters of coursework, due to fragmented policies and inconsistent articulation agreements (Belk Center, 2022). This study emphasizes that while policy reform is crucial, faculty engagement also significantly influences whether students experience momentum or setbacks during transfer.

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Chapter Summary

Chapter One laid the foundation for this study, which investigates how faculty engagement impacts students' experiences with vertical transfer in AAS programs. Using Wang's (2017) Loss/Momentum Framework, the study explores how faculty behaviors, teaching methods, and relational interactions influence transfer readiness, motivation, and persistence among AAS students. The chapter places this inquiry within the broader policy context of

applied degree transfer reform, including recent research that identifies AAS transfer as an emerging statewide and national trend (Belk Center, 2022; CLTRR, 2025; Nichols & Deal, 2025). It also introduces Transfer Student Capital (TSC) as a complementary framework that highlights how information, confidence, and relationships affect students' ability to navigate complex transfer systems. Together, these perspectives show that faculty engagement functions as both a relational and structural force, helping to build student momentum within programs not traditionally designed for transfer. This chapter outlines the study's background, problem, purpose, significance, research questions, and theoretical foundations, providing a foundation for understanding how faculty influence both institutional and individual factors that shape AAS transfer outcomes.

Organization of the Study

This dissertation comprises five chapters. Chapter One introduced the study, covering the background, research problem, purpose, significance, theoretical frameworks, and an overview of the methodology. It contextualizes AAS transfer within current research on structural barriers, workforce trends, and faculty engagement, emphasizing how relational and institutional factors intersect to influence student experiences.

Chapter Two reviews the existing literature on the vertical transfer of AAS students, focusing on faculty engagement, adult learner characteristics, and the evolving state and national policy landscape for applied degree transfer. It also discusses the theoretical foundations guiding this research, including Wang's Loss/Momentum Framework and Transfer Student Capital.

Chapter Three describes the research design and methodology, explaining the use of a qualitative phenomenological approach to capturing students' lived experiences. It covers

participant selection, data collection, analysis procedures, and measures to ensure credibility and trustworthiness.

Chapter Four presents the study's findings, organized around themes within the momentum framework that illustrate both relational and structural factors affecting transfer momentum and loss.

Chapter Five interprets the findings in relation to prior research and theoretical models, considers implications for faculty practice and institutional policy, and offers recommendations for improving transfer pathways and future research on AAS student experiences.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter explores the systems, structures, and relationships that shape students' vertical transfer experiences in Associate in Applied Science (AAS) programs. The focus is on how community college faculty influence these students' opportunities to pursue a bachelor's degree. Vertical transfer, defined as the progression from a two-year to a four-year institution, has long been a central mission of community colleges (Cohen et al., 2013; Jenkins & Fink, 2016). However, students in workforce-oriented pathways, such as the AAS, face unique and persistent barriers. These include limited credit transferability, inconsistent articulation agreements, and advising systems that often fail to support transfer aspirations (D'Amico et al., 2022).

In response to these challenges, the review examines the evolving role of faculty beyond their instructional duties. It highlights their capacity as advisors, mentors, and institutional agents. Grounded in Bourdieu's (1986) theory of social capital, this review considers how faculty engagement can either support or constrain students' ability to access the relationships and information needed to navigate complex institutional systems. The literature is organized into four interrelated themes:

- Structural barriers to vertical transfer for AAS students
- The evolving role of faculty in advising and mentoring
- Faculty as institutional agents in the development of transfer student capital
- Institutional conditions that limit or enable faculty engagement

These themes directly align with the study's research questions, which investigate how AAS students perceive faculty involvement in their transfer journeys and how institutional contexts influence faculty engagement.

Vertical Transfer in Community Colleges: A Momentum-Based Perspective

Vertical transfer provides an accessible and affordable way to earn a bachelor's degree. However, success rates are still low. Nationally, only 12% to 16% of students who start at a community college finish a bachelor's degree within six years. Nearly 80% of these students transfer and earn a four-year degree (Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, 2018; Jenkins & Fink, 2016; Velasco et al., 2024). This gap between students' intentions and their achievements shows systemic inefficiencies in the transfer process. Wang's (2017) Loss/Momentum Framework offers a useful perspective for understanding how students either keep or lose progress toward their educational goals. The framework highlights momentum points that help students move forward, like proactive advising and clear curricular pathways. It also points out loss points where students face setbacks due to unclear requirements, poor advising, or misaligned institutional policies.

Students from underserved backgrounds, including many enrolled in AAS programs, are especially vulnerable to these loss points. Credit loss is a common issue. Students often face duplication of coursework or delayed graduation due to misaligned curricula and unclear articulation agreements (Wang, 2017). These setbacks increase time and cost, erode confidence, and contribute to attrition. Although faculty may not have formal advising roles, they frequently shape students' academic direction through informal interactions. Faculty discussions about course planning or transfer potential can encourage students to pursue further education (Holliday-Millard et al., 2022). However, many faculty lack adequate training in transfer processes. This can lead to inconsistent information or missed opportunities, disrupting student momentum.

Wang's framework can also be applied to other sectors. National research shows that although many community college students express the intent to transfer, only about 15-20 percent ultimately complete a bachelor's degree (Horn & Skomsvold, 2011; Jenkins & Fink, 2016; Shapiro et al., 2017). This mirrors findings in workforce development, where poor coordination and limited support structures contribute to low completion and advancement rates. In both systems, ineffective implementation and insufficient institutional follow-through lead to a loss of momentum for students seeking to advance their education or careers. Vertical Transfer and AAS Students: Institutional Friction and Structural Loss

While many community college students face barriers to transfer, those enrolled in AAS programs encounter distinct structural challenges that make it especially difficult to maintain momentum. AAS degrees are typically designed for immediate workforce entry and focus on technical skill development rather than academic preparation for transfer. In contrast, degrees like the AA or AS are aligned with transfer pathways and include general education coursework that meets the requirements of four-year institutions (Gentsch et al., 2023). As a result, AAS students are often at a disadvantage when attempting to continue their education. Wang's (2017) Loss/Momentum Framework identifies misaligned curricula and institutional policy gaps as key contributors to momentum loss. These issues are especially prevalent for AAS students. According to Nichols and Deal (2025), AAS transfer students lose an average of 28 credits, while AA and AS students lose only about eight. This loss is equivalent to two full semesters of coursework and can delay graduation, increase financial burdens, and discourage students from completing their bachelor's degrees. Institutions play a significant role in either supporting or obstructing student progress. When colleges fail to provide accurate advising, do not clearly communicate articulation pathways, or maintain outdated program equivalencies, they create

additional barriers for students. These breakdowns become systemic loss points that reduce student engagement and persistence. Gentsch et al. (2023) found that many AAS students are unsure whether their credits will transfer and are often unprepared for the academic demands of upper-division coursework. These conditions signal a broader failure in institutional coordination and student support.

The nature of AAS programs also affects transfer feasibility. Many technical programs are highly specialized and lack alignment with four-year degree requirements. This specialization can limit credit portability and restrict access to baccalaureate pathways. Recent data indicate that only 62% of AAS students who transfer complete a bachelor's degree within four years, compared to 75% of students in AA or AS programs (North Carolina Belk Center, 2025). These disparities reflect both curricular misalignment and larger policy shortcomings that disproportionately affect AAS students. Advising fragmentation further complicates the process. Students often receive conflicting or incomplete guidance from faculty and advisors. Articulation agreements, when they exist, are frequently difficult to interpret. Wang (2017) emphasized that academic friction increases when institutional systems are not streamlined. AAS students, who already contend with limited credit transferability, are especially vulnerable to these gaps in advising and policy infrastructure.

In summary, AAS students experience multiple forms of institutional friction. Misaligned curricula, high rates of credit loss, lack of clear pathways, and inconsistent faculty engagement all contribute to momentum loss. To improve vertical transfer outcomes, colleges must invest in better coordination, stronger advising models, and targeted faculty development. Without intentional reform, the vertical transfer pipeline will remain fragmented for students in career-technical education programs.

Significance of Vertical Transfer in Postsecondary Pathways

Vertical transfer plays a critical role in expanding educational opportunities and improving bachelor's degree attainment among community college students. However, transfer success rates remain alarmingly low. National data show that while nearly one-third of community college students transfer to a four-year institution, fewer than half complete a bachelor's degree within six years. This results in an overall attainment rate of just 16% (Velasco et al., 2024). These outcomes highlight widespread inefficiencies in the transfer process, especially for students in career and technical education pathways.

Students pursuing AAS degrees face even greater challenges than their peers in transfer-oriented programs. AAS degrees are designed primarily for workforce entry and often lack the general education components and curricular alignment that facilitate transfer. D'Amico (2022) found that AAS students lose more credits on average than AA or AS students when transferring. These credit losses are frequently unexpected and are often discovered only at the point of transfer, increasing time to degree, raising costs, and causing frustration and discouragement. Faculty engagement in AAS programs is also inconsistent. Instruction often focuses on preparing students for immediate employment, which can limit conversations about long-term educational planning. This leaves many AAS students without sufficient guidance for navigating complex transfer procedures (Holliday-Millard et al., 2022). As a result, even motivated students may lack the support needed to persist.

Structural challenges such as advising gaps, unclear policies, and institutional misalignment have led many researchers to describe the transfer pipeline as *leaky*. Students fall

out of the process at multiple stages, not due to lack of ambition, but because of systemic issues that interrupt their progress (Love, 2024; Velasco et al., 2024). These problems are particularly acute for AAS students, who require tailored advising, a transfer-friendly program design, and access to clear, accurate information to succeed.

There are promising examples of institutional partnerships that improve transfer outcomes. In Virginia, for instance, 23% of Hispanic students who began at a two-year college successfully transferred and earned a bachelor's degree within 6 years, exceeding both the national and state averages for all students (Velasco et al., 2024). These improvements are attributed to well-developed regional partnerships, dual enrollment programs, and faculty involvement. However, such models must be adapted to local institutional and student contexts to be effective elsewhere. AAS students transfer an average of only 58% of their earned credits (Love, 2024). The remaining credits are often lost, prolonging completion time and increasing student debt. Forty percent of these students leave higher education without earning a credential (Love, 2024; National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2019). These figures illustrate how misalignment between institutional structures and student needs leads to significant attrition.

Overall, vertical transfer remains a vital pathway to bachelor's degree attainment, especially for students from low-income or underserved backgrounds. Institutions that fail to streamline this process, particularly for AAS students, risk deepening equity gaps and reducing overall degree completion. Improving transfer outcomes will require stronger faculty engagement, better advising, and policies that recognize the unique needs of students in workforce-oriented programs.

Regional Models and Institutional Interventions

Regional and institutional models play a critical role in shaping the success of vertical transfer. While national data reveal persistent challenges, there are examples of effective partnerships and practices that offer insight into how institutions can improve outcomes for students in AAS programs. Virginia has demonstrated that transfer outcomes can be improved through targeted initiatives. These results are attributed to regional policies that promote strong institutional partnerships, coordinated advising, and clear academic pathways. Although promising, such models must be tailored to local needs and student demographics to be sustainable and effective.

The City University of New York (CUNY) system also provides a valuable case study. Within the CUNY system, 29.5% of bachelor's degree recipients began at a CUNY community college, and an additional 25.3% transferred into the system from outside institutions (Gentsch et al., 2023). Despite these high transfer rates, the system continues to face significant challenges with student persistence. Only 44.4% of CUNY transfer students complete a bachelor's degree, and nearly 37% drop out before the start of their second year (Gentsch et al., 2023). These patterns highlight the importance of supporting students during the early stages of transfer.

Wang's (2017) framework emphasized the need for early momentum to build long-term success. This includes support structures such as guided pathways, proactive advising, and faculty validation of student goals. Data from CUNY show that 36.9% of students who transferred left before their second year, reinforcing the idea that early academic and social integration is essential to retention (Gentsch et al., 2023).

Community college students, particularly those balancing school with work and family responsibilities, benefit from faculty members who actively support their academic plans. When faculty help students understand course sequencing, reinforce their educational goals, and refer

them to transfer resources, students are more likely to maintain momentum. Faculty engagement during the early stages of program entry is especially valuable, as it can prevent students from becoming discouraged or misinformed. These findings show that while institutional coordination and clear articulation of agreements are important, student-level outcomes are also shaped by faculty-student interactions. High-impact interventions include structured onboarding processes, early advising touchpoints, and access to clear program maps. Without these, students may struggle to make timely progress, particularly in programs like the AAS that were not initially designed for transfer.

In summary, successful models from Virginia and CUNY demonstrate that vertical transfer outcomes can be improved through intentional institutional design and faculty involvement. However, these strategies require alignment between academic programs, advising systems, and institutional leadership. Adopting such approaches more broadly will require institutions to recognize the distinct needs of AAS students and invest in practices that promote transfer equity and student momentum.

Transfer Challenges in North Carolina and State-Level Dynamics

North Carolina offers a compelling regional case study for understanding the barriers and opportunities of vertical transfer, particularly for students in AAS programs. These programs are often designed for immediate workforce entry. As a result, students in AAS pathways encounter greater difficulty transferring to four-year institutions compared to students in transfer-focused degrees like the AA or AS.

A statewide analysis conducted by D'Amico (2022) revealed substantial disparities in transfer rates for AAS students. Only 15% of AAS graduates transferred to a four-year institution within three years of earning their degree. Of those who transferred, 64% enrolled at one of a

few public universities in North Carolina, including UNC Charlotte, East Carolina University, and Appalachian State University. This limited range of destination institutions reflects barriers such as geographic proximity, institutional capacity, and a lack of statewide articulation agreements specific to AAS degrees.

The geographic distribution of AAS transfer students also highlights structural inequities. Nearly half of the AAS graduates in the study came from Tier 1 counties, which the state designates as the most economically distressed areas, while only 30 percent came from Tier 3 counties, the most economically prosperous regions (D'Amico, 2022; North Carolina Department of Commerce, 2024). Students in economically distressed areas are more likely to be adult learners, attend part-time, and remain place-bound due to work and caregiving responsibilities. These characteristics compound the challenges they face in identifying and accessing viable transfer pathways. Despite these challenges, many AAS students express a desire to pursue a bachelor's degree. However, institutional policies have not fully adapted to meet the needs of this population. Traditional advising structures often focus on workforce readiness rather than continued education. As a result, students receive little to no guidance about how to plan for transfer early in their academic journey.

These issues are particularly urgent considering North Carolina's statewide educational goals. The MyFutureNC (2019) Commission has set a goal of having 2 million North Carolinians ages 25 to 44 hold a high-quality postsecondary credential or degree by 2030. This aligns with the Lumina Foundation's national goal to ensure that 60% of working-age adults earn a postsecondary credential by 2025 (Lumina Foundation, 2023). Reaching these benchmarks will require a significant increase in transfer success, particularly among students in applied degree programs.

Faculty engagement plays a crucial role in closing this gap. As the main point of contact for many students, faculty can guide them toward transfer opportunities and share accurate information about pathways. When faculty understand the structure and purpose of articulation agreements and communicate them clearly, students are more likely to stay on track academically. Conversely, if faculty assume students are not interested in transfer or unaware of their options, they may unintentionally contribute to student disengagement. Improving vertical transfer in North Carolina will require intentional partnerships between two-year and four-year institutions, improved advising models, and faculty development focused on highlighting the transfer opportunities available to AAS students. Considering the economic and geographic disparities affecting this population, the state must invest in targeted strategies to ensure equitable access to bachelor's degrees.

Early Momentum and Equity Gaps

Early academic momentum is a strong predictor of student success, particularly for community college students in workforce-aligned programs. Momentum can be built through timely credit accumulation, early completion of gateway courses, and proactive engagement with faculty and advising staff. When these early experiences are structured and supportive, students are more likely to persist and achieve their academic goals. Fink and Jenkins (2021) found that 24% of STEM-intending students who completed a pathway course in their first year earned a bachelor's degree in a STEM field within six years.

In comparison, only 3% of similar students who did not take such a course achieved the same outcome. Other indicators of early momentum, such as earning 15 credits in the first term or 30 credits in the first year, are also strongly correlated with transfer and degree completion. These findings highlight the importance of designing systems that support students from the

outset. However, access to momentum-building opportunities is not evenly distributed. In one state, only 2% of Black students completed a STEM pathway course in their first year, compared to 6% of all students (Fink & Jenkins, 2021). These disparities reflect broader equity gaps in access to advising, program structure, and institutional readiness to support underrepresented students. AAS students, many of whom come from historically marginalized backgrounds, are especially affected by this uneven distribution of support.

Institutions that implement structured pathways and early advising interventions help mitigate these disparities. Jenkins and Bailey (2017) emphasized that students who enter a defined program of study early are more likely to complete it, especially when they receive clear academic planning and regular faculty engagement. Faculty members who provide timely feedback, clarify course sequences, and validate students' long-term goals can help students maintain forward momentum. For students in AAS programs, this kind of early support is essential. These programs are often misaligned with four-year degree requirements, making it difficult for students to see a clear path toward transfer. Faculty and advisors who take an active role in helping students understand potential transfer options can play a crucial role in sustaining momentum. Without this support, students may become discouraged and fall behind, particularly those who are part-time, place-bound, or balancing significant work and family responsibilities.

Wang's (2017) Loss/Momentum Framework shows how institutional structures either support or hinder students' ability to persist. Institutions that do not build early momentum might unintentionally cause student disengagement, especially for those most at risk of leaving college before reaching transfer goals. By incorporating momentum-building practices like proactive advising, structured onboarding, and faculty mentorship, colleges can create a culture receptive to transfer that lasts throughout the student journey. Early momentum is vital for vertical transfer

success; however, without timely and equitable support from faculty and advisors, students in AAS programs are more likely to face delays, credit loss, and eventual dropout. Closing these gaps requires coordinated institutional strategies that focus on structured academic pathways, early engagement, and faculty involvement in transfer planning.

National and State-Level Vertical Transfer Rates

Across the United States, there is a significant gap between the number of students who begin their postsecondary education at a community college and those who complete a bachelor's degree. National data show that about one-third of community college students transfer to a four-year institution. Of those who transfer, fewer than half go on to earn a bachelor's degree within six years. This results in an overall success rate of just 16% (Velasco et al., 2024). This gap highlights deep structural issues in the transfer process. One of the most persistent challenges is credit loss. Research by Nguyen et al. (2023) found that up to 43% of community college credits do not transfer successfully. When students are unable to apply their earned credits toward a bachelor's degree, they face increased costs, extended time to graduation, and a greater risk of disengagement. This burden falls most heavily on students in applied or workforce-focused pathways, including those pursuing AAS degrees.

Faculty involvement in advising is another key factor affecting transfer success. In many institutions, especially those with high student-to-advisor ratios, faculty are often the most consistent and accessible source of information for students. However, their role in the transfer process is frequently informal, and many lack the training or institutional support to provide accurate, up-to-date guidance on articulation agreements or programming (Lester & Leonard, 2018). As a result, students may rely on incomplete or inconsistent advice, leading to course misalignment and a loss of momentum. Institutional policies and inter-institutional coordination

further shape the student transfer experience. Many articulation agreements are unclear, outdated, or inconsistently applied. This creates confusion for students and advisors alike and makes it challenging to plan a seamless transition to a four-year institution. These policy-level breakdowns are particularly harmful to AAS students, whose technical coursework is often not recognized by receiving institutions.

State-level data reinforces these challenges. In Virginia, Hispanic community college students transfer at a rate of 23%, exceeding the national average of 16% and the state average of 19% (Velasco et al., 2024). This suggests that with strong regional coordination and proactive advising, higher transfer rates are achievable. However, these practices must be tailored to institutional contexts and cannot simply be replicated without attention to local dynamics.

In North Carolina, the number of AAS graduates transferring to University of North Carolina (UNC) system institutions increased by 71% between 2010 and 2021 (D'Amico et al., 2020). However, AAS transfer students continue to complete bachelor's degrees at lower rates than those from AA or AS pathways. These students are also more likely to come from Tier 1 counties, which are designated as economically distressed. This regional concentration suggests that vertical transfer plays a critical role in access to bachelor's degrees for low-income and rural students (D'Amico, 2022). One of the clearest barriers to transfer is limited institutional capacity. Even in strong pathways, such as the route from Central Piedmont Community College to UNC Charlotte, fewer than half of eligible AAS students are served. This reflects a broader lack of coordination and planning across institutions, which contributes to low transfer and completion rates.

In summary, national and state-level data reveal a transfer system that is inconsistent, inequitable, and poorly aligned with the needs of AAS students. Addressing these issues will

require stronger faculty engagement, improved advising practices, clearer articulation agreements, and better institutional collaboration. Without these changes, many students will continue to fall short of their educational goals, despite having the intent and ability to succeed.

Bachelor's Attainment Outcomes for Transfer Students

Bachelor's degree attainment among community college transfer students remains significantly lower than for students who begin their education at four-year institutions. Although more than 80% of community college students indicate a goal of earning a bachelor's degree, only 16% achieve this within six years (Jenkins & Fink, 2016; Velasco et al., 2024). This disparity between aspiration and outcome highlights a fragmented and inefficient transfer system, where institutional barriers rather than student ability often drive attrition.

One of the most significant barriers is credit loss. Studies estimate that nearly 43% of community college credits do not transfer successfully to four-year institutions (Nguyen et al., 2023). This mismatch extends students' time to degree, increases tuition costs, and contributes to the loss of academic motivation. Even when credits are accepted, students often find that only a portion of their coursework counts toward degree requirements. In many cases, students transfer between 10% and 89% of their earned credits, exposing wide inconsistencies in credit recognition across institutions. These inefficiencies disproportionately impact students from low-income, adult, and racially minoritized backgrounds (Bailey et al., 2015; Schudde et al., 2021).

Demographic disparities in degree completion further reveal systemic inequities. Students from low-income families, older learners, and Black students are less likely to complete a bachelor's degree than their wealthier, younger, or White peers (Bailey et al., 2015; Brown, 2016). These outcomes are shaped not only by individual circumstances but also by broader institutional structures that fail to adequately support diverse student populations.

The 2-plus-2 transfer model, which envisions students completing two years at a community college followed by two years at a four-year university, is often cited as a standard pathway. However, this model rarely reflects the actual experience of transfer students. Research shows that only about 8% of all bachelor's degree recipients follow this exact path (Jenkins & Fink, 2016). Many students take non-linear routes, including breaks in enrollment, part-time study, or reverse transfers. These realities are often overlooked by policies and practices designed around more traditional student trajectories (Bragg & Soler, 2017).

Support programs such as transfer seminars or informational workshops can help students navigate this process, but they are insufficient when not paired with structural changes. For instance, a transfer seminar may prepare students for course selection, but if institutions continue to enforce unclear credit policies or maintain outdated articulation agreements, students will still face setbacks. Research suggests that institutional design and coordination are far more predictive of transfer success than individual effort or student engagement alone (Bailey et al., 2015; Schudde et al., 2021). Among transfer students, those with an AAS degree are at even greater risk of not completing a bachelor's degree. This is due to multiple factors, including limited articulation of technical courses, misalignment between associate and bachelor's degree curricula, and a prevailing perception that AAS degrees are terminal credentials (D'Amico et al., 2020; Fincher et al., 2017). These challenges are especially detrimental for students from underserved backgrounds who often have fewer financial and institutional resources to navigate the transfer process.

Nevertheless, several institutional practices have shown potential to enhance outcomes. These include co-developed curricula between two- and four-year institutions, expanded dual enrollment opportunities, and clearly defined articulation agreements. When course equivalent

and transfer pathways are transparent and accessible, students can better plan their academic journeys. Institutions participating in the Aspen Institute and the Community College Research Center's initiatives have used such tools to reduce credit loss and improve time-to-degree outcomes (Baker et al., 2023; Worsham et al., 2021). Ultimately, increasing bachelor's degree completion among transfer students, especially those from AAS programs, requires more than encouraging messaging or optional workshops. It demands intentional redesign of institutional practices, equity-centered advising, and strong partnerships between community colleges and four-year institutions. Without these reforms, the bachelor's degree will remain out of reach for far too many students who begin their educational journey in a community college setting.

AAS vs. AA/AS Degree Pathways

Understanding the differences between workforce-oriented and transfer-oriented associate degree pathways is crucial for examining the challenges faced by AAS students pursuing vertical transfer. Community college credentials are not all created with the same goal, and these fundamental differences in purpose and structure greatly impact transfer potential and degree outcomes. Associate in Arts and AS degrees are specifically designed to promote transfer to four-year institutions. These degrees include general education courses that closely match the lower-division requirements of bachelor's degree programs. In states like North Carolina, students in AA or AS programs benefit from policies such as the Comprehensive Articulation Agreement (CAA), which ensures that approved courses will transfer to participating universities and count toward a four-year degree (D'Amico, 2022; Serrata et al., 2025). These policies minimize credit loss and give students a clear path toward earning a bachelor's degree.

In contrast, the AAS degree is designed to prepare students for direct entry into the workforce. These programs focus on technical and occupational skills, often at the expense of

general education coursework. AAS curricula generally include specialized courses that do not align with the general education or major requirements of four-year colleges (Holliday-Millard et al., 2022). As a result, students who want to transfer after earning an AAS degree often find that many of their credits do not count toward a bachelor's degree. Despite these structural limitations, more AAS students are interested in continuing their education. However, they face significant barriers related to credit transfer, curriculum mismatches, and limited institutional support for transfer planning. Many students do not realize how their coursework will transfer until they are well into their program, which can cause delays, credit duplication, and increased financial burdens (D'Amico et al., 2020; Fincher et al., 2017).

Efforts to support vertical transfer from AAS programs remain inconsistent across institutions and states. While some four-year universities have developed applied bachelor's programs specifically designed to receive technical credits, these options are limited in availability and not widely promoted. Without clearly defined pathways and institutional commitment to supporting AAS transfer students, many are left to navigate the process on their own, often with limited success. These differences between AA, AS, and AAS programs are not just academic distinctions; they represent systemic barriers that disproportionately affect students who begin their education in workforce-aligned pathways. Understanding these distinctions is crucial for developing policies and practices that ensure AAS students have equitable opportunities to pursue a bachelor's degree.

Characteristics of Adult Learners and First-Generation Students

Adult learners and first-generation college students (FGCSs) represent a growing segment of the community college population, yet many institutional structures remain poorly equipped to support their transfer goals. These students often balance multiple responsibilities,

including full-time work, caregiving, and academic demands, which limit their ability to engage with traditional college support services (Serrata et al., 2025). Nearly one-third of learners over age 25 have dependent children, and most work full-time while pursuing their degrees (Sanseviro et al., 2023; VanZoest et al., 2024). Although adult learner enrollment increased by 10% between 2020 and 2022, institutional responses have not kept pace with their evolving needs (VanZoest et al., 2024a). Many colleges continue to prioritize services tailored to younger, full-time students, creating a mismatch between student needs and institutional offerings.

The disconnect deepens existing equity gaps, particularly for racially minoritized first-generation students. These learners frequently encounter compounded barriers related to race, socioeconomic status, and access to culturally responsive support services (Starks et al., 2024). Institutional data collection and program design often fail to reflect the intersectional complexity of their lived experiences. Policies and programs that treat adult learners as a monolithic group may overlook the unique challenges faced by subgroups managing both academic obligations and personal responsibilities, such as caregiving or full-time employment.

Structural rigidity in areas like advising and course delivery introduces additional challenges. Advising services are often only available during regular business hours, and course offerings may be confined to in-person or daytime formats. These limitations reduce access for working students and slow their progress toward degree completion. Although some institutions offer services such as credit for prior learning (CPL), these are often applied inconsistently, diminishing their ability to boost academic momentum. At institutions like the University of Maryland Global Campus (UMGC), 78% of adult learners work 40 or more hours a week. Still, few colleges have developed flexible structures to effectively serve this population (Sanseviro et al., 2023).

Some colleges have developed return-to-college or transfer support centers. However, these initiatives are often designed for students re-entering higher education after a break rather than for those already enrolled while working or parenting. As a result, students navigating complex articulation agreements or seeking applied baccalaureate pathways remain underserved (Starks et al., 2024). Faculty perspectives reflect this institutional gap. While 91% of faculty report feeling confident in their ability to teach adult learners, only 74% believe their institutions are doing enough to address systemic inequities impacting these students (VanZoest et al., 2024). This discrepancy highlights the need for broader institutional reforms that extend beyond the classroom.

To improve transfer outcomes for adult learners and FGCSs, institutions must adopt a holistic and equity-driven approach. This includes offering evening and online advising, designing flexible course schedules, and clearly communicating articulation and transfer pathways. Emotional and cultural support is equally important. Advising practices should affirm students' identities and lived experiences while addressing the structural barriers they face. Colleges should also disaggregate institutional data by age, race, income, and parental status to ensure interventions effectively reach diverse student subgroups. By aligning institutional strategies with the realities of adult learners and FGCSs, colleges can better sustain student momentum and expand access to bachelor's degree completion.

Barriers Related to Family Obligations, Work, and Advising

Family responsibilities and work commitments are among the most persistent barriers to academic persistence and transfer for students pursuing an AAS degree, especially non-traditional and first-generation students in rural areas (Serrata et al., 2024). Many of these learners work full-time and spend over 30 hours weekly on caregiving duties, leaving limited

time to attend classes, engage with faculty, or access institutional resources. As a result, their opportunities for academic advising, career counseling, and faculty engagement are often constrained, increasing the likelihood of disengagement and attrition. These challenges are particularly pronounced for students who lack institutional capital, the knowledge, skills, and connections needed to navigate the college environment and transfer process.

While AAS students express interest in services like academic advising and career counseling, their actual usage rates, especially for transfer-related guidance, remain low (Serrata et al., 2024). Advising in many AAS programs continues to focus primarily on workforce preparation rather than academic progression, creating a critical gap for students interested in continuing to a bachelor's degree. Although 88% of students report having supportive families, this emotional support does not substitute for institutional guidance, which is often reactive and fragmented rather than proactive and sustained (Nahlik et al., 2024). These informational and structural gaps are especially burdensome for adult learners and racially minoritized students juggling multiple roles, reinforcing isolation and weakening momentum toward transfer.

Faculty can play a key role in bridging this gap by acting as providers of institutional capital and offering guidance on academic planning and transfer options. However, because many AAS programs assume students will enter the workforce directly, faculty may not initiate conversations about continuing education unless students explicitly express interest (Serrata et al., 2025). This leaves students, particularly those without strong external support networks, at risk of missing critical information about transfer pathways and articulation agreements. Logistical constraints such as childcare and inflexible advising hours further compound these challenges. Nearly 45% of UMGC students, for example, have dependent children, and 78% work full-time while enrolled (Sanseviro et al., 2023). These realities significantly limit time for

engaging in transfer planning or forming mentoring relationships with faculty. However, institutional approaches often fail to consider the intersectional identities of AAS students or to offer culturally responsive, equity-minded support structures.

Current efforts often do not reflect the real experiences of racially minoritized, adult, or first-generation students. Standardized advising and limited faculty involvement in transfer preparation fail to meet the needs of students whose identities overlap across race, economic status, work, and caregiving responsibilities (Sanseviro et al., 2023; Serrata et al., 2025). As Jabbar et al. (2022) argued, a student-ready institution must align policy, practice, and support systems to proactively address these challenges and foster a transfer culture that is both inclusive and sustainable. To reduce barriers and build transfer momentum, colleges should intentionally incorporate culturally affirming advising, flexible support, and faculty engagement strategies that recognize and support the realities of AAS students. Equity-focused transfer practices will require higher education institutions to redefine what it means to be ready and to adjust institutional practices to meet students where they are.

Faculty Engagement and Advising Gaps as Barriers to AAS Transfer

AAS students often face barriers to transferring that are not just about policies; they stem from everyday advising structures and faculty roles. Faculty have the potential to support or stall students' transfer momentum, but their involvement is often inconsistent. Because AAS programs are designed for workforce entry, many faculty assume students do not plan to transfer, and as a result, they rarely initiate conversations about it (Love, 2024; Serrata et al., 2025). Even when students show interest, faculty often lack the institutional guidance, time, or incentives to help students explore bachelor's pathways (Silver, 2025; Wang et al., 2021).

One of the most significant issues is the fragmented advising structure standard in AAS programs. Responsibilities are often split between faculty and advising staff, with neither group having a complete picture. Faculty understand the technical course requirements but may not be familiar with articulation agreements. Meanwhile, staff advisors might not understand the program-specific nuances of AAS curricula (Chindia et al., 2024; Jabbar et al., 2022). This disconnect could lead to incomplete or conflicting guidance, which creates confusion for students, especially adult learners and first-generation college students who may not know how to navigate institutional systems (Finnegan, 2019; Nahlik et al., 2024). Articulation agreements themselves add another layer of complexity. Many are unclear or outdated, and because AAS degrees emphasize technical skills, students often discover too late that many of their credits will not transfer to four-year programs (Holliday-Millard et al., 2022; Love, 2024; Nguyen et al., 2023). This is especially difficult for students without strong networks or prior college experience. Without transparent and proactive support, they often rely on family or peers, who may mean well but lack accurate institutional knowledge (Nahlik et al., 2024; Serrata et al., 2025).

When faculty are not actively involved in the transfer process and advising is disconnected, students are left to piece together information on their own. Even well-meaning faculty may hesitate to advise on transfer when their focus is on workforce preparation. This disconnect discourages students and lowers their chances of transferring successfully. To bridge this gap, institutions need to provide faculty with the tools and responsibility to support transfer planning from the beginning, instead of relying on students to seek help or find it elsewhere (Chen, 2023; Jabbar et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2021).

Advising and Mentorship Structures Supporting Vertical Transfer

Effective academic advising and faculty mentoring are essential components of vertical transfer success for students pursuing AAS degrees. Students, who often face compounded barriers related to employment, caregiving responsibilities, or limited access to institutional resources, benefit significantly from proactive, high touch advising structures and meaningful faculty relationships (Fay et al., 2022; McKinney et al., 2022; Serrata et al., 2025).

Academic advising has evolved from basic course selection to a holistic support model addressing academic, financial, career, and personal development. For underserved populations, including first-generation and non-traditional students, equity-minded advising provides essential guidance on articulation agreements, prerequisites, and transfer policies, while also fostering a sense of institutional belonging and increasing persistence (Keup & Kinzie, 2024; Nahlik et al., 2024). Early assessments, mandatory advising, and peer mentorship connections are especially helpful in catching students at risk of disengagement or academic derailment (Grote et al., 2024). However, advising effectiveness is often constrained by excessive caseloads, frequently exceeding 1,000 students per advisor, which undermines the personalized guidance required for successful transfer planning. These limitations lead to missed deadlines, course misalignment, and poor utilization of campus resources (Fay et al., 2022; McKinney et al., 2022). In contrast, programs with smaller advising ratios, such as honors tracks, demonstrate stronger transfer outcomes. Institutional investment in well-staffed, equity-driven advising departments is necessary to ensure consistent and accessible support for all students (Nahlik et al., 2024).

Faculty mentoring programs complement formal advising by providing emotional and academic support that fills institutional gaps. Faculty mentors assist students in building confidence, navigating resources, and preparing for the transition to four-year institutions (Liu, 2023; Martinez et al., 2024; Queen, 2022). This impact is especially significant for first-

generation and low-income students, who may lack the social capital and informational resources necessary for academic success (Holliday-Millard et al., 2022).

However, faculty mentoring programs often face scalability issues. Faculty members balancing teaching and advising roles may be responsible for large caseloads, ranging from 50 to over 100 students annually, limiting their capacity to offer meaningful guidance (Finnegan, 2019; Miller, 2023). Moreover, part-time and adjunct faculty, who constitute a significant portion of the community college workforce, often have less institutional access, making sustained mentorship difficult (Maliszewski Lukszo et al., 2020).

To address these gaps, institutions must integrate mentoring into faculty roles and provide professional development, incentives, and differentiated workload expectations. Well-trained faculty mentors not only support students' academic progress but also enhance students' real-world understanding and sense of belonging at transfer institutions (Crisp & Delgado, 2021; Wagner et al., 2021). Embedding faculty mentorship within the larger student support infrastructure is critical to reducing attrition and improving vertical transfer outcomes, especially for nontraditional and marginalized students.

Chapter 2 explored the existing research on the vertical transfer experiences of students in Associate in Applied Science (AAS) degree programs, highlighting the structural, institutional, and instructional factors that influence their ability to transfer and pursue a bachelor's degree. The chapter started by describing the original purpose of the AAS degree as a terminal workforce credential and the widening gap between this purpose and current student aspirations. Although many AAS students now plan to transfer, their pathways remain disjointed, poorly coordinated, and often involve significant credit loss. National and state research consistently show that AAS students face higher rates of credit non-transferability, lower bachelor's degree completion rates,

and more challenges in navigating articulation agreements compared to their AA and AS counterparts.

The chapter also explored the broader transfer landscape, including articulation policies such as North Carolina's Comprehensive Articulation Agreement (CAA). While AA and AS students benefit from clearly articulated pathways, AAS students lack comparable guarantees, resulting in inconsistent credit acceptance and prolonged time to degree. Research shows that adult, rural, and place-bound learners, groups overrepresented in AAS programs, are disproportionately affected by these systemic inequities.

A significant section of the chapter focused on the role of faculty as institutional agents. Studies highlight that faculty engagement is critical in shaping students' transfer knowledge, confidence, and aspirations. However, research also shows that faculty in AAS programs often lack formal guidance, training, or institutional support to provide accurate transfer information, resulting in uneven messaging and limited development of transfer student capital. Faculty mentoring and instructional validation can enhance students' sense of belonging and educational momentum, yet these supports remain inconsistently implemented across programs.

The chapter then introduced the theoretical foundation for the study: Wang's Momentum Framework, particularly the Teaching and Learning domain. This framework provides a lens for understanding how instructional interactions and faculty engagement can either build or disrupt students' transfer momentum. Combined with the concept of transfer student capital, the framework highlights how students' knowledge, skills, relationships, and confidence influence their ability to navigate complex transfer systems.

The literature also underscored key gaps. While substantial research exists on transfer pathways for AA and AS students, far fewer studies explore the experiences of AAS learners.

Even less is known about how faculty engagement specifically shapes the momentum of adult, rural, and place-bound students pursuing applied degrees. These gaps justify a qualitative inquiry into students' lived experiences and guide the focus of this study.

Overall, Chapter 2 offered a thorough overview by integrating scholarship on AAS degree structures, transfer barriers, faculty engagement, momentum-building supports, and theoretical frameworks. This integration sets the academic backdrop for the study and underscores the vital importance of understanding how faculty involvement influences the transfer paths of students in applied science programs.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

The study examined how students in Associate in Applied Science (AAS) degree programs often face limited and unclear pathways for vertical transfer to four-year institutions. It also noted that there was limited research on the role faculty play in shaping transfer outcomes (Jenkins & Fink, 2016). The goal of this study was to better understand how faculty influence AAS students' perceptions of transfer opportunities, access to resources, and preparedness for continuing their education beyond the community college. Evidence supporting this need included national data showing that transfer rates among AAS students were disproportionately lower compared to those in associate of arts or science pathways, and literature indicating that faculty play a critical, yet often overlooked, role in transfer success through advising, encouragement, and academic culture (Karp, 2011; Wang, 2016).

Research Design

The study used a qualitative phenomenological approach to explore students' experiences with faculty support during their vertical transfer from AAS programs. Specifically, the study adopted a transcendental phenomenological approach, as outlined by Moustakas (1994), which emphasized bracketing the researcher's assumptions and focusing on participants lived experiences to identify the universal essence of a phenomenon. This approach aligned with capturing how AAS students perceived and interpreted faculty engagement within the context of their transfer journeys.

Transcendental phenomenology, as described by Moustakas (1994), emphasized setting aside personal biases through the process of *epoche* to capture participants lived experiences and

identify the shared essence of a phenomenon. Hermeneutic or interpretive phenomenology, as described by van Manen (1990), centers on the researcher's role in interpreting lived experience, often through reflective writing. Descriptive phenomenology, which remained closer to Husserl's original method, aimed to describe the phenomenon as objectively as possible, with less focus on interpretation. For this study, transcendental phenomenology was most suitable because the aim was to understand the core of students' experiences with faculty, based on their own words, without the researcher applying too much interpretation.

Phenomenology focused on capturing the essence of lived experiences and the meanings participants assigned to them (Moustakas, 1994). This approach was especially suited to educational research aimed at understanding the subjective aspects of student experience, particularly in systems not designed with transfer in mind. By centering AAS learners' voices, phenomenology helped the study uncover how institutional culture and faculty interactions influenced students' perceived transfer readiness.

In addition to phenomenological methods, the study was guided by Wang's (2017) momentum framework, which provided a structured approach to examining how faculty support influenced students' transfer progress. The model highlighted key factors that contributed to or disrupted student momentum, including instructional practices, motivation, and institutional signals, and helped interpret how faculty interactions influenced these areas. While the primary goal was to understand students' lived experiences, Wang's framework provided a relevant lens for organizing and analyzing themes related to teaching, encouragement, and transfer messaging. Incorporating this framework enhanced the study's ability to connect participant narratives to broader patterns impacting vertical transfer outcomes.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study:

RQ1: How do students enrolled in AAS programs describe their interactions with faculty about their educational and transfer goals?

RQ2: In what ways do AAS students report experiencing momentum or loss in the transfer process as a result of faculty engagement?

RQ3: In what ways do AAS students describe faculty as contributing to or limiting the development of their transfer student capital?

Methodological Procedures

Sample Size and Rationale

The sample size for this phenomenological study was 15 participants, which aligned with established practices in phenomenological research (Polkinghorne, 1989). The aim was not statistical generalizability but rather achieving data saturation by collecting sufficiently rich and detailed narratives, so that no new themes arose. This sample size enabled thorough exploration and enhanced the overall validity and trustworthiness of the results.

Site Selection and Setting

The study included participants from one rural community college in western North Carolina and one University of North Carolina (UNC) System institution. Participants were recruited using purposeful sampling and supplemented with snowball sampling to identify additional students who met the eligibility criteria. These colleges served large populations of non-traditional students, many of whom juggled school, work, and family responsibilities. Sites were selected based on their available AAS programs, willingness to support research access,

and regional importance to the broader transfer landscape. These institutional settings provided valuable insights into how faculty engagement affected transfer opportunities for students in applied degree pathways.

Instrument Description

A semi-structured interview protocol was used as the primary data collection tool. The protocol included open-ended questions aligned with the study's research questions and theoretical framework. Participants were asked to describe specific instances when faculty supported their transfer goals, how instructors discussed transfer during their AAS program, any discouraging moments related to transfer, and how faculty interactions outside the classroom influenced their transfer decisions. The interview protocol is included in Appendix A.

Participant Recruitment

Participant Recruitment and Gatekeeper Engagement

The study used a two-stage sampling approach, aligning with phenomenological methods and ensuring the inclusion of participants who could directly address the research focus. First, purposive sampling was utilized to identify individuals who met clearly defined eligibility criteria; specifically, students currently enrolled in or having recently transferred from AAS programs and who had experienced some form of faculty engagement related to their transfer. After this initial group was recruited and interviewed, snowball sampling was employed to expand the participant pool. In this phase, participants were invited to refer peers who also met the eligibility criteria. Snowball sampling was beneficial for locating individuals with relevant lived experiences who were not easily accessible through institutional channels (Noy, 2008).

This combined strategy ensured a rich, experience-based dataset while remaining consistent with the goals of phenomenological research.

Initial recruitment began with the Institutional Effectiveness Officer (IEO) at Wilkes Community College. The IEO helped identify students who were currently enrolled in or recently transferred from AAS programs and had attempted or completed transfer within the past two academic years. The IEO generated a contact list using institutional data systems while ensuring compliance with FERPA and institutional privacy guidelines. Simultaneously, department chairs and faculty in high-enrollment AAS programs such as Health Sciences, Business Technologies, and Applied Engineering were asked to assist by posting recruitment flyers, emailing potential participants, and making announcements in course learning management systems (e.g., Blackboard or Moodle). These faculty members also referred interested students to the researcher.

For alum outreach, the researcher coordinated with the Office of Institutional Effectiveness and Research at the rural western community college to request access to alum contact records. IRB-approved email invitations were sent to AAS graduates who transferred within the last two academic years. To expand the participant pool, snowball sampling was also employed. Interviewed participants were invited to refer peers who met the eligibility criteria. This strategy was effective in reaching recent transfer students who were no longer active in the community college system.

Contingency Plan for Recruitment

Given the reliance on institutional gatekeepers and alumni records, the study included a contingency plan in case recruitment access proved to be more limited than expected. Recruitment proceeded as planned, and no additional strategies were needed to secure the desired

number of participants. The primary recruitment methods, including outreach through the Office of Institutional Effectiveness and Research and direct email invitations to eligible AAS graduates, yielded sufficient participants. As a result, the recruitment timeline remained on schedule, and no extensions or supplemental outreach methods were required.

Eligibility Criteria

Participants had to be at least 18 years old, fluent in English, and currently enrolled in or recently graduated from an AAS program. They had considered, attempted, or completed a transfer to a four-year institution within the past two academic years and had at least one meaningful interaction with a faculty member related to transfer planning or academic advising. All participants had to be willing to take part in a recorded interview, either via Zoom or in person. The study also aimed to include participants of diverse ages, gender identities, racial and ethnic backgrounds, and AAS program types to ensure a wide range of experiences. However, demographic diversity was not the focus.

Data Collection Procedures

Screening and Consent

Interested individuals first completed an online screening form to confirm their eligibility and provide their contact details. Qualified participants then received an IRB-approved informed consent form. The researcher followed up with a secure scheduling link or direct email to set up the interview. All participants were reminded that their participation was voluntary and they could withdraw at any time without penalty.

Interview Procedures

Interviews lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes and were conducted either via Zoom or in person, depending on participant preference and location. At the start of each session, the researcher reviewed the study's purpose, reminded participants of their rights, and confirmed their consent for audio recording. All interviews were audio-recorded with participant permission and transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy. Transcripts were carefully anonymized by removing names, institutional identifiers, and any other personally identifiable information. Participants received a written summary of their interview responses as part of the member checking process, allowing them to review, clarify, or expand on their statements. This step helped ensure that the findings accurately reflected their intended meaning and lived experiences. Participants also had the opportunity to ask follow-up questions or withdraw specific parts of their responses.

Data Storage and Security

All digital recordings, transcripts, consent forms, and contact records were stored on an encrypted, password-protected drive accessible only to the researcher. Pseudonyms were used in all research documentation and reporting. No personally identifying information was shared with institutional staff or used for evaluation purposes. A data tracking system was maintained to monitor recruitment progress, ensuring that participant anonymity was preserved. All research data will be retained for a minimum of three years after the study concluded, in accordance with federal IRB guidelines, and will then be securely deleted.

Recruitment Timeline

The recruitment period lasted six weeks. In Week 1, initial outreach was made through Institutional Effectiveness and faculty networks. Weeks 2 and 3 focused on sending email reminders, posting to the LMS, and following up with faculty. Weeks 4 and 5 shifted to alum outreach and snowball referrals. Week 6 was the final push to confirm any remaining interviews

and conclude the recruitment phase. Progress was recorded in a secure tracking file with de-identified codes. This systematic data collection plan ensured that participant access was ethical, inclusive, and compliant with institutional and federal standards, while aligning with best practices in phenomenological research.

Data Analysis

The study followed Moustakas' (1994) transcendental phenomenological approach to data analysis. All interviews were first transcribed verbatim, and the researcher engaged in *epoche*, setting aside personal assumptions and experiences to approach the data with an open and unbiased perspective. NVivo 14 qualitative analysis software was then used to organize transcripts, apply codes, manage memos, and track emerging patterns throughout the analytic process.

After transcription and *epoche*, each transcript was reviewed holistically to gain a comprehensive understanding of the participant's narrative. The next step involved identifying significant statements, or horizontalization, in which key phrases and sentences related to the phenomenon of faculty engagement in the transfer process were highlighted. These significant statements were organized into meaning units, which were subsequently clustered into broader themes.

From these themes, the researcher developed textural descriptions that captured what participants experienced, followed by structural descriptions that outlined how they experienced the phenomenon, including relevant context and setting. These descriptions were ultimately synthesized to identify the essence of the phenomenon, reflecting the shared experience of faculty engagement during the vertical transfer process.

Coding was both inductive and deductive. Inductive codes were drawn directly from participant language, while deductive codes were informed by Wang's Momentum Framework (2017), particularly constructs related to teaching and learning, motivation, and momentum loss. A preliminary codebook was created to guide this process and was updated as new insights emerged during analysis.

Trustworthiness was supported through member checking, peer debriefing, and the maintenance of a detailed audit trail. These strategies helped ensure consistency, transparency, and alignment with the phenomenological goals of the study.

Trustworthiness and Rigor

Ensuring Trustworthiness

This study followed Lincoln and Guba's (1985) four criteria for establishing trustworthiness in qualitative research: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. These criteria were essential for validating the integrity and rigor of the research process and outcomes, especially when working with personal and context-dependent lived experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

- **Credibility.** Member checking allowed participants to verify the accuracy of their interview transcripts and provide clarifications (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Peer debriefing was employed throughout the data analysis to test emerging themes. Prolonged engagement with the data facilitated a deep and authentic understanding of the participants' perspectives (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).
- **Transferability.** Thick description was used to provide sufficient contextual detail about participants, institutions, and program settings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

- **Dependability.** The researcher maintained a detailed audit trail documenting all stages of the study, including decisions made during recruitment, data collection, and analysis.
- **Confirmability.** The researcher employed bracketing techniques, supported by regular entries in a reflexive journal, and utilized peer debriefing to ensure that the results were grounded in participant voices.

Reflexivity

To minimize bias, the researcher maintained a reflexive journal throughout the study to document assumptions and analytical decisions. Bracketing techniques were used to set aside previous experiences with transfer and faculty advising. Peer debriefing and member checking helped confirm that the findings accurately reflected participants lived experiences, rather than the researcher's interpretations.

Positionality Statement

As a former non-traditional student who started in an AAS program and successfully transferred to a four-year institution, the researcher offered personal insight into the transfer process. Professionally, the researcher had over 15 years of experience leading AAS programs at North Carolina community colleges and had worked closely with students navigating the transfer process. While this experience helped build rapport and context-awareness, it also introduced potential biases. The researcher employed bracketing, reflexive journaling, and peer debriefing to examine and mitigate these influences throughout the study regularly.

Limitations and Ethical Considerations

Limitations and Delimitations

The study was limited by its dependence on self-reported experiences, which may have been influenced by memory or bias. Additionally, the findings were not generalizable beyond the small, intentionally selected sample. Delimitations included focusing on students in AAS programs who had attempted or completed transfer within the past two years and excluding faculty perspectives. These boundaries were purposeful to emphasize student voice and align with the phenomenological goal of exploring lived experiences.

Ethical Considerations

Before collecting data, IRB approval was obtained from the appropriate institutional review board. Informed consent was secured from all participants, who were informed of their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. All data was anonymized and stored securely. Pseudonyms were used in all published materials.

The study followed the ethical principles outlined in *The Belmont Report* (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979): respect for people, beneficence, and justice. Respect for people was maintained through the informed consent process. Beneficence required maximizing benefits while minimizing potential risks; the study presented minimal risk and included safeguards such as emotional support referrals if needed. Justice was demonstrated through the fair selection of participants from various AAS programs and backgrounds.

Chapter Summary

This chapter outlined the methodology for exploring the lived experiences of AAS students navigating vertical transfer and the role of faculty in shaping those experiences. Using a transcendental phenomenological approach, the study gathered and analyzed data from selected

participants across North Carolina community colleges. Detailed procedures for data collection, coding, and theme development were provided, along with strategies to ensure trustworthiness and address ethical considerations. By centering participant voice and applying rigorous qualitative methods, the study aimed to uncover the essence of faculty engagement in AAS student transfer journeys. Chapter 4 will present the findings that emerged from this inquiry.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

This chapter presents the findings of this qualitative phenomenological study, which examined how students enrolled in Associate in Applied Science (AAS) degree programs experience faculty engagement and how these experiences affect their momentum and ability to transfer to a four-year institution. The purpose of this study was to understand how faculty behaviors, communication, and relational support either promote or hinder students' development of Transfer Student Capital (TSC) and their persistence toward educational progression. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with students who were either currently enrolled in or had recently completed AAS programs and who had attempted or completed transfer within the past two academic years.

The analysis was guided by Wang's (2017) Loss/Momentum Framework for community college student success, focusing specifically on the Teaching and Learning domain, which highlights how faculty interactions influence student motivation, confidence, and academic progress. The concept of Transfer Student Capital (Laanan et al., 2010) further frames the analysis, emphasizing how knowledge, skills, and relationships gained through faculty engagement help students navigate complex transfer systems.

The chapter begins with an overview of the participants and a description of how pseudonyms were assigned to protect confidentiality. Following the participant overview, individual narratives are presented to illustrate the lived experiences of AAS students and the influence of faculty engagement on their transfer journeys. These narratives provide rich, contextual insight into the challenges and momentum points that shape students' educational trajectories. The chapter concludes with thematic findings organized by research questions,

summarizing the patterns that emerged across participants and connecting those findings to the theoretical and conceptual frameworks guiding the study.

Confidentiality and Pseudonyms

To protect participants' privacy and confidentiality, pseudonyms were assigned to all individuals, institutions, and academic programs mentioned in this study. Each participant selected or was assigned a pseudonym that bears no identifying connection to their real name or background. In addition, all community colleges and universities referenced by participants were replaced with generalized descriptors such as *a rural community college in western North Carolina* or *a public university within the University of North Carolina (UNC) System*.

When participants referred to specific institutions, such as UNC Wilmington, those names were generalized to *a public university in the UNC System* to protect confidentiality while maintaining context clarity. Likewise, program names that could reveal institutional identity were slightly altered when needed. For example, when a program was only at one or two community colleges in the state, it was described using broader terms (e.g., *a health-related AAS program* or *a human services–related AAS program*) to retain the meaning of participants' experiences and ensure anonymity.

Demographic details such as age, gender, and program of study are presented to provide context, but were generalized or adjusted slightly when needed to prevent identification. These measures align with ethical research practices and the confidentiality standards outlined in the Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval process.

Participants

Fifteen participants took part in this study, representing a variety of Applied Science programs across human services and health-related fields. Ages ranged from 18 to 47, with most

participants identifying as female and White. The group also included participants who identified as Black and Hispanic or Latino, offering a diverse range of perspectives and experiences. Twelve participants identified as first-generation college students, and all were either currently enrolled in or graduates of AAS programs at rural community colleges in North Carolina.

All participants in this study were enrolled full-time while also working full-time, reflecting the realities faced by many adult learners in applied fields. This dual commitment to work and school was a consistent theme across interviews, affecting participants' experiences with time management, stress, and academic momentum. Some had completed their degrees and transferred to a public university within the University of North Carolina (UNC) System. In contrast, others were still enrolled or had considered transferring but did not pursue it. This variety of experiences provided valuable insights into the role of faculty engagement, advising, and institutional support in shaping students' momentum and the development of Transfer Student Capital (TSC). Table 1 summarizes participant characteristics, followed by individual stories that highlight each participant's unique experiences, challenges, and pathways toward, or away from, transfer.

Table 1
Participant Demographics and Enrollment Status

Pseudonym	Gender	Age Range	Race/Ethnicity	School Status	Work Status	Transfer Status
Samantha	Female	37–47	White	Full-time	Full-time	Still enrolled, planning to transfer
Myli	Female	18–25	Hispanic or Latino	Full-time	Full-time	Graduated, transferred to a UNC System school
Wilson	Male	37–47	White	Full-time	Full-time	Graduated, transferred

						to a UNC System school
Matthew	Male	18–25	White	Full-time	Full-time	Graduated, transferred to a UNC System school
Nona	Female	26–36	Hispanic or Latino	Full-time	Full-time	Graduated, transferred to a UNC System school
Christian	Male	37–47	White	Full-time	Full-time	Graduated, considered transfer, but did not
Angelica	Female	37–47	White	Full-time	Full-time	Graduated, transferred to a UNC System school
Lindsey	Female	18–25	White	Full-time	Part-time	Still enrolled, planning to transfer
Kenya	Female	26–36	White	Full-time	Full-time	Graduated, transferred to a UNC System school
Lisa	Female	26–36	White	Full-time	Full-time	Graduated, transferred to a UNC System school
Jenn	Female	26–36	White	Full-time	Full-time	Still enrolled
Carly	Female	26–36	White	Full-time	Full-time	Still enrolled, planning to transfer
Sondra	Female	26–36	Black	Full-time	Full-time	Graduated, considered

						transfer, but did not
Kennedy	Female	26–36	Black	Full-time	Full-time	Still enrolled, planning to transfer
Kym	Female	37–47	White	Full-time	Full-time	Still enrolled, planning to transfer

Note. All participant names are pseudonyms. Institutional and program identifiers have been generalized to protect confidentiality.

Introduction to Participants

The following section offers a brief overview of each participant in this qualitative study. Each profile includes relevant background details such as age, family situation, educational background, and employment status to give context for understanding their individual experiences. Pseudonyms are used to protect participant confidentiality, and all identifying information, including institutional names and program titles, has been adjusted or made generic. These profiles help introduce the diverse backgrounds and circumstances of the participants before presenting the thematic analysis of their experiences.

Getting to Know Samantha

Samantha is a 41-year-old first-generation college student and mother of six who is currently enrolled in an Associate in Applied Science program at a rural community college in western North Carolina. She returned to college to pursue a career in social work, hoping to create stability for her family and a better future for her children.

Getting to Know Myli

Myli is a 23-year-old first-generation Hispanic or Latino student who graduated from an Associate in Applied Science program at a rural community college in western North Carolina.

As a traditional college student, she enrolled immediately after high school with an interest in the healthcare field but was initially uncertain about her long-term career goals. Although she aspired to become a nurse, she realized that maintaining full-time employment while completing the rigorous nursing curriculum would not be feasible. As a result, she chose a more flexible applied science program that allowed her to remain employed full-time while continuing her education in a healthcare-related discipline.

Getting to Know Wilson

Wilson is a 45-year-old first-generation college student who earned an Associate in Applied Science degree in Social and Human Services from a rural community college in eastern North Carolina. He is married with three children, works full-time as a manager at a commercial fish market, and also serves as a youth pastor at his church. Balancing work, family, and school responsibilities, Wilson returned to college with a desire to pursue a career in social work and create new opportunities for his family.

Getting to Know Matthew

Matthew is a 22-year-old student who returned to college after earning an Associate in Arts degree, which he chose not to transfer to a four-year university. Seeking a more direct path into the healthcare field, he enrolled in a Medical Assisting program at a rural community college in western North Carolina. Matthew is working full-time as a pharmacy technician while completing his coursework and plans to pursue a career as a physician assistant after graduation.

Getting to Know Nona

Nona is a 29-year-old single mother of two living in a rural county in western North Carolina. She was employed full-time while completing coursework. She initially enrolled at a community college after being accepted into the Nursing program, fulfilling a lifelong goal of

becoming a nurse. However, after one semester, Nona realized that nursing was not the right fit for her and began reevaluating her long-term career plans. She transferred to the Social and Human Services program, where she found coursework that matched her desire to help individuals and families in need. Balancing parenthood, work, and school, Nona viewed her return to education as both a personal and professional turning point that would help her build a more stable future for her family.

Getting to Know Christian

Christian is a 37-year-old White male and a first-generation college student who began his college journey over 12 years ago but had to withdraw due to financial and family obligations. He later returned to a rural community college in western North Carolina to earn an Associate in Applied Science degree in Medical Assisting. While studying full-time, Christian also worked full-time, balancing his academic goals with work and family responsibilities.

Getting to Know Angelica

Angelica is a 42-year-old White woman who initially started pursuing an Associate in Applied Science degree in Human Services in the early 2000s. She had to withdraw from college after being diagnosed with stage four cancer. After recovering, she faced significant personal challenges, including substance use disorder and homelessness. Once she rebuilt her life, Angelica chose to return to college to earn a degree in Social and Human Services, motivated by a desire to help others face similar struggles.

Getting to Know Lindsey

Lindsey is an 18-year-old first-generation college student who enrolled full-time at a rural community college in western North Carolina right after finishing high school. While working on her coursework, she also works part-time to support herself. Lindsey began her studies in an

Associate of Science program during high school, but she later switched to an Associate in Applied Science program, which she believed better suited her interests and career goals.

Getting to Know Kenya

Kenya is a 34-year-old married mother of six who worked for three years to gain acceptance into a Nursing program at a rural community college in western North Carolina. Shortly after being admitted, she learned she was pregnant, but tragically lost her baby during the third trimester. While coping with grief and recovery, Kenya was dropped from the Nursing program and withdrew from college. After a period of reflection, she decided to return to community college to pursue a degree in Social and Human Services. While enrolled full-time, Kenya also worked full-time and cared for her family, demonstrating resilience and determination as she rebuilt her educational journey.

Getting to Know Lisa

Lisa is a 28-year-old first-generation college student and single mother of two. She initially enrolled in an Associate in Applied Science program in Health Sciences, but had to withdraw from college due to circumstances involving domestic violence. After stabilizing her personal life, Lisa returned to college and finished her degree. She has since transferred to a university within the University of North Carolina System to continue her education while working full-time.

Getting to Know Jenn

Jenn is a 32-year-old married mother of two who started her community college education in a Medical Office Administration program and earned an Associate in Applied Science degree. Although she finished the program, the degree did not provide an industry-recognized credential needed for advancement in her field. Jenn has worked full-time in

healthcare for the past eight years. When a larger healthcare system acquired her organization, uncredentialed employees were required to obtain professional credentials to keep their jobs. As a result, Jenn returned to a rural community college to pursue an associate's degree in Medical Assisting. While she was unsure about her long-term career plans, her decision to re-enroll was motivated by both a practical need for credentialing and a renewed interest in professional growth.

Getting to Know Carly

Carly is a 29-year-old single mother of three who previously attended a community college but withdrew after facing significant personal challenges. She lost two partners to overdose, experienced multiple overdoses herself, and lost stability due to substance use disorder. After entering recovery, Carly decided to return to college to complete her education so she could help others face similar struggles. She successfully earned her Associate in Applied Science degree and has since transferred to a public university within the University of North Carolina System to continue her studies.

Getting to Know Sondra

Sondra is a 52-year-old mother of one who enrolled in a community college with little certainty about her career plans. Before going back to school, she lived in a large city where she had a well-paying job and enjoyed financial stability. During the COVID-19 pandemic, she became seriously ill and later lost her job, housing, and sense of security. Homeless and looking for a fresh start, Sondra moved to a rural community in western North Carolina to rebuild her life. She enrolled in a community college to pursue a degree that would help others while rebuilding her own future. Sondra has since earned her Associate in Applied Science degree and plans to complete a bachelor's degree after her child graduates from high school.

Getting to Know Kennedy

Kennedy is a 28-year-old single mother of four who works full-time while also being enrolled full-time at a rural community college in western North Carolina. She initially attended college part-time but decided to accelerate her studies to graduate sooner and improve her career prospects. Kennedy was initially enrolled in an Early Childhood Education program, but later changed her major to Social and Human Services after discovering a more substantial interest in helping individuals and families in need. Having worked in several low-wage jobs with limited opportunities for advancement, she saw returning to college as a way to achieve stability and a better future for her family.

Getting to Know Kym

Kym is a 52-year-old student who has completed various community college courses over the years, mainly in business administration. She has maintained a steady career working in both banking and healthcare settings. After her organization was acquired by a larger healthcare company, employees without professional credentials were required to obtain formal certification to stay employed. To meet this requirement and improve her professional standing, Kym returned to a rural community college to pursue an Associate in Applied Science degree in Medical Assisting while continuing to work full-time. Besides securing her current position, she aims to use her education to transition into a leadership or instructional role in the future.

How Faculty Engagement Shaped Transfer Momentum: Emergent Themes Across participants' stories, a common thread emerged: faculty engagement acted as both a lifeline and a catalyst of opportunity. Regardless of age, background, or program, students credited faculty with inspiring confidence in their potential and making transfer seem achievable. At the same time, their experiences highlighted the limitations of institutional systems that did not always

match that level of support. The following sections organize these shared experiences into themes that show how faculty interactions influenced motivation, resilience, and navigating the transfer process.

Research Question 1: Faculty Engagement and Transfer Motivation

RQ1: How does faculty engagement influence AAS students' motivation to pursue transfer?

Participants described faculty engagement as a defining factor in shaping their motivation, persistence, and confidence to pursue transfer. Three overarching themes emerged from the data: Core Faculty as Proactive Champions, Faculty Role in Building Transfer Capital, and Student Resilience and the Need for Validation. These themes highlight a clear momentum point, demonstrating how faculty relationships fostered motivation, confidence, and direction for students who often entered college uncertain of their potential.

Theme 1: Core Faculty as Proactive Champions (Momentum Point)

Students described their core faculty, those teaching in their program, as deeply committed to their success. These instructors were seen as mentors and advocates who offered personalized guidance, support, and encouragement that went beyond the classroom.

Personalized, Relational Support. Students repeatedly emphasized that core faculty knew who they were and cared about them as people, not just students. Nona captured this sentiment when she shared, “The faculty in my program genuinely cared about me and my future career goals.” For her, this care extended beyond academic instruction and demonstrated that faculty were genuinely invested in her future.

This feeling of individualized attention was echoed across participants' stories. Kym described how meaningful it was when her instructor took time to connect with her personally, stating, “She always asked about my long-term goals, not just how I was doing in her class.”

Another participant explained that faculty were “always willing and ready to listen,” reflecting how their openness and availability provided reassurance during moments of uncertainty.

These consistent, relational interactions created a sense of trust and belonging that participants identified as essential to their persistence. For many nontraditional and first-generation learners, feeling known by faculty helped them feel anchored within the institution and encouraged them to continue toward their goals. The relational support offered by faculty emerged as a significant form of motivation, confidence-building, and stability as students navigated both the demands of their programs and the complexities of the transfer process.

Relentless Encouragement and Vision-Casting. Relentless encouragement and vision-casting played a crucial role as core faculty helped students reimagine their academic and professional futures. Kennedy described this influence vividly, explaining, “My biggest motivation for transfer was the inspiration from my faculty. As a minority student, it was amazing to see a woman of color leading in the community. It gave me something to look up to, and representation really does matter.” For Kennedy, seeing faculty who reflected her identity and aspirations created a powerful sense of possibility that reshaped how she viewed her future.

Participants often recalled moments when faculty “pushed you, motivated you, and told you to go to the max,” describing how such encouragement prompted them to think beyond graduation from the AAS program. Kennedy also shared that one of her instructors “made me see that my degree wasn’t the finish line, it was a stepping stone,” a realization that strengthened her belief that transfer was within reach.

These expressions of encouragement widened students’ understanding of their potential and reinforced their confidence during pivotal moments in their academic journeys. Faculty members who offered consistent, future-oriented guidance helped students imagine pathways

they had not previously considered, making transfer and further education feel attainable rather than aspirational. This kind of vision-casting served as a critical source of momentum, particularly for students who entered their programs with limited exposure to transfer options or who had not previously viewed themselves as bachelor's degree earners.

Faculty as Connectors to Opportunity. While this theme reflects strong momentum through faculty support, the analysis also surfaced moments when inconsistent or confusing communication created setbacks that interrupted students' progress. Yet, for many participants, core faculty played an important role in helping them access accurate information about transfer pathways and in bridging the gap between the AAS program and four-year institutions.

Christian described how intentional faculty actions expanded his understanding of what was possible. He recalled, "Our instructor brought in someone from a university to talk about transfer options, and that's when I realized I could actually keep going." This exposure filled a critical knowledge gap and transformed his perception of the transfer process. For Christian, the faculty member's effort made the transfer pathway visible in a way it had not been before.

Similarly, Matthew reflected on the impact of faculty who remained invested in his success long after he completed the program. He shared, "I would not be in this career without the guidance and support of my faculty. Their support did not end at graduation; I still reach out to them about my career planning." His experience highlights how faculty influence extended beyond the classroom, continuing to provide guidance, reassurance, and direction as he navigated his career and educational decisions.

Together, these accounts illustrate how faculty acted as connectors who opened doors, facilitated access to transfer information, and provided ongoing mentoring that extended into students' professional lives. For AAS students who often lack structured advising or formal

exposure to transfer pathways, these faculty-initiated connections served as pivotal moments of momentum that helped counteract the broader systemic gaps in transfer information and support.

Theme 2: Faculty Role in Building Transfer Capital (Momentum Point and Loss Point)

Students credited faculty engagement with helping them build Transfer Student Capital (TSC), which includes the knowledge, skills, and confidence needed to move from community college to a four-year university. Faculty acted as guides who went beyond just teaching content, equipping students with both academic and professional skills while making expectations for future academic settings clear.

Cultivation of Academic Rigor (Momentum Point). Core faculty intentionally prepared students for the academic demands of university coursework by integrating higher-level writing, research, and critical thinking skills into the AAS program assignments. Participants often recalled instructors who framed course projects as preparation for future bachelor-level work. One student noted that completing formal research papers in the AAS program “made me feel prepared for the kind of writing I would have to do later,” highlighting the importance of learning how to structure academic arguments and cite sources correctly. These experiences fostered a sense of confidence among students that they could meet the expectations of a university classroom.

Besides academic training, many faculty deliberately taught professional communication and soft skills applicable in both work and school environments. Several students remembered being advised on how to be *professional* and *presentable*, whether during live class discussions or professional interviews. These lessons boosted students’ confidence and highlighted the broad usefulness of the skills they learned, showing them that their coursework is relevant not only for immediate jobs but also for ongoing higher education.

Inconsistent and Confusing Information (Loss Point). Despite strong support from program-level faculty, students often encountered significant challenges when navigating the technical side of the transfer process. Many described the process as confusing and inconsistent, particularly when trying to understand articulation agreements, course equivalencies, or specific requirements for entering a bachelor's program. Participants also noted that terminology commonly used in advising materials, such as synchronous, asynchronous, and various academic acronyms, was difficult to interpret. This left several students unsure about the next steps they needed to take, even when they felt motivated to continue their education.

Adult learners voiced frustration over the lack of clear and consistent information. They shared situations where they wanted to make progress but found it difficult to understand college language or find trustworthy guidance. The absence of accessible information created unnecessary obstacles and led to moments of lost momentum, emphasizing the need for structured support to help AAS students advance.

For Christian, Nona, and Matthew, one course stood out as especially helpful in bridging these gaps. Christian shared that "ACA 122 was a great course. It helped me understand the language of college and transfer. Everyone should take this course." Nona and Matthew echoed similar experiences, explaining that the course made unfamiliar concepts more approachable and provided a foundation for understanding how transfer pathways worked.

ACA 122, formally titled *College Transfer Success*, is part of the North Carolina Community College System's Combined Course Library. It is designed to teach academic planning, transfer processes, and strategies for navigating college expectations. Participants described ACA 122 as one of the few structured opportunities within their programs to develop

transfer knowledge, interpret academic terminology, and understand how to progress toward a bachelor's degree.

This theme reflects a key aspect of momentum in the transfer journey. While institutional systems often created confusion, students' resilience was strengthened when faculty and structured courses like ACA 122 offered clear explanations, validation, and practical guidance. For many, these supports played a critical role in making the transfer process feel possible and attainable.

Advising emerged as a recurring concern. While students appreciated their advisors' general support, many found that advisors lacked specific knowledge about AAS-to-bachelor's transfer pathways. One student said they "had to go back to [their] instructor" for help because their advisor "did not know some of the information." This inconsistency led several students to rely more heavily on their program faculty for accurate guidance, underscoring the importance of instructors in translating institutional procedures into clear, actionable steps. "When I started in the nursing program, I was so excited about the opportunity that I worked so hard and dreamed of. However, as I settled into the class, I quickly realized that the faculty was very disengaged. I was treated like a number, not even human at times."

In contrast, students who experienced smooth transitions to university programs often credited strong institutional partnerships and well-defined articulation agreements. These arrangements, frequently initiated or supported by faculty, eliminated uncertainty and made transfer seem achievable. Students noted that these structured partnerships gave them confidence and clarity, suggesting that ongoing faculty collaboration with four-year institutions can significantly enhance transfer success.

Theme 3: Student Resilience and the Need for Validation (Momentum Point)

The final theme centers on the resilience of AAS students and the importance of validation from faculty throughout their educational journeys. Participants consistently described balancing multiple responsibilities, full-time work, family caregiving, and coursework, while navigating complex life circumstances that often disrupted their academic progress. Despite these challenges, students demonstrated strong determination to persist. Faculty validation, through recognition, encouragement, or acknowledgment of effort, emerged as a powerful motivator that sustained students' belief in their ability to continue and eventually transfer.

Persistence Amid Life Challenges. Nearly all participants discussed moments when personal circumstances threatened to derail their education. "I lost my home and became homeless in Hurricane Helene. I was at my lowest point, but I knew that I had school to keep me focused. It was devastating when my English professor suggested that I drop my classes instead of offering support." Several described juggling demanding work schedules, raising children, and coping with financial or emotional stress. One student explained, "There were nights I'd get off work at midnight and still stay up to finish my assignments. I just kept telling myself, it will be worth it." For these nontraditional learners, persistence was not simply a matter of academic ability but of resilience and purpose.

Some students linked their motivation directly to a desire to improve their family's circumstances. For example, one participant described returning to college after years in the workforce, sharing, "I wanted my kids to see that it's never too late to go back and finish what you started." This sense of responsibility to family often provided the emotional drive to continue when coursework or transfer planning became overwhelming.

The Emotional Cost of Persistence. Although determination was a defining strength, participants also revealed that the path toward transfer came with emotional strain. Balancing

competing priorities frequently led to exhaustion, self-doubt, and moments of isolation. One student admitted, “There were times I felt like giving up because I didn’t think anyone understood how much I had going on outside of school.” These moments of emotional fatigue highlight the high cost of persistence for AAS students, especially when faculty support was inconsistent or limited.

Students who lacked affirming feedback or connection described feeling invisible or undervalued, which at times caused them to question whether they belonged in higher education. The absence of encouragement, even when unintentional, was perceived as a loss point that could disrupt momentum.

Validation as a Momentum Builder. On the other hand, faculty recognition of students’ achievements often served as a strong boost, providing motivation. Many participants remembered times when instructors publicly praised their effort or progress, calling these moments “motivating” and “life changing.” One student remarked, “When I received the Outstanding Student Award, it finally convinced me that I could achieve more, and that I truly belonged in college.”

Other participants described smaller yet equally meaningful forms of recognition, such as receiving positive feedback on assignments or hearing an instructor say, “I’m proud of you.” These expressions strengthened students’ self-efficacy and helped them see transfer not just as an abstract goal but as a reachable next step. Faculty who took time to affirm effort, rather than only outcomes, were considered key in helping students maintain confidence and direction.

The Relationship Between Resilience and Faculty Engagement. This theme underscores that AAS students’ success is deeply tied to both internal resilience and external validation. While students displayed remarkable persistence, their stories revealed that

motivation was strengthened when faculty acknowledged the effort behind their progress. Faculty who provided encouragement, flexibility, and authentic recognition helped students sustain momentum during times of stress. In contrast, when recognition was absent, students described feeling emotionally depleted or disconnected from their goals. This theme reflects a significant momentum point, showing how faculty transformed uncertainty into confidence by helping students decode transfer systems and see a clear path forward.

Research Question 2: Experiencing Momentum and Loss in the Transfer Process

RQ2: In what ways do AAS students report experiencing momentum or loss in the transfer process as a result of faculty engagement?

Building upon the first research question, the second research question focuses on how faculty interactions influenced students' understanding of transfer pathways and their ability to navigate the process successfully. Participants described both moments of clarity and confusion in their pursuit of transfer, emphasizing that faculty were often their most trusted, and sometimes their only, source of accurate information. Two primary themes emerged from the data: Faculty as Translators of the Transfer Process and Systemic Complexity and Fragmented Communication.

Theme 1: Faculty as Translators of the Transfer Process (Momentum Point)

Participants consistently highlighted that faculty were the primary source of guidance on how to transfer from an AAS program to a four-year institution. Faculty who took the time to explain transfer pathways, articulation agreements, and course equivalencies played a vital role in turning uncertainty into actionable knowledge, directly enhancing the development of TSC.

Demystifying the Transfer Process. For many students, the transfer process initially seemed confusing and hard to access. Several participants admitted that they “didn’t even know

it was possible” to transfer an AAS degree until a faculty member explained the available pathways. One student reflected, “I thought I’d have to start all over until my instructor showed me there were agreements that let some of my classes count.” These faculty-led explanations were often the first-time students realized their degree could serve as a stepping stone rather than an endpoint.

Students described these moments as transformative because they changed what was seen as possible. Faculty who discussed specific four-year partnerships or invited university representatives to speak in class provided crucial clarity. As one participant noted, “When my instructor brought in someone from a university to explain transfer options, that is when it clicked, I could actually keep going.” This mix of practical information and personal support helped students connect their current coursework to long-term educational goals.

Proactive Communication and Individualized Guidance. This theme highlights a critical loss point, the moments when unclear policies, fragmented advising, and inconsistent communication undermined student confidence and disrupted transfer momentum. Students also emphasized the importance of faculty who proactively communicate transfer information rather than waiting for students to ask. Many participants described their instructors as “constantly reminding us that we could transfer” and “making sure we knew what to do if we wanted to keep going.” For adult learners who were often balancing full-time work and family responsibilities, this consistent reinforcement kept transfer visible even when life demands competed for attention.

In several cases, faculty also personalized the information by helping students identify specific programs that aligned with their interests. One participant shared, “My advisor told me which universities had online programs that would fit my schedule, and that made all the

difference.” These one-on-one conversations reflected the deep mentoring relationships that many students associated with core faculty and were often the deciding factor in whether students pursued transfer at all.

Building Confidence Through Clarity. Clear and consistent communication from faculty not only gave students logistical information but also boosted their confidence in navigating complex institutional systems. For students who often started college feeling unsure or intimidated, faculty transparency acted as a form of empowerment. One participant explained, “Once I understood how the credits worked and what schools accepted them, it stopped feeling impossible.” This newfound confidence was reinforced when the faculty presented transfer as a normal and achievable next step.

Theme 2: Systemic Complexity and Fragmented Communication (Loss Point)

While many students credited faculty with helping them understand aspects of the transfer process, others described ongoing confusion caused by inconsistent information and institutional complexity. Even with faculty support, navigating articulation agreements, course transferability, and degree requirements was often overwhelming. These communication gaps reflected structural rather than individual barriers, which created points where momentum was lost, replacing motivation and confidence with frustration and uncertainty.

Inconsistent Advising and Mixed Messages. In nearly all interviews, participants described advising as one of the most confusing and discouraging parts of the transfer process. Students often said they received vague, incomplete, or incorrect information from advisors about transfer options. Advising sessions were seen as short and procedural, mainly focusing on course registration rather than long-term planning. As one participant explained, “I did not trust

the advisors at all; they had little information about transfer options and often didn't even mention it."

Students highlighted that advisors often lacked specific knowledge about AAS-to-bachelor's transfer programs. They struggled to clearly explain which courses would transfer, how degree structures matched up, or what four-year options were available for their field of study. This uncertainty left students feeling unsupported and sometimes misinformed. One participant noted that advisors "treated transfer like it was unrealistic and unattainable," reinforcing the idea that the AAS degree was seen as a final endpoint rather than a stepping stone for further education.

Complexity of Transfer Systems. Several participants emphasized that the transfer process itself, not just the communication surrounding it, was unnecessarily complicated. Students described feeling overwhelmed by various application procedures, unclear deadlines, and separate platforms for submitting transcripts or verifying course equivalencies. One student explained, "You feel like you're doing everything right, but then you find out there's one more form or step you missed." For adult learners juggling jobs and families, these bureaucratic hurdles were especially discouraging, creating what one participant called "red tape that wears you down."

This complexity also revealed a disconnect between institutions. Participants observed that although community college faculty were supportive, there was often little direct communication between their colleges and the universities they aimed to transfer to. The lack of a clear, unified process left students feeling as if they were navigating two systems on their own.

Impact on Momentum and Confidence. These systemic barriers visibly impacted students' motivation and sense of control. Several described feeling "stuck" or "ready to give up"

when transfer details became too confusing to handle. For many, the lack of clarity weakened the momentum they had built through faculty encouragement and classroom success. One student summarized this by saying, “It wasn’t that I didn’t want to keep going, I just didn’t know how.” The fragmented communication also reinforced inequities among students, representing a critical loss point within the Loss/Momentum Framework.

Chapter Summary

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore how faculty engagement affects the transfer experiences of students enrolled in AAS programs. Using Wang’s Loss/Momentum Framework as the guiding lens, the study examined both the factors that contribute to momentum and those that cause loss points during the transfer process. The analysis showed that faculty engagement, both relational and informational, plays a crucial role in shaping AAS students’ motivation, preparation, and confidence to pursue transfer opportunities.

Findings from Research Question 1 demonstrated that faculty relationships serve as a powerful source of academic and emotional momentum. Core faculty emerged as proactive champions who built trust, encouraged persistence, and helped students envision transfer as achievable. In contrast, experiences with general education faculty were often described as less personal, occasionally contributing to discouragement. Findings from Research Question 2 highlighted the impact of faculty engagement on students’ understanding and navigation of transfer pathways. When faculty acted as translators, clarifying articulation agreements and degree structures, students gained the knowledge and confidence needed to advance their educational goals, which directly contributed to the development of TSC. However, systemic advising inconsistencies, unclear communication, and fragmented institutional coordination often led to misinformation and frustration.

Overall, the findings emphasize that faculty engagement is a key factor in whether AAS students experience setbacks or progress during the transfer process. Faculty who offer relational encouragement, academic support, and accurate guidance create an environment where transfer feels feasible and supported. Conversely, inconsistent advising systems and limited institutional communication can hinder that progress, leaving students to depend on their personal resilience and informal support networks. The next chapter will interpret these findings in relation to existing literature and theoretical frameworks. Chapter 5 will discuss the implications of faculty engagement for policy, practice, and future research, highlighting strategies institutions can adopt to strengthen transfer pathways for AAS students.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This qualitative study explored how faculty engagement influences students' transfer experiences in associate in applied science (AAS) programs. Guided by Wang's (2017) Loss/Momentum Framework, I sought to understand how faculty behaviors, communication, and relationships impact students' motivation, confidence, and ability to transfer to a four-year college or university. I also examined how faculty contribute to the development of Transfer Student Capital (TSC), including the knowledge, relationships, and confidence students need to navigate transfer successfully.

My interpretation of the findings is that faculty engagement acts both as a facilitator of relationships and as an essential link within the structure. While policies and advising systems define the boundaries of transfer, it's often faculty who interpret them into understandable, actionable steps for students. In the context of AAS programs, traditionally seen as *terminal* and often overlooked in transfer research, faculty involvement becomes even more vital. Faculty members assist students in reframing what their degree represents and the opportunities it can create.

Chapter 4 shared the experiences of AAS students who had either completed or attempted transfer. Their stories demonstrated that faculty involvement can build both progress and setbacks. Core faculty often acted as proactive advocates, encouraging trust, motivation, and a sense of community. On the other hand, unclear advising, inconsistent communication, and disconnected institutional systems caused frustration and doubt.

In this chapter, I go beyond just describing these findings to interpret their significance within the larger context of transfer, equity, and institutional design. I examine how these results

reinforce, challenge, and expand existing literature and theoretical frameworks, particularly regarding the faculty's role in building transfer student capital and maintaining student momentum. I also draw on my professional experience in community colleges to identify practical and policy implications for improving AAS-to-bachelor's pathways. Finally, I offer recommendations for future research and share closing thoughts on how this study advances a broader understanding of faculty engagement as a relational, equity-centered practice.

Discussion of Findings

The findings from this study show that the AAS transfer journey is shaped not only by policy and advising structures but also by the quality of faculty relationships that boost students' self-confidence. Using Wang's (2017) Loss/Momentum Framework as a lens, I interpret these experiences as a balance between two forces: the momentum generated by supportive faculty engagement and the setbacks caused by inconsistent institutional systems. My view is that while AAS students are often intrinsically motivated, their progress largely depends on how faculty present transfer as either an achievable goal or an unrealistic aspiration.

Research Question 1: How does faculty engagement influence AAS students' motivation to pursue transfer?

Results indicated that faculty involvement plays a key role in shaping AAS students' motivation to persist and consider transferring. This suggests that faculty perceptions influence student beliefs. Participants frequently mentioned faculty who recognized their potential before they did. When core faculty shared their transfer experiences, explained articulation pathways, or encouraged students with "You can do this," students began to see opportunities beyond earning an associate degree.

This aligns with existing research (Karp & Bork, 2014; Tinto, 1997,) that emphasizes the link between student-faculty relationships and student persistence. However, my results expand this understanding by concentrating on students who are frequently overlooked in transfer discussions. AAS students are usually not the primary focus of community college transfer pathways, yet, as my participants showed, faculty engagement often served as the crucial moment that shifted their self-perception from *workforce student* to *transfer student*.

Core Faculty as Proactive Champions

Faculty can be seen as catalysts that support transfer student success. They build momentum not only by teaching content but also by fostering confidence and curiosity. These instructors blend teaching with mentoring, helping students view transfer as a natural extension of their work rather than a distant or unlikely goal. To me, this relational approach exemplifies transfer equity, acknowledging students' goals regardless of the program type. When faculty described the AAS degree as a "stepping stone," they challenged the deficit narrative that often limits applied learners.

Faculty Encouragement and Vision-Casting

Participant interviews revealed that faculty engagement often involved what I refer to as *vision-casting*, the deliberate act of helping students see themselves as capable of succeeding at the next academic stage. In this study, vision-casting describes how faculty expanded students' sense of possibility by naming, modeling, or affirming transfer as an achievable goal. For AAS students, this kind of encouragement went beyond motivation; it became transformative. It reshaped how students viewed themselves, shifting their identity from a *student completing a technical degree* to a *student preparing for a bachelor's*.

Having directed AAS programs myself, I have observed this pattern repeatedly. Faculty who take the time to connect personally with students can overcome years of self-doubt and discouragement. I see this relational energy as an informal yet powerful advising tool, one that fosters the kind of TSC that policies alone cannot develop.

Contrast with General Education Faculty Experiences

While relationships with core faculty gained strong momentum, interactions with general education (Gen Ed) instructors often told a different story. I see this as a structural divide rather than a matter of individual intent. Since Gen Ed courses are usually taught outside students' main divisions, participants viewed those instructors as less committed to their long-term goals. Gen Ed faculty often provided instruction that students felt was not directly relevant to their program of study, making it hard for students to see the connection or importance of these courses for their professional goals. When Gen Ed instruction focused mainly on course completion rather than program or career relevance, students saw it as a sign that their broader ambitions, especially transfer, were not valued. Many also perceived that Gen Ed faculty did not regard AAS students as *transfer* students at all, reinforcing the idea that their pathways ended with the associate degree. I interpret this pattern as evidence that institutional organization itself can create points of loss. When departments work in isolation, AAS students lose the relational continuity that helps maintain their belief in transfer. Students in applied programs often spend many hours with their core faculty, naturally fostering deeper relationships and trust. This closeness is not necessarily intentional and develops over time through shared experiences, familiarity, and mutual understanding of career goals. Participants often described gravitating toward faculty whose professional backgrounds matched their aspirations. I believe this close relational proximity explains why core faculty are usually the most influential advocates for AAS

students. Conversely, Gen Ed instruction, while crucial, can feel disconnected unless deliberate efforts are made to build cross-divisional links. Creating bridges through shared professional development or cross-divisional mentoring could help bridge gaps in belonging and continuity.

Validation and Belonging

One of the most important insights I gained from this study is that validation is essential for building momentum. When faculty acknowledge students' effort, intelligence, or perseverance, that recognition is more powerful than any advising document or policy memo. Participants described moments of validation as turning points, times when they began to see themselves as capable of earning a bachelor's degree.

I interpret this through Rendón's (1994) Validation Theory, which states that students succeed when important others affirm their potential. My findings extend this theory to AAS students by showing that faculty validation not only sustains motivation but also challenges negative stories ingrained in applied programs. In my view, relational validation is one of the most powerful ways in which faculty influence equity in transfer outcomes. It turns persistence from an individual challenge into a shared belief between student and faculty that transfer is both possible and deserved. This process of relational validation closely aligns with Wang's (2017) Loss/Momentum Framework, illustrating how meaningful faculty-student relationships create momentum points that help students continue despite structural or institutional barriers.

Research Question 2: How do AAS students experience momentum or loss in transfer because of faculty engagement?

When students shared their transfer stories, I noticed a pattern of momentum followed by loss, which reflects institutional system issues rather than a lack of motivation. Participants often depended on self-guidance, informal advice, or faculty support to fill gaps created by weak

advising structures. These experiences show that the issue is not student motivation but a lack of clarity, coordination, and continuity in how institutions facilitate transfer.

Theme 1: Transfer as a Self-Navigated Process (Loss Point)

Students expressed frustration with unclear advising and misinformation, which they saw as evidence of a systemic problem rather than a failure of individual advisors. Many were told their degree was *non-transferable* or that earning a bachelor's degree was not needed for their career pathway. From my perspective, these messages show how institutional culture can unintentionally gatekeep opportunities. Students' confidence dropped not because they doubted their abilities, but because the system failed to demonstrate how transfer could work for them. As a result, transfer became a self-guided process, something students had to figure out on their own, often without structured support or clear guidance.

Participant accounts also revealed that advising for AAS students lacked depth, consistency, and trust. Many felt their advisors were unfamiliar with AAS program structures, course transferability, or pathway design. Students described receiving incomplete or conflicting information, or no guidance about transfer at all. Several noted that the topic of transfer never came up during advising sessions, reinforcing the idea that their educational path ended at the associate degree. This lack of formal guidance forced students to take the initiative, conduct independent research, contact universities, or rely on informal networks to understand their options.

Because of this uncertainty, students often turned to core faculty for reliable guidance. They saw these instructors as more knowledgeable about program-specific pathways and as advocates who understood both the curriculum and transfer realities. Participants described

faculty as *the bridge* to four-year institutions, making introductions, explaining course equivalencies, and confirming that transfer was possible.

Students also trusted core faculty for their professional expertise and connections to the field. Many AAS faculty members continue to work in, or have significant experience within, the professions they teach, giving them credibility when discussing career planning and advancement. For instance, a Respiratory Therapy instructor who holds or has pursued a bachelor's degree can clearly explain how that credential enhances professional mobility and leadership opportunities. These real-world insights made faculty advice both relatable and practical, something students felt was often missing from traditional advising interactions. In contrast, several participants expressed skepticism or mistrust toward advisors, believing they lacked the specialized knowledge or investment needed to help them navigate transfer.

This divide is a major factor behind why AAS students view transfer as a self-guided process. When advising systems are not integrated with academic programs, students rely on relationships with faculty to bridge institutional gaps. This often results in instructors taking on informal advising roles that should be a shared responsibility. Such a self-directed approach burdens students with the task of acquiring transfer knowledge independently, which can worsen inequities for those lacking access to knowledgeable faculty mentors.

These findings support the insights of D'Amico et al. (2025) and Serrata et al. (2025). However, I think they offer a deeper understanding of why these barriers continue: AAS students are mostly invisible in institutional transfer stories. From my perspective as a practitioner, this invisibility represents a significant equity concern, one that can be tackled through faculty-driven advocacy, improved advising partnerships, and systemic change that views transfer as a structured, guided process rather than purely self-directed.

Theme 2: Institutional Partnerships and Clarity Build Momentum (Momentum Point)

In contrast, examples of strong partnerships between community colleges and nearby universities demonstrated that clear communication could rebuild trust and create new momentum for transfer. When students interacted with university representatives or saw successful AAS graduates, they felt a renewed sense of purpose and possibility. Faculty played a key role in fostering these connections, which I see as a form of institutional alignment where relationships, information, and timing come together to restore student confidence.

The proximity of transfer opportunities also proved to be a key factor in building and maintaining momentum. Many participants in this study were nontraditional, place-bound learners living in rural communities. For these students, physical distance to a university and limited access to flexible programs greatly restricted their transfer options. Many expressed a desire to continue their education but felt unable to relocate or attend classes full-time because of work and family obligations. As a result, partnerships offering local, online, or hybrid bachelor's programs were seen as essential rather than optional. Participants emphasized that flexible scheduling, virtual advising, and remote access to upper-division coursework made transfer feel feasible and within reach.

Based on my professional experience, I believe colleges that intentionally create and promote such partnerships can greatly improve both student trust and engagement. Transparent and flexible pathways turn hope into a plan, allowing non-traditional learners to see transfer not as a distant goal but as an attainable, structured step. For AAS students in rural areas, these collaborations between community colleges and universities are not just about articulation; they are about accessibility, equity, and a belief in continued opportunity.

Theme 3: Internal Motivation and Resilience Drive Completion (Momentum Point)

Finally, I see students' persistence and self-reliance as signs of remarkable internal strength. Even when institutional systems failed to support them, participants demonstrated impressive resilience, managing full-time work, family, and coursework while continuing to pursue their educational goals. Many of the participants also described enduring significant personal hardships, including loss, grief, and other unresolved trauma. Despite these challenges, they remained determined to complete their programs and seek transfer opportunities. This level of perseverance reflects more than academic motivation; it represents a deep commitment to personal growth and generational change.

Several participants credited core faculty with helping them navigate these life challenges. Faculty members provided empathy, flexibility, and encouragement during times of crisis, enabling students to stay engaged and see education as a stabilizing force rather than another source of stress. In this way, faculty became both academic and emotional anchors, reinforcing students' belief that they could keep moving forward even when external circumstances were tough.

It appears that faculty engagement enhances this resilience by transforming it into forward momentum. Through validation, consistent communication, and relational support, faculty help students direct their self-discipline toward long-term goals rather than short-term survival. In my view, the persistence of AAS students should not be seen as a reason to cut back on institutional support, but rather as a call to strengthen it. Colleges need to create systems that match students' determination, recognize the emotional effort required for persistence, and the vital role of faculty in supporting it. Faculty engagement provides the validation, encouragement, and structure needed to turn resilience into success.

Collectively, these themes illustrate that AAS students' success is not defined solely by individual willpower but by the dynamic interaction between personal resilience and faculty engagement. Participants' stories revealed that even the most determined students relied on relational encouragement and structural clarity to sustain momentum. These findings align closely with Wang's (2017) Loss/Momentum Framework, demonstrating how faculty interactions can transform personal persistence into institutional momentum. The following section interprets these findings within the context of both Wang's framework and TSC, connecting individual experiences to the larger theoretical understanding of how AAS students build belief, direction, and capacity for transfer.

Taken together, these findings reveal a real tension between the relationships that build momentum and the systems that can unintentionally slow it down. Faculty fosters belief, motivation, and direction for students, but institutional processes do not always support that. In other words, students gain confidence from people, not policies. The following section focuses on how colleges can close this gap by transforming the kind of relational engagement faculty provide daily into deliberate structures, policies, and practices that ensure transfer support is consistent and equitable.

Implications for Practice and Policy

The findings from this study reveal that faculty engagement is both a relational and structural force that directly shapes AAS students' motivation, confidence, and persistence. The results point to a clear need for community colleges and higher education systems to close the gap between relational support and institutional structure. While faculty interactions often build momentum, advising and policy systems frequently create roadblocks that force students to navigate transfers independently. To move from insight to action, institutions must intentionally

design structures that align policy, advising, and faculty practice in support of AAS transfer success.

Reframe Faculty Development as Transfer Empowerment

I recommend that colleges shift from traditional professional development to faculty and advisor training focused on transfer empowerment, preparing staff to support and guide students through the transfer process actively. In this study, transfer empowerment means equipping both faculty and advisors with the knowledge, confidence, and tools to help AAS students see transfer as both achievable and expected. This type of development could enhance collaboration between academic and student services by ensuring that all institutional staff, those teaching in the classroom and those providing advising, share consistent, accurate information and promote a shared message that transfer is accessible.

Collaborative Advising Models

Findings from this study revealed that inconsistent or unclear advising was one of the most significant loss points for AAS students. Advisors and faculty often worked in isolation, resulting in fragmented communication and misinformation. To address this gap, I recommend that colleges adopt collaborative advising models that position faculty and advisors as partners in student success rather than separate entities operating within different systems.

In a collaborative model, faculty would focus on program-specific guidance, such as course sequencing, career alignment, and transfer applicability within their discipline. At the same time, advisors would provide expertise on university admissions processes, articulation agreements, and financial aid. Joint professional development focused on transfer empowerment would ensure both groups share consistent information and reinforce the same message: that transfer is attainable, supported, and expected.

Such collaboration also helps rebuild student trust, which participants identified as a significant factor in whether they sought guidance at all. When students receive aligned information from both their instructors and advisors, they are less likely to feel dismissed, confused, or forced to navigate the process alone. I believe this shared model of responsibility not only strengthens institutional communication but also represents a more holistic approach to equity, recognizing that every point of contact with a student is an opportunity to build momentum toward transfer.

Institutional Partnerships and Transfer Visibility

Participants consistently emphasized that visibility and access to transfer information restored their confidence and motivation to continue their education. Many students described that simply seeing clear pathways or hearing from university representatives reignited their belief that transfer was possible. I view these experiences as instances where the partnership between community colleges and universities turns abstract policies into tangible opportunities.

Faculty played a key role in building these partnerships. By inviting university representatives into classrooms or sharing stories of former students who successfully transferred, faculty made transfer more visible and relatable. These efforts also helped rebuild student trust after previous advising issues. When colleges intentionally create spaces for collaboration among faculty, advisors, and four-year partners, they send a message to students that transfer is a supported and achievable path, not an exception reserved for certain programs.

The findings also highlighted that proximity and flexibility are crucial to sustaining transfer momentum, particularly for nontraditional and place-bound learners. Many participants lived in rural areas, balancing work and family responsibilities that made relocation unrealistic. For these students, access to nearby universities or online/hybrid programs determined whether

transfer was even possible. I believe institutions should prioritize local, flexible, and affordable partnerships, such as 2+2 online pathways, satellite programs, or university partnerships hosted on community college campuses. These collaborations extend opportunity beyond geography, enabling students to continue their education without compromising stability.

Drawing from both the findings and my professional experience, I see these partnerships not just as administrative agreements but as meaningful equity mechanisms. Transparent and flexible pathways turn aspiration into action, helping non-traditional learners move from hope to planning and from planning to persistence. When institutions make transfer visible, relevant, and accessible, they not only strengthen individual student momentum but also fulfill the broader mission of community colleges: expanding opportunity for all learners, regardless of location or life circumstance.

The recent NC State University Wolfpack Connect partnership shows how well-meaning initiatives can unintentionally reinforce inequality. Although this program involves all 58 North Carolina community colleges, eligibility is limited to students who are earning an AA or AS degree. The exclusion of AAS degree holders from this statewide effort reflects the experiences shared by participants who felt overlooked in transfer discussions and disconnected from clear pathways to a bachelor's degree. Such policies reinforce the idea that AAS programs are outside the larger transfer system. Expanding guaranteed-admission partnerships and articulation agreements to include high-demand AAS fields, like business, information technology, and human services, would not only promote fairness but also align state policy with the educational and workforce realities highlighted in this study's findings (Belk Center for Community College Leadership and Research, 2025).

Strengthen and Expand AAS Articulation Agreements for Bachelor's Degree Options

A key policy implication from this study is the need for more consistent and comprehensive articulation agreements that clearly outline AAS-to-bachelor's degree transfer options. Currently, articulation agreements for AAS programs are often developed and managed at the institutional or program level rather than through a coordinated statewide process. This fragmented approach creates confusion for students and faculty alike, resulting in inconsistent information, unclear expectations, and lost momentum.

Participants often described feeling like they were “stuck in the transfer maze,” unsure of which credits would transfer or which universities would accept their degree. These experiences show how the lack of standardized agreements acts as a structural barrier that mainly affects nontraditional and first-generation students, those who are least likely to have the time, access, or resources to navigate multiple systems alone.

To address this issue, state systems should prioritize developing statewide AAS articulation policies that ensure transparency, consistency, and equitable access across all institutions. This would allow students entering applied programs to plan their academic paths from the start, rather than discovering transfer options late in their programs or through informal faculty connections.

A consistent statewide framework should include:

- Clearly published transfer pathways between programs for all major AAS disciplines.
- Standardized communication protocols require that agreements be publicly accessible to students, faculty, and advisors.

- Regular review cycles ensure alignment with changing workforce and university program needs.

Implementing these changes would decrease confusion, enhance advising accuracy, and demonstrate institutional support for AAS students' potential for ongoing academic success. In short, clear and consistent statewide articulation policies would turn the *transfer maze* into a clear and navigable pathway, enabling AAS students to advance with confidence and purpose.

Fund and Support Faculty-Led Transfer Initiatives

Findings from this study consistently identified faculty as the most trusted and influential agents in AAS students' transfer journeys. Faculty served not only as instructors but also as motivators, mentors, and navigators, bridging gaps created by unclear advising systems or limited institutional communication. However, much of this work occurs informally and without institutional recognition or dedicated resources. As a result, transfer advocacy often depends on the goodwill and extra effort of individual faculty members rather than being embedded in the college's structure.

To sustain and scale the momentum that faculty create, state systems and institutions should provide intentional funding and structural support for faculty-led transfer initiatives.

These efforts could include:

- Faculty release time or stipends to develop or update articulation agreements.
- Support for cross-institutional collaborations, such as regional transfer summits or joint curriculum alignment meetings with university partners.
- Mini-grants for faculty to implement mentoring or peer-coaching programs that help AAS students prepare for transfer.

- Recognition programs that highlight and reward faculty who make significant contributions to improving AAS transfer outcomes.

In addition to faculty-focused initiatives, institutions should consider discipline- or division-specific transfer advising, in which advisors specialize in particular academic or professional areas, such as Health Sciences, Business and Technology, or Industrial Technologies. A division-specific model ensures that advisors understand the structure of AAS programs, the relevance of general education requirements, and the unique articulation agreements connected to each discipline. For example, a transfer advisor dedicated to Health Sciences could maintain direct partnerships with regional universities, stay current on nursing or allied health pathways, and guide students more effectively through transfer options aligned with their professional goals. This structure would reduce confusion, build student trust, and provide more targeted support.

At the policy level, state systems could encourage this work by providing targeted funding that supports collaborative advising between divisions and partner universities. Promoting faculty and advisors to co-lead division-specific transfer planning would help ensure that guidance is accurate, consistent, and grounded in program realities.

Ultimately, funding and supporting faculty-led initiatives, alongside division-specific advising, sends a powerful message: that relational engagement, discipline expertise, and collaboration are not peripheral to student success but core strategies for equity and momentum in the AAS-to-bachelor's transfer pipeline.

Create Curriculum Pathways That Align Workforce and Transfer Goals

Participants' experiences revealed a curricular gap between the ACA courses designed for AAS students and the transfer-focused instruction available in ACA 122, which better prepares

students to navigate bachelor's degree pathways. Several participants discussed the differences between ACA 115: Success and Study Skills and ACA 122: College Transfer Success, both of which are part of the North Carolina Community College System Combined Course Library.

ACA 115 is typically required for students in AAS programs and introduces general college orientation topics such as study strategies, time management, and basic academic planning. Although it supports student success at the associate-degree level, it offers limited exposure to transfer processes, university admissions requirements, or navigating bachelor's degree expectations.

In contrast, ACA 122 is required for students enrolled in AA and AS programs and is specifically designed to prepare students for transfer. The course focuses on academic planning for bachelor's degree pathways, interpreting articulation agreements, understanding university requirements, and navigating financial aid and admissions. Students who completed ACA 122 described it as transformative in helping them "learn the language of transfer," giving them early and structured access to essential information that made transfer feel achievable.

For AAS students, not having access to this same preparation resulted in confusion and gaps in transfer knowledge. ACA 115, while valuable for college success, did not provide the transfer-focused instruction or terminology that several participants later realized they needed.

This curricular divide mirrors the broader institutional narrative that frames AAS programs as workforce endpoints rather than transfer foundations. Developing a transfer-focused college success course explicitly tailored for AAS students could help close this gap and reframe applied education as both career- and transfer-oriented.

An AAS Transfer Readiness course could include instruction on:

- Understanding articulation agreements and credit transferability

- Navigating admissions and financial aid processes for bachelor's programs
- Exploring flexible and online completion options for working adults
- Connecting students with university representatives, alumni, or transfer mentors
- Building confidence through discussions about identity, belonging, and persistence as nontraditional learners

Embedding this type of course early in AAS curricula would introduce the concept of transfer as an achievable goal from the start of a student's program. It would also normalize transfer conversations, strengthen collaboration between advising and faculty, and ensure consistent messaging about available pathways.

From a policy standpoint, adopting a statewide ACA 122-equivalent course for AAS students would provide consistency and promote equity across degree types. Making such a course required or strongly recommended would help ensure that all students, regardless of program, gain the knowledge and confidence needed to pursue a bachelor's degree successfully.

Ultimately, aligning workforce and transfer narratives through curriculum reinforces that applied programs are not final destinations but steppingstones. When students are intentionally taught how to translate their AAS education into bachelor-level opportunities, they gain both the language and the confidence to continue their academic journey.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study adds to the limited research on students' vertical transfer experiences in AAS programs. While the results offer insights into how faculty engagement, advising, and institutional structures influence students' motivation and progress, they also identify several areas for further research. Future studies should aim to deepen the understanding of AAS transfer

from various perspectives, including faculty, advisors, policy leaders, and students who continue beyond the associate degree.

Examine Faculty and Advisor Perspectives on Transfer Support

Future research should explore how faculty and advisors perceive their roles in supporting AAS transfer. Participants in this study described faculty as their most trusted and knowledgeable resource but also expressed limited trust in advisors due to inconsistent information or a lack of understanding of programs. A comparative study examining how faculty and advisors understand transfer procedures, institutional expectations, and their own responsibilities could identify significant gaps in communication and training. Additionally, this research could investigate how professional development focused on transfer empowerment influences advisor and faculty confidence, knowledge, and collaboration across departments.

Investigating Institutional Cultures of Transfer

The findings indicate that institutional culture significantly influences AAS students' perceptions of what is achievable. Future research should investigate how leadership priorities, communication styles, and organizational frameworks either reinforce or challenge the idea that applied programs are *terminal*. Multi-site case studies could examine how colleges with strong AAS transfer results foster cultures of alignment and belonging. Such research could guide strategies for creating transfer-friendly institutions, those that support and promote mobility for all students, including those in applied programs.

Explore Post-Transfer Experiences of AAS Graduates

This study focused on students within the community college setting. Longitudinal research following AAS graduates who successfully transfer to four-year institutions would offer

valuable insights into their post-transfer adjustment, credit transferability, academic confidence, and sense of belonging. Understanding how AAS students experience the receiving institution could reveal new barriers and inform university practices to support applied program transfer students. This line of inquiry would also help clarify whether faculty engagement and momentum points identified in community colleges persist after transfer or diminish once students enter a new environment.

Evaluating the Impact of Transfer-Focused Interventions

Given the findings regarding unclear advising, misinformation, and the self-guided nature of AAS transfer, future researchers should evaluate the effectiveness of targeted interventions to improve transfer outcomes. Studies could investigate the effects of collaborative advising models, faculty-led mentoring programs, or the proposed AAS Transfer Readiness course described in this chapter. Experimental or quasi-experimental designs could determine whether these interventions significantly enhance transfer intent, confidence, or success rates. These studies would bolster the empirical evidence supporting targeted reforms and show how relational engagement can be put into practice.

Analyze Policy Implementation and System-Level Reform

Finally, research is necessary to understand how statewide articulation policies and institutional accountability measures influence AAS transfer across different settings. Comparative studies between states with coordinated articulation systems and those with decentralized agreements could show how policy consistency impacts equity and access. Additional research might also explore how funding structures, performance metrics, or workforce policy language shape institutional behavior and student opportunities. These analyses

would provide policymakers with valuable data to balance workforce development with transfer equity.

Summary of Research Recommendations

Collectively, these areas for future study would deepen understanding of how AAS students navigate vertical transfer and how institutions can better support them. By examining the perspectives of faculty, advisors, policymakers, and post-transfer students, future researchers can build a more comprehensive picture of momentum and loss across the entire transfer pipeline. Continued exploration of transfer-focused interventions and policy implementation will not only strengthen theory but also advance practice, ensuring that AAS students are recognized as capable, college-ready learners with the potential to succeed beyond the associate degree.

Limitations of the Study

Like all qualitative research, this study has limitations that should be acknowledged when interpreting its findings. The goal of qualitative inquiry is to explore depth and meaning rather than produce generalizable results. While the findings provide valuable insights into the transfer experiences of AAS students, they are shaped by the study's context, participant sample, and my positionality as the researcher.

Sample Scope and Geographic Context

This study focused on students enrolled in AAS programs at rural community colleges in western and central North Carolina. While this geographic focus limits transferability to other areas, it enhances understanding of how rural institutional culture influences AAS transfer experiences. The results should be viewed as illustrative rather than universal, offering insights into how place and institutional size may impact faculty engagement and transfer momentum.

Participant Demographics

Most participants identified as female, nontraditional, and employed full-time while earning their degrees. Although this reflects the demographics of many AAS learners, it narrows the range of perspectives represented. This limitation may affect transferability to other populations, such as younger, traditional-aged, or male students. Nevertheless, the homogeneity also strengthens the credibility of the findings by providing a detailed, consistent portrait of adult learners navigating transfer within applied programs.

Self-Reported Experiences

Because data were collected through semi-structured interviews, the findings rely on participants' self-reported perceptions and memories. While this limits verification across data sources, it enhances credibility by centering the voices and lived experiences of students. Member checking and peer debriefing were used to confirm accuracy and reduce interpretive bias, improving trustworthiness.

Institutional Representation

Participants represented a small number of community colleges, so the results may not reflect variations in institutional culture, policy, or advising models across the entire North Carolina Community College System. This limits transferability but adds credibility through an in-depth exploration of institutional dynamics within specific contexts. The purpose was to understand meaning, not to generalize outcomes.

Researcher Positionality

My professional background as a community college faculty member and program director naturally influenced my interpretation of data. While this insider perspective could introduce bias, it also enhances credibility through contextual sensitivity and a deeper

understanding of institutional processes. Reflexivity practices, such as journaling and peer debriefing, were used to remain aware of potential bias and to prioritize participants' voices in the analysis.

Summary of Limitations

Overall, these limitations clarify that the findings are contextually rich, credible within similar institutional settings, but not statistically generalized. The study's strengths lie in its depth and its ability to shed light on the relational and structural factors affecting AAS transfer in rural community colleges, providing insights that can inform local practices and broader policy discussions on transfer equity.

Conclusion

This study investigated how faculty engagement impacts the transfer experiences of students enrolled in associate in applied science (AAS) programs. Using Wang's (2017) Loss/Momentum Framework as a theoretical lens, the research examined how faculty interactions, advising structures, and institutional culture influence students' confidence, motivation, and belief in the possibility of transfer. Through the voices of AAS students, the study identified both momentum points, moments of validation, encouragement, and connection, and loss points, instances of confusion, misinformation, and institutional silence that hinder progress.

The findings confirmed that faculty engagement serves both relational and structural roles in supporting AAS transfer. Faculty members served as proactive advocates, offering encouragement, practical guidance, and consistent belief in students' potential. Their involvement often filled advising gaps, turning what might have been self-directed navigation into supported, collaborative progress. On the other hand, limited advising expertise and poor

institutional communication revealed structural weaknesses that eroded students' confidence and momentum.

Interpreted through Wang's framework, these findings show that momentum is maintained not only through institutional processes but also through human connections. Faculty members who validate students' potential, discuss transfer openly, and offer actionable information act as catalysts for persistence. This relational engagement builds transfer student capital, the knowledge, relationships, and self-belief needed to navigate transfer successfully.

The study also showed that AAS students' persistence is not just about personal determination. Participants displayed strong resilience, often continuing their education despite trauma, family responsibilities, and financial difficulties. Faculty support strengthened this resilience by offering emotional stability and academic guidance. These findings challenge the idea that persistence is solely an individual matter; instead, it is built through relationships that communicate care, possibility, and direction.

At the institutional and policy level, the results highlight the need for alignment among advising, curriculum, and culture. Colleges must go beyond seeing AAS programs as just workforce endpoints and recognize them as valid pathways to advanced degrees. This requires clear articulation agreements, collaborative advising models, and professional development that empowers both faculty and advisors to help students through the transfer process. State systems must also ensure that AAS transfer is visible, supported, and incorporated into institutional accountability structures.

Ultimately, this study affirms that faculty are the bridge between aspiration and opportunity. Their engagement transforms uncertainty into momentum and belief into action.

When institutions invest in relational validation, clear communication, and cross-sector collaboration, they create conditions for equitable access to transfer.

For AAS students, many of whom are adult learners, caregivers, and first-generation college students, the path to earning a bachelor's degree is not simple, but it is possible. Every act of encouragement, each moment of clarity, and every faculty-student connection helps build a larger culture of belief. Strengthening that culture is not only an institutional challenge; it is a moral duty to ensure that every student, regardless of program or background, has a supported way to reach their goals.

Conducting this study has deepened my understanding of how relationships, structure, and belief intersect to shape the experiences of AAS students. As a community college faculty member, I have seen firsthand how small moments of encouragement, an honest conversation, a question about goals, or an acknowledgment of potential can shift a student's entire trajectory. Listening to participants describe their perseverance reminded me that faculty engagement is not simply instructional; it is transformational. This research reaffirmed my belief that when institutions empower faculty, clarify systems, and affirm student capability, we create not just pathways but possibilities. My hope is that this work contributes to a broader movement to recognize AAS students as scholars, professionals, and lifelong learners who deserve clear, supported, and visible routes to their educational aspirations.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

Interview Guide: Faculty Engagement and Transfer Student Capital in AAS Pathways Welcome, Introduction, and Purpose

Intro Script:

Thank you for taking the time to participate in this interview. Before we begin, I want to make sure you've had a chance to read the consent form.

Do you have any questions about the consent form before we start?

Just as a reminder, your participation is voluntary. You may skip any question or stop the interview at any time without explanation. With your permission, I will audio-record this session so I can capture your words accurately.

With that in mind, may we proceed?

Warm-up Questions

1. Can you tell me a little about your educational journey so far?
 - What AAS program are/were you in?
 - Where are you now in your academic journey (still in AAS, recently transferred, planning to transfer)?
2. What originally motivated you to enroll in your AAS program?
 - Was transfer to a four-year school part of your plan from the beginning?

Main Interview Questions

Faculty Engagement

1. How would you describe your interactions with faculty during your AAS program?
 - Were there any faculty who stood out as especially helpful or discouraging?
 - Did instructors ever talk with you about your transfer goals?
2. Can you share a time when a faculty member encouraged you (or discouraged you) about transferring to a four-year school?

Transfer Preparation & Support

3. What kinds of guidance or information did you receive about transferring?
 - Did this information come from faculty, advisors, or other sources?
 - Was it clear and helpful?
4. What challenges did you face when trying to figure out how to transfer your AAS credits to a four-year institution?

Momentum and Turning Points

5. Were there times in your program when you felt momentum building toward transfer?
 - What helped create that momentum?
6. Were there times when you felt discouraged or lost in the transfer process?
 - What caused that loss of momentum?

Transfer Student Capital (TSC)

7. Who or what helped you learn how to navigate the transfer process (requirements, timelines, course transferability)?
 - Did you feel like you had “insider knowledge” to help you succeed?

8. Did faculty help you build confidence, skills, or connections that you think prepared you for a four-year institution?

Program Context

9. How did the structure or focus of your AAS program affect your ability to transfer?
 - Were you ever told your degree was non-transferable or mainly for the workforce?
10. Do you think your experiences were different from students in AA or AS programs?

Wrap-up Questions

11. What advice would you give a faculty member who wants to better support AAS students interested in transfer?
12. Is there anything else you'd like to share about your experience with faculty or the transfer process?

VITA

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Bachelor of Science (B.S.) in Human Services, Gardner-Webb University, *August 2003*

Associate in Applied Science (A.A.S.) in Medical Assisting, Wilkes Community College, *May*

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Professional Experience

Director of Medical Assisting and Social and Human Services

Wilkes Community College, Wilkesboro, NC, *August 2008–Present*

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Surry Community College, Dobson, NC, *August 2004–August 2008*