

PREFACE

But many of us didn't make it here.

—KIMBERLY

I REMEMBER EVERYTHING that I felt when meeting Kimberly on that crisp September day in 2005 at The Ohio State University. Kimberly had just transferred from Columbus State Community College to work toward her bachelor's degree in the College of Engineering. I was starting my second year as a doctoral student in the College of Education and was a research assistant at the Office of Student Affairs Assessment, working on a project about transfer student experiences at the university. Our paths crossed at the Oval, the enormous quad at the campus center, where Kimberly asked me for directions to the bookstore. I offered to walk with her as that's where I was headed too, and we struck up a conversation as we went. We quickly connected through our shared experience of transitioning into a new campus environment, hers as a transfer and mine as an international student, and laughed around a few "culture shocks." And of course, the second I found out that Kimberly was a new transfer, I couldn't help but start to eagerly share resources at Ohio State that my limited knowledge could offer. When we hit the bookstore, there was a long line as usual for the start of the quarter. "See? You might end up spending an hour here just to purchase your textbooks," I said, heaving a big sigh.

“No worries,” Kimberly replied. “I ordered all my books from the store’s new online system, and I am just picking them up.” She proceeded to the information desk and located her preordered books in no time. I watched, wondering where I had been all this time, totally unaware of such an obvious service, while assuming that my academic standing and greater experience with the university meant I was the one holding the knowledge.

Connected, self-reflective, and inspired was how I felt meeting Kimberly that day. It was about experiencing the brilliance, grace, and savviness of transfer students firsthand. It brought life and texture to my then evolving exposure to the community college¹ and transfer literature, and fueled my growing interest in studying transfer for my dissertation research. In short, my encounter with Kimberly coincided with and further solidified my decision to pursue a research career focusing on community college transfer. As an international student coming from a highly structured and closed education system with little to no possibility for student mobility across institutions, my introduction to the American community college, particularly its upward transfer function, was both eye-opening and uplifting. Coupling that with my personal interactions with Kimberly and the many savvy, successful, and kind transfer students whom I have met since, I internalized the idea that any postsecondary education path that was structurally set to be “terminal” was beyond unacceptable. Therefore, as I delved deeper into any topic on community colleges that fall quarter and onward, any missing thread about two-year colleges’ transfer function, which allows students to achieve a baccalaureate degree and beyond, if they so desire, was remarkably troublesome. And this omission is especially pervasive in the narrative around the shortage of talent in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields of study, as I discuss later in this book.

I didn’t know at the time that my initial fascination with transfer as a democratizing function was to be complicated when I saw Kimberly again—and for years to come. Later that winter, I helped conduct a series

of focus groups with transfer students at Ohio State, and to my delight, Kimberly participated in one of them. The focus group conversations helped confirm and contextualize what I found on the survey that had been sent out earlier: transfer students were as engaged and successful academically as their counterparts who started as university freshmen. As Kimberly and I left that focus group, we fondly recalled our fall encounter and teased each other about textbook purchases. When I told Kimberly how inspiring I found her experience and those of other transfer students, she said something that has stuck with me since: “But many of us didn’t make it here.”

Fast forward to fall 2018, during a class session of my doctoral seminar on community colleges at the University of Wisconsin–Madison (where I am a faculty member), when I previewed some of the findings from the research undergirding this book. The story of Katy, whom you will soon meet, struck a particular chord among my students. Katy was a community college transfer-aspiring student who ended up not transferring or earning any credential. As my students discussed what went wrong and what could have been done differently to change Katy’s course for a more positive outcome, LaShawn, one of our doctoral students who attended a community college as an undergraduate, spoke in a somber voice uncharacteristic of her typical upbeat style: “I feel so sad. I’ve always loved my community college and I am a proud transfer, but it is just sad to think that I made it and others didn’t.”

With well over a decade between their experiences, Kimberly and LaShawn, both successful transfer students, both identifying as women of color, spoke of the perennially elusive nature of transfer and the disconnect between aspired and realized goals among transfer-aspiring students. Startlingly enough, although 70 to 80 percent of students who enter two-year colleges aspire to transfer to a four-year institution, only around 20 percent actually do so. And this pair of statistics did not change much from when Kimberly voiced her sentiment to when LaShawn realized that she had beaten the odds.² This is especially disheartening when

considering that success rates for community college students who make it through the transfer process are on par with those who originally started at four-year institutions.³ To think that only a fraction of those motivated students ever transfer, which means the post-transfer success is enjoyed by that same small fraction. As this book will show, the disconnect between aspired and realized goals among transfer-aspiring students permeates all areas of study but is particularly pronounced in STEM. In a similar fashion, the structural and institutional barriers inequitably experienced by transfer-aspiring students manifest across all fields but are noticeably magnified in STEM. It begs the question: Why do students with the same desire to transfer end up on different trajectories, and what can we do to reduce the gap between what students aspire to and what they actually attain?

My book set out to answer this question from the vantage point of how students experience and negotiate a path to or away from transfer. It portrays the unfolding educational journeys of roughly 1,670 beginning two-year college students over the course of four years.⁴ But first I want you to meet four remarkable students among this group: Jordan, Seamus, Kanda, and Katy, whom I was privileged to get to know, interview, and learn from through the research underlying this book. Their experiences and the trajectories each represents are previewed in the introduction and further unpacked throughout the book. Individually and collectively, their stories epitomize this book's title, *On My Own*, along with all the depth, complexity, and paradox that come with it.