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*Since transfer students are a fact of undergraduate life today, institutional faculty and staff members need to be aware of the issues affecting their transition and strive to make it as successful as possible.*

## “Feeling Like a Freshman Again”: The Transfer Student Transition

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Undergraduate transfer is a fact of life. At least 40 percent of students attend more than one institution on their path to a baccalaureate degree (Adelman, 2005). Some students initially attend a two-year college, so transfer is to be expected if they seek a baccalaureate. Among the students in the Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study 1995–2001 (BPSLS:95/2001), over 40 percent of those who started postsecondary education in a public two-year school in 1995 transferred at least once by June 2001. Two-year college students are not the only ones who transfer. The same BPSLS:95/2001 data also show that 27 percent of students who started at a public four-year school and almost 24 percent who started at a private, nonprofit school transferred at least once (National Center for Education Statistics, 2002). Some of this transfer may include what is known as “reverse transfer,” or transferring to a community college after attending a four-year college or university (Townsend, 1999).

As a result, there is increasing interest in transfer students’ transition to their new institution, often referred to as the receiving institution. In this chapter, I describe the two parts of the transfer transition: the transfer process itself, which I label transfer transition part 1, and the adjustment once at the receiving institution, which I call transfer transition part 2. To do so, I draw primarily from my current research about transfer students’ experiences once at their receiving college or university. I conclude with suggestions for ways that administrators and faculty at both the sending and receiving campuses can facilitate the transfer student transition.

The basis for this chapter's description of transfer students' experiences is several qualitative studies conducted at a large, public, research extensive, midwestern university. This university's undergraduate student body consists primarily of full-time, traditional-age students drawn to the school partly because it exemplifies the stereotypical collegiate experience, including Division I athletic teams, an extensive Greek presence, and the requirement that all first-year students live on campus. Several years ago, nineteen community college transfer students at this university were individually interviewed (see Townsend and Wilson, 2006, for details). Two years later, a follow-up study of these students was conducted with eleven of those still on campus (see Townsend and Wilson, in press). Results of these two studies are used here, along with results from several focus groups conducted in 2007.

Students in the focus groups were selected in two ways. One set of students had enrolled in a one-credit course developed as part of an institutional effort to retain transfer students. This optional course about being a transfer student, whether from a two-year or four-year institution, is offered by several of the university's colleges or disciplines (for example, business, education, psychology). Students in the course are considered to be part of a transfer student interest group (TRIG). Several of the TRIGs agreed to participate in a focus group about the transfer process and about being a transfer student. The questions asked were a variant of those asked of the students in the two transfer studies. Responses of the thirty-seven students from four TRIGs were taped and then transcribed for later analysis. In addition, leaders of one TRIG asked that their nine students receive the questions and individually respond to them in writing, which they did.

The second way students responded through focus groups was by means of a provost-driven effort to learn how transfer students perceived their experiences at the institution, including the transfer process itself, and how the university could improve the transfer process and services for transfer students. Using essentially the same questions as those used with the TRIG students, institutional faculty and staff interviewed twenty-seven community college transfer students who responded to an invitation for "pizza and conversation" (Barnes, 2007, p. 1). When they arrived, they were placed in small groups of two to four students. Their comments were recorded by hand and then compiled into a master list of responses categorized by the questions asked.

In other words, responses of seventy-three students from the 2007 focus groups, as well as nineteen students from the previously described studies (Townsend and Wilson, 2006, in press) inform most of the remarks in this chapter. From these responses of almost a hundred students, several themes emerged. The themes are divided into comments about the transfer process itself and about transfer students' experiences after enrollment at the receiving institution.

## **The Transfer Process, or Transfer Transition Part 1**

The transfer process encompasses the steps students take to move from their current or sending institution to their receiving one: deciding where to transfer, applying to that college or university, and receiving the institution's decision about their admission, which may include indicating which credits will transfer.

In deciding where to transfer, students are influenced by a number of factors that likely influenced their decision to attend their initial institution. These factors include how much it will cost to attend, how far the campus is from their home, and whether any of their friends or relatives are at the possible receiving college or university. Each of these factors may also influence the college-choice decision of a native student at the institution. However, an additional and distinctive factor for transfer students is the extent to which their already accumulated college credits will transfer or be accepted at the receiving institution. While first-time college students may be concerned about whether and how many of their dual enrollment or dual credit courses or advanced placement courses will be accepted, they took these courses prior to their college attendance. Transfer students, of course, are already college students who have earned course credits while in college. They want all of these credits to transfer; otherwise, they believe their college tuition money and time have been wasted.

Once potential transfer students have decided where to apply, they must go through the college application process. Transfer students bring to this process prior experience in applying to a college. This process typically includes filling out an institution's application form (usually an online one now), arranging for their transcripts to be sent to the institution, and paying an application fee. Students may also seek institutional forms of financial aid.

For potential transfer students, another important part of the application process is learning how many and which credits a college or university will accept. Sometimes this information is available through institutional Web sites detailing institutional articulation agreements or through state-level Web sites describing articulation agreements for a state's public and sometimes its private institutions. However, information about articulation agreements for courses and programs is not always so accessible. Thus, at times students apply to and decide to go to an institution without knowing in advance if all of their previously earned college credits will be accepted and, if they are accepted, in what way they will count toward a particular major's requirements.

In terms of transfer transition part 1, the student voices heard in this study were almost uniform in expressing why they chose the university in the study. The majority selected it because of a particular major, which makes sense for transfer students. Many of them already have all or most of their general education courses completed and are ready to take courses in their major. Some transfer students also wanted to come to this university

because they had family members or friends who were graduates or were currently attending it. Cost was rarely mentioned except when a student had a parent who worked at the university, thus entitling the student to a significant tuition discount. Several of the students also chose this university because they wanted the stereotypical college experience of living in a residence hall, belonging to a sorority or fraternity, attending intercollegiate athletic events, and generally enjoying campus life.

Completing the application was frustrating for some, who complained that the application process took weeks or even a couple of months, while others indicated they had completed the process quickly. Perhaps the differences stem from the time of year students submit an application (some times are busier than others) and the care with which students completed the application, including having the requisite information on hand. A related frustration was the uncertainty about how much financial aid they would receive and the difficulty of getting the financial aid application through the institution's system. Interestingly, students did not complain about having to complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid, perhaps because they had already experienced completing it prior to attending their initial institution.

As might be expected for transfer students, by far the most frequent frustration in the application process was the transfer of course credits. Most of the students did not say that they had lost course credits, but that may be because many of the two-year college transfer students had completed the associate of arts (A.A.) degree before transferring. The A.A. degree is commonly designated as the transfer degree and is designed to articulate with the first two years of students' general education requirements. At the university described here, students who earn an A.A. degree with a 2.5 grade point average (GPA) or above are accepted as juniors. However, the most common complaint (20 percent of the students) was frustration with the number of prior credits accepted that would count toward the desired major or still not knowing how many or which of their courses had transferred. At this institution, students receive a general acceptance into a particular college, like the College of Arts and Science, but are not automatically accepted into the major of their choice. Only after they are admitted to a college can they apply to a program or department within it. Typically it is not until students are accepted into their major and meet with an adviser that they learn how many of their courses count and in what way (as electives, general education courses, or major courses). Adviser meetings usually do not occur until after a student has matriculated and may not occur during the first semester if the student does not take the initiative to set up a meeting.

## **Transfer Transition Part 2**

Once students have been accepted at the institution of their choice and decide to transfer there, they begin the second part of the transfer transition:

becoming a student at the receiving institution. To a certain extent, this part of transfer transition begins with the campus's official orientation program, which may or may not include a specific orientation for transfer students. At this university, orientation is known as Summer (or Winter) Welcome and is designed for beginning first-year university students. There is also a Transfer Day for transfer students. However, transfer students can choose to attend Summer/Winter Welcome in lieu of Transfer Day. After orientation, transfer transition part 2 continues as students select and attend their first classes and seek to connect academically with faculty and socially with students on their new campus or institutional home.

Just as transfer students are experienced in the application process, they also bring experience as college students. Thus, they are unlike beginning first-year students in that they have already survived college life and shown they can succeed in an academic environment. Perhaps as a result, the dominant theme that emerged from the studies described in this chapter was that transfer students, whether they transferred from a community college or four-year school, “feel like a freshman again” in their lack of knowledge about how their new school works (for example, where students can and cannot park and under what conditions, where to go for course advising). Yet transfer students were explicit about not being first-year students and did not want to be treated like them. Transfer students' desired differential treatment included not rooming with freshmen because these students were just learning how to be college students, whereas transfer students already know how to be college students, although not yet at their new institution. In addition, the students in these focus groups and interviews perceived that as transfer students, they had different interests from first-year students. As one transfer student said, “I get back to my dorm at night and my freshman roommate just wants to go out partying, night after night. I'm past that.” Similarly, another said, “There's a big difference between eighteen and twenty. You do a lot of growing up after the first year of college.”

In adjusting to their new institution, those who had transferred from small campuses, especially community colleges, initially found the large size of the campus and the faculty's impersonal attitude somewhat daunting. Some community college transfers indicated they were not used to the apparent lack of interest of faculty in knowing who their students were or whether they came to class. Community college transfers were also more likely than four-year college transfers to indicate they had to stretch to meet this university's academic expectations. In these comments, community college students are indicating some of the factors—institutional size, faculty attitudes toward students, and academic expectations—that contribute to what is known as “transfer shock” (Hills, 1965), a much documented phenomenon that typically results in a lowered GPA the first semester on campus.

Occasionally a transfer student already has some friends or a family member at the receiving institution, in which case the social adjustment is easier than for individuals who do not know another soul on campus.

However, both sets of students are faced with having to find and make friends in a place where most students' friendships have already been formed, usually in the freshman year. This situation holds true for both two-year and four-year college transfer students.

None of the transfer students expressed a sense that they were not wanted on campus, although in some institutions, community college transfers are not viewed positively. Given some people's negative perceptions of the community college, students who transfer from it are sometimes devalued (Berger and Maloney, 2003). Four-year college transfer students apparently do not face this challenge; at least it has not been documented in the admittedly small literature about four-year college transfer students.

### **Suggestions for Facilitating the Transfer Transition**

Suggestions for facilitating the transfer transition are categorized in terms of student suggestions emerging from the focus groups and interviews and my suggestions building on those of students, yet addressed at a more general institutional level. Since only two-year colleges have the formal mission of preparing students for transfer, suggestions for what sending institutions can do to facilitate the transfer transition will be aimed at two-year colleges.

Student suggestions about what receiving institutions can do to facilitate the transfer transition reflect the nature of the receiving institution's student body. In the university in this chapter, its transfer transition efforts are framed within a primary focus on full-time, traditional-age students seeking a traditional collegiate experience. Many of the transfer students at this institution want this experience, as reflected in their suggestions as to what the institution can do to smooth their transition. Suggestions from students at a college or university where the majority of students are part-time commuter students, often with family responsibilities, would likely vary in some respects.

**Transfer Transition Part 1.** Students had few suggestions about how to improve the transfer process itself. Their one suggestion regarding financial aid was for more scholarships for transfer students. Four-year college transfer students were most vocal about this because no institutional scholarships were available to them, whereas community college students who transferred with an A.A. degree were eligible for some institutional aid. Students simply wanted all aspects of the application process, including the determination of financial aid and the acknowledgment of which credits would transfer and in what categories, to work smoothly and quickly.

At the two-year college or sending-institution level, students need to understand in advance of their transfer that some of their credits may not transfer. Understanding in advance is preferable to frustration when they arrive on campus and learn, for example, that the general statistics course they took at their prior college will not count in lieu of the required statistics for agricultural education students. Thus, two-year colleges can and

should partner with the four-year colleges or universities to which the bulk of their students transfer. The partnership can include efforts to develop a joint or co-admission process to facilitate early admissions, and efforts to develop programmatic articulation agreements so that community college students will know while at the two-year school which general education courses are appropriate for their intended major at the four-year school. Programmatic agreements, while time-consuming to develop, are a critical means to lower student frustration over the failure of prior earned credits to count toward their degree.

Not just administrators but also two-year and four-year college faculty need to work together on the articulation agreements. Faculty at two-year colleges need to understand the expectations of four-year college or university faculty in specific courses to ensure that the two-year college course will indeed prepare the transfer student for upper-division course work. Similarly, four-year faculty need to meet their two-year colleagues and feel confident that what two-year college students are learning will prepare them well for course work at the four-year institution.

**Transfer Transition Part 2.** Within the context of wanting to be treated as transfer students, not first-year students, transfer students wanted a Summer Welcome or orientation geared to them as transfer students. At the same time, some wanted elements of the freshman orientation in their orientation. For example, some wanted the opportunity to stay overnight instead of just having a half-day or one-day orientation. Students also suggested having other transfer students tell them about the campus and what they had done to adjust socially and academically to it. These same people could also serve as mentors to new transfer students. At the department level, students suggested that during the orientation, there could be a department reception for transfer students or a faculty dinner for all transfer students to demonstrate that faculty cared about these students. Both commuter and residential transfer students wanted a transfer orientation that emulated the one for freshmen by providing lots of opportunities for the students to get to know one another and form connections that will last beyond the orientation.

As another manifestation of not wanting to be treated like freshmen, transfer students who lived on campus suggested having a residence hall just for transfer students or perhaps a floor within each residence hall. Similarly, they wanted to room only with other transfer students, not with freshmen. Commuter transfer students wanted differentiation of their status by having a parking lot just for commuter transfer students and priority in receiving parking lot assignments.

Student suggestions to facilitate further academic and social adjustment at the receiving institution included having more TRIGs by departmental major. One student commented about walking into her first large class and seeing students grouped by their Greek membership or their freshman interest group membership. She suggested that being in a TRIG was a way to

have a sense of small group membership. Having more TRIG students would create a sense of a cross-campus TRIG community. This sense of community could be enhanced by having an end-of-the-semester party of all the TRIGs.

Several of the suggestions transfer students had for ways the institution could help them adjust socially included ways transfer students could meet one another besides in TRIGs. For example, there could be contact groups or even formal organizations especially for transfer students who are parents or who work full time or commute. The underlying assumption seemed to be that fellow transfer students would be seeking friends and thus would be more welcoming and friendlier than native students.

From an institutional perspective, it is important to concentrate on what a specific college or university can do to facilitate its transfer students' transition, whether this is a transition from the sending institution or to the receiving institution. To determine what its transfer students need, institutional faculty and staff need to ascertain the students' specific issues and concerns and suggestions for improvement. Focus groups and individual interviews, the methods used to gather the information in this chapter, are important means of ascertaining students' perceptions of their experiences and can provide helpful information.

In ascertaining students' transfer transition needs, it is also important to distinguish between issues affecting any college student's needs versus the needs and issues unique to transfer students. For example, almost all students, undergraduate and graduate, at this university complain about the parking situation; there simply are not enough parking spots to accommodate all the students, and many are a mile or more away from the campus. Similarly, almost all of the institution's new students (first-year, transfer, and graduate students) complain about not understanding where to park and under what conditions. Thus, parking frustrations are a shared student experience, cutting across class year and transfer status. While students can suggest increased parking spaces to facilitate their experience as transfer students, it is unlikely that this institution can or will heed this suggestion. However, it could do a better job of helping students to understand in advance of the first day of classes where to park and under what conditions.

Among issues unique to transfer students at the receiving institution, it is important to distinguish between issues unique to four-year-college transfer students versus two-year-college transfer students. For example, both groups of transfer students wanted more scholarships, but four-year-college transfer students were particularly frustrated about the lack of scholarships, because some had given up institutional scholarships at their sending institution to attend this university, which has no institutional aid for four-year-college transfers.

In short, institutional efforts at facilitating transfer transition should be based on the needs of their particular transfer students. Both two-year and

four-year school faculty and staff should seek student advice as to how to improve both parts of the transfer transition.

## Conclusion

Transfer students are experienced college goers. They have already gone through the college application process at least once before beginning another application process in order to transfer. They have also been students at another college or university before going to their receiving institution, so they know how to be college students. However, at their new institution, they may “feel like a freshman again,” because they need to learn how to be students in a new place. They need to learn how the new campus operates bureaucratically, academically, and socially (Poisel and Stinard, 2006).

Their adjustment time is probably shorter than that of first-year students and can certainly be facilitated by institutional efforts to ease their transition. Whatever the extent and nature of transfer students in an institution’s student body, campus leaders must commit to smoothing their transition and helping them move successfully through the period of “feeling like a freshman again.”

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