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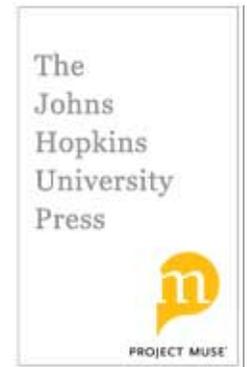
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# “A Hand Hold for A Little Bit”: Factors Facilitating the Success of Community College Transfer Students to a Large Research University

Barbara K. Townsend    Kristin B. Wilson

*To understand factors affecting the academic and social integration of community college transfer students, we interviewed 19 students who transferred to one state's large Research-Extensive university. We inquired about the transfer process, efforts of the university to orient and assist them, and perceptions of the university versus the community college. Findings indicate that community college transfer students may need more assistance initially than they are given, partly because of the large size of the university. In addition, transfers from community colleges need to understand how a research institution's institutional mission affects faculty and student behavior. Student affairs staff may need to lead the way in fulfilling four-year institutions' responsibility for integrating community college transfers into the fabric of the institution.*

In the past few decades, higher education leaders have become attentive to the importance of academic and social integration in facilitating students' academic success and degree attainment, particularly at institutions whose student body is traditional-age and primarily residential (Astin, 1993; Braxton, Sullivan, & Johnson, 1997; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, 2005; Tinto, 1993). Consequently, institutional leaders have supported the development of institutional practices such as learning communities and first-year seminars, practices that enable entering students and faculty to know one another more fully than in large lecture halls. The underlying

assumption behind each of these practices is that the more students are involved in or integrated into college life, the greater the likelihood they will stay in college and attain their degree (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 1993; 1997).

At the same time that institutional leaders are focusing on the academic and social integration of their first-year students to ensure their retention and academic success, they also have begun to focus on increasing the baccalaureate attainment of community college transfer students. Given current limitations on some four-year colleges' institutional capacity as well as rapidly escalating tuition costs, students entering higher education through the public sector are increasingly likely to begin their college education at two-year colleges. After a year or two at a community college, many students seek to transfer to a four-year school and attain a baccalaureate. While preparing students academically to transfer to four-year colleges or universities and facilitating that transfer has always been a major responsibility of community colleges, four-year institutions are increasingly being viewed as also responsible for students' successful transfer and transition (Berger & Malaney, 2003; Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt & Associates, 2005; Weschler, 1989). After helping these students transfer, the receiving institutions are responsible for orienting, advising, and providing support services to them (Kerr, King, & Grites, 2004) as well as

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ensuring their academic success by providing opportunities for the academic and social integration deemed necessary for their retention (Tinto, 1993). Unfortunately, transfer students are often ignored in retention efforts (Kuh et al.), including activities as basic as orientation to the campus (Herman & Lewis, 2004).

Therefore, the purpose of this study was to ascertain the perceptions of current community college transfer students about institutional factors that influenced their fit within the receiving institution, including the transfer process, orientation to the university, and social and academic experiences there as compared to those in the community college.

### Conceptual Framework

Tinto's (1993) theory of factors affecting student retention has greatly influenced retention efforts in the past couple decades. He posits that undergraduate students' persistence is influenced not only by their own characteristics, goals, and commitments but also by their experiences academically and socially while in college. Academic experiences include interaction with staff and with faculty both inside and outside the classroom as well as engaging classroom learning experiences. Social interactions within the academic system include both formal or institutionally provided co-curricular activities and informal interactions with peers in residential facilities or other institutional settings such as a place to study. These social and academic interactions contribute to a student's sense of belonging to the institution. With sufficient academic and social integration into the educational community, students will likely persist, unless external commitments or changing intentions and goals work against their persistence in a particular institution or even in higher education itself.

Institutional leaders have taken to heart this perspective and, largely through the efforts of student affairs staff, often in partnership with some faculty, have concentrated institutional efforts on retaining first-year students into the next year through such activities as residential learning communities, freshman interest groups, and first-year seminars. Far fewer efforts have been exerted to ensure the retention and success of community college transfer students (Herman & Lewis, 2004; Kuh et al., 2005).

One factor affecting transfer itself is the creation and maintenance of articulation agreements, whether at the state, institutional, or programmatic level. There is abundant literature about the value of these agreements in facilitating what is termed a "seamless transfer," which generally means transfer without loss of credits (Pitter, 1999). Although this phrase alludes to transfer of credits, it could also be viewed as an ideal for the literal transfer and integration of community college students into the receiving institution. Factors affecting or facilitating this kind of seamless transfer include advising by both the sending and receiving institutions, orientation to and availability of support services at the four-year institution, and opportunities for transfer students to become socially and academically integrated into the receiving institution. Tinto's (1993) theory of academic retention suggests factors necessary for academic and social integration and thus a relatively seamless transfer into the fabric of the receiving institution.

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Tinto's (1993) theory about student retention has particularly been applied in studies about the academic and social integration of students entering as first-year students into large

universities (Braxton et al., 1997). However, little of this research focuses on the actual integration experiences of students. Most is quantitative research using grade point average (GPA) or graduation rates as a proxy for integration. Also, what is striking about this research is that almost none of it has been conducted on students once they transfer to another institution. Instead, research that looks at transfer students' success focuses largely on quantitative measures of their academic performance at the four-year institution: GPA after one semester for evidence of "transfer shock" (Hills, 1965) or a decline in GPA, exit GPA, baccalaureate attainment, and time to degree. Typically the studies include selected student demographic characteristics such as gender and race/ethnicity as well as performance or behavioral characteristics such as number of transferred hours and entering GPA to see if there is a relationship between these characteristics and outcome variables like time to degree (e.g., Carlan & Byxbe, 2000; Glass & Harrington, 2002; Koker & Hendel, 2003; Saupe & Long, 1996). Occasionally studies are conducted at the national level (e.g., Dougherty, 1992) or state level (e.g., Arnold, 2001), but more typically researchers conduct institutional-level studies that examine the performance of transfers from a particular community college to a particular four-year college (e.g., Angelin, Davis, & Mooradian, 1995; Townsend, McNerney, & Arnold, 1993), all community college transfers to a particular four-year state institution or system (e.g., Glass & Harrington; Whitfield, 2005), or all two- and four-year college transfers to a particular institution (e.g., Berger & Malaney, 2003; Holahan, Green, & Kelley, 1983; House, 1989). These studies typically document the transfer shock that Hills first identified. Some find that community college transfers attain

the baccalaureate at about the same rate or have approximately the same exit GPA as native students (e.g., Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges, 1989); others find that community college transfer students are less successful (e.g., House). At the national level "about 70% of students who transfer from two- to four-year colleges after taking at least a semester's worth of credits receive a baccalaureate degree" (Wellman, 2002, p. 8).

While studies have found some demographic differences in student performance after transfer, the behavioral differences that can potentially be rectified through advising and support services merit particular attention by institutional administrators. For example, knowing that two-year college students who transfer with an associate of arts degree are the most likely to complete the baccalaureate and in the shortest time (e.g., Carlan & Byxbe, 2000; Glass & Harrington, 2002) is useful information for community college advisors and four-year college admissions directors and advisors.

Some research has focused on the experiences of students during the transfer process and at the receiving institution. Occasionally researchers look at just one aspect of the transfer student experience such as the transfer process or orientation programs at the receiving institution (e.g., Davies & Casey, 1998; Herman & Lewis, 2004; Jacobs, Busby, & Leath, 1992). Other researchers examine transfer students' perceptions of their experiences at the receiving institution (e.g., Townsend, 1995).

Most of the studies have similar findings. Transfer students perceive both community colleges and the receiving institutions as needing to improve the transfer process by providing more information, which must be accurate, and aiding potential transfer students in understanding which community college

courses will transfer (Davies & Casey, 1998). Initial efforts by the receiving institution to orient students are typically limited to a one-day orientation, which not all students attend, and there is little or no effort to provide other assistance in making the initial transition (Jacobs et al., 1992). Students desire more help from the receiving institution after they transfer, e.g., more information about campus resources and outside-of-class opportunities to meet other students. Students also consider community college faculty as more caring, helpful, and interested in their students than are university faculty (Bauer & Bauer, 1994; Townsend, 1995; Vaala, 1991). Perceptions about their academic preparation at the community college are generally positive, with most studies (Bauer & Bauer; Davies & Casey; Jacobs et al.; Vaala) finding students satisfied with their preparation although concerned about heavier academic workloads at their new institution. At large receiving institutions, transfer students often feel anonymous and have difficulty in making social connections with fellow students, as well as academic connections with faculty (Britt & Hirt, 1999; Harbin, 1997; Vaala).

Not only are the findings fairly similar across these studies; so also are the implications for practitioners. Typically, researchers urge two-year college faculty and administrators to do a better job of preparing students for transfer, including making them more aware of what university classes will be as compared to community college classes (e.g., Townsend, 1995) as well as developing transfer centers that will facilitate the process of transfer. Even in recent studies whose authors emphasize the importance of four-year schools facilitating transfer students' adjustment, the recommendations for practice at the four-year level are limited and focus primarily on four-year schools providing community colleges with current information about admissions and

institutional expectations; they may also focus upon certain demographic variables such as race and gender that may affect a transfer student's success (Berger & Malaney, 2003). Since these demographic characteristics are inherent to individuals, a focus on them does not seem as productive as would a focus on what four-year colleges could do to facilitate success after transfer.

Many of the above studies were conducted during the 1990s, with some even older. Despite this research indicating what problems community college transfers have experienced in the transfer process and after process, the extent to which either two-year or four-year institutions have worked to rectify these problems is not clear. Given the emerging emphasis on the responsibility of four-year institutions in helping transfer students succeed, as well as the long standing emphasis on the academic and social integration of students to ensure academic success, it is important to continue studying the experiences of community college transfer students. New studies may indicate whether the transfer process itself has improved for these students and what institutional factors currently contribute to or hinder transfer students' academic and social integration into the receiving institution. Thus, as indicated earlier, this study sought to determine the perceptions of one set of community college transfer students about (a) the transfer process itself, including the level of assistance provided by the sending and receiving institutions; (b) university services, including orientation, for transfer students; and (c) similarities and differences between the institutions in terms of students' academic and social experiences at them.

## METHOD

This was a qualitative study relying upon generic qualitative interview methods to

answer our research questions (Merriam, 1998). A qualitative approach is used when "little is known" about a phenomenon, or, as in this study, when there is interest in gaining new perspectives about a phenomenon "about which much is known" already (Stern, 1980, as cited in Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 11). While there have been various studies looking at the experiences of community college transfer students, none have focused specifically upon the phenomenon of students transferring from small community colleges to a large university oriented to full-time, traditional-age, residential students, although size of the receiving institution has occasionally been noted as being problematic for transfers. In this study, size of the receiving institution as well as the nature of its student body and its institutional mission provide the institutional context typically ignored in other studies even if identified in the study (e.g., Glass & Harrington, 2002).

To answer our research questions, which were drawn from a study conducted by Townsend (1995), we interviewed students who transferred to a large research university. The university is a selective, Research-Extensive university in a suburban setting. A public land-grant university, it had a fall 2004 on-campus headcount enrollment of over 25,000 students (20,166 on-campus undergraduates and 5,361 on-campus graduate and professional students). Of its more than 1,300 undergraduate transfers in fall 2004, 33% were from community colleges in the state. The undergraduate student body consists largely of White (84.7% in fall 2003), traditional-age students who attend full-time (93%) and live on or near campus. In contrast the community colleges in this state had an average of less than 5,000 full-time equivalent credit students during 2003-04. Some of the colleges in rural areas had limited student housing, typically for no more than 200 students.

The students interviewed were solicited from the total population of students who were classified as transfer students (students transferring in at least 24 credit hours) coming from a community college located in the same state as the university, and who attended the university during the 2003-04 academic year. Some transfer students had attended two or more colleges before matriculating at the university, but the last institution attended prior to the university was an in-state two-year college.

Because the university in the study was interested in its transfer students' perceptions, it provided us with a list of all community college transfer students enrolled during summer 2004 and fall 2004. Initially we contacted only those enrolled during the summer to participate in the study, but to increase the number of participants, we also contacted students who enrolled during the fall. One of the researchers sent an e-mail to each student to explain the study and request the student's participation. Students who initially agreed to participate received another e-mail to arrange the interview, intended to last between 30 minutes and 1 hour.

Forty-five students initially agreed to participate, but only 19 set up an interview appointment and also kept it. Among the 19 were 9 women and 10 men. Two self-identified as minority and five as older (mid to late 20s and hereafter referred to as nontraditional age). Ten had completed the associate of arts degree.

After each participant signed a consent form, one of the researchers conducted and taped each interview. The interview consisted of 14 questions, a few of which began with a close-ended question such as, "Did you receive any assistance from the community college when you decided to transfer to the university?" and "Did you attend transfer student orientation at the university?" When participants said yes to any of the close-ended

questions, they were asked to elaborate. We chose this approach to save participants' time for responding to questions eliciting a positive response. Time was of concern because several of the people agreeing to be interviewed indicated they did not have an hour but would answer what questions they could in the time they had. The average time for the interviews, not counting the time to secure written consent and answer preliminary questions regarding the study was approximately 40 minutes, with five lasting only 15–20 minutes and five taking well over an hour.

After the tapes were transcribed, each of us tallied responses to the close-ended questions and coded all elaborations to them. We also coded all responses to the open-ended questions in terms of themes emerging from several readings of the interview data (Bogden & Biklen, 2002; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). After developing general categories of codes or themes, each of us, working independently, used axial coding to group related categories or themes to make sense of the data (Creswell, 1994). We then met several times to discuss what were the general categories or themes and how they related to one another. When we differed about particular points, we looked together at the transcript in question and discussed it until consensus was reached (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2003).

As a measure of the trustworthiness of the data, the researchers sought "analyst triangulation" (Patton, 2002, p. 556) through formal presentation of the findings to the university's enrollment management team and its Advisors' Forum. When these individuals heard the student voices through readings of quotations from the transcripts, many said they had heard similar statements from transfer students. Occasionally a staff member would indicate that a response seemed atypical from her/his experience in working with these students, and

we kept this perspective in mind when analyzing the data.

## FINDINGS

We present students' perceptions about the following areas: (a) extent of assistance received at the community college and at the university in the transfer process, (b) university efforts to orient and assist students after transfer, and (c) comparison of the community college and the university in terms of experiences with faculty and students inside and outside the classroom.

### Transfer Process

We defined the transfer process in this study to include students' determining to which institution to transfer, securing its application, completing and submitting it, sending transcripts, and learning which community college credits would be accepted in transfer and how they would fit into the degree requirements for the desired university program.

*Assistance From the Community College.* Several of the students had similar perceptions about the role of the community college in the transfer process, as these typical quotes illustrate:

I felt like you were on your own, as far as making a decision to see an advisor, or set up a program of study, and if you go see an advisor, they could give you advice, but the most practical advice they'd give you was to call [the university], or where ever you were looking to transfer to. . . . I recall feeling frustrated they couldn't help me any more than they could. (traditional-age male)

. . . they didn't want to help me find out what I needed to transfer, what credits would transfer over to [a different university than the one in the study]. . . . They didn't want to work with me . . . it

was just very frustrating, and I didn't really know what to do. . . . I don't think she [the community college advisor] was very informed about . . . how she should be advising me. (traditional-age female)

I went . . . to my college and I asked about them about . . . [the transfer scholarship available at the university] and they said there is no such thing. So from then on I didn't trust them with anything because if they didn't know . . . about the scholarship they're not going to know much about the whole transfer process. (traditional-age, minority female)

Thirteen of the 19 students stated they did not receive assistance from the community college; however, only 4 said they asked for help. As one traditional-age female student said, "I didn't ask for help as to what do I do. . . . I did everything online basically." Over half used the Internet to obtain the university's application or to determine which courses would transfer. Another said, "What was most helpful to me in the transfer process was the [university] course equivalencies website. So I did most of my planning based on that" (traditional-age male).

*Assistance From the University.* Most of the students perceived they had received assistance from the university in the transfer process. Students indicated they had worked with an advisor in the college they would be entering to determine what would transfer or they had attended one of the formal welcome programs for new students. However, as at the community college, an occasional student did not ask for help partly because as one traditional-age male said, "I didn't really know where to ask, or who to ask."

### **University's Efforts to Orient and Initially Assist Transfer Students**

Once students have been accepted into the university and have decided to transfer, the

university provides two kinds of formal efforts to orient them: a Summer or Winter Welcome program for all new undergraduates and a Transfer Student Welcome, an orientation specifically for transfer students. Sixteen of the 19 students attended one of the welcome programs: 4 attended Summer or Winter Welcome and 12 attended Transfer Welcome. Comments about the Transfer Welcome included the following:

I would have liked to have heard from someone that had actually gone through or is going through [being a transfer student] . . . versus someone that is teaching about it. (traditional-age female)

I'd like just more general advice, like, get to know your professors real quick, and what you can do to prepare [for graduate school] . . . as a transfer here, you're closer to graduation than a freshman [is], so you've got to immediately start thinking about graduate school and how to get in there and what to do. (traditional-age male)

Independent of these formal university efforts to orient transfer students, some students had other thoughts about what the university could do to assist them:

I would have liked to have seen a course or something to just kind of prepare you as far as class sizes, because the school I came from I was never used to having more than 40 people in a class . . . and it took awhile to adjust to the bigger class sizes. (traditional-age female)

Probably the most helpful would have been something to tell you the study habits of community college versus the university are a lot different. It wouldn't have to be very long because we obviously know how to study, but something to kind of show you the difference in how to do that. (traditional-age male)

They could help by letting people know

more about the campus, not just the buildings and what goes on, but what types of services are available and also like different hidden fees . . . I didn't know I had to pay for parking. I didn't know I had to park off campus. (nontraditional-age, minority female)

I think what they [university staff members working with transfers] need to do is . . . realize that transfers are a pretty sizable chunk of incoming class each year . . . and we need to extend things out to them. They're going to need as much of *a hand hold for a little bit* [italics added] as the freshman, maybe a little bit less over the course of the year, but especially just getting in . . . like one or two days just going around learning how things work, where the places are, where you go to register, where you go to file a graduation plan, how you drop a class. . . . All this stuff is stuff that freshmen get told, and the transfer students don't know. (nontraditional-age male)

Similarly, another student said:

I had to find everything on my own. I had to find where the shuttle picks people up, where they leave, and that was intimidating. I had a friend who went here and he took me around and he showed me. . . . I think [the university] fails because they think that because we've been through college already, we're more mature and we should find our way around and we don't need any assistance, but really we're pretty much like freshmen when we come up here 'cause we're new, so I think they should be friendlier, maybe like give you your schedule and have somebody show you where these places are and tell you where you can get your parking permit and not just tell you on a piece of paper, but maybe have somebody take you there and kind of *hold your hand through it* [italics added]. (traditional-age, minority female)

## Academic Integration

When asked their perceptions of faculty, students had various thoughts about their interaction with faculty at the community college versus those at the university. For example, one student said:

. . . here you kind of feel like you're a number because the professors don't know you. Whereas in the classroom at the junior college . . . you really felt like they knew you . . . if you just really asked a question, it was more like a discussion between you and the professor because you knew the professor, and the professor knew you. (traditional-age male)

Several had similar reactions:

I think the faculty seem really good up here . . . .sometimes I think it's harder to get to know a faculty member at a big university like [this one]; at the junior college I had a pretty close relationship with a lot of instructors . . . sometimes even on a first-name basis. Here I don't feel that's as acceptable and I think it's harder to get to know your professors too in that kind of personal way. (traditional-age male)

[The] Community College was nice because there was . . . a little bit more, I guess, one-on-one time if you needed it with the professors. A little laid back atmosphere than [here with] teachers running back and forth from class to class to grad students to TAs, to office hours, their grants, their funding, whatever they're doing. (nontraditional-age male)

. . . as far as just going up to the instructor whenever and talking to them, it seemed like they would be more available at [the community college] than they are here. That's just because [the community college] is a lot smaller place and you know you can run into each other easily. (traditional-age male)

However, not all students had this view. One said:

You always hear these stories . . . that [at the university] you have these huge classes and your professors don't care and they're busy with their research. I didn't have that problem at all. Every professor I've had—even the ones in the big 250-to-300-person lecture halls—it's been obvious to me that they were interested. (non-traditional-age female)

A few described interaction or involvement with faculty in terms of homework assignments:

In the community college we had more [assignments]. . . we actually turned in our homework or were responsible for having things done where here you can go a whole semester and never have to turn in anything. You just have your test. I think that [the community college approach] got me in the habit of keeping up on my homework. Just because I had to do there to get it checked off or whatever. So I think I did it. It helped me a lot to just keep up on a weekly or daily basis. Where here, sometimes you'll have three or four weeks of lecture with nothing to be accountable for except when you get to the test and it's real easy to let yourself fall behind in that situation. (nontraditional-age female)

It was kind of a shock for me to come up here and find [there are] two papers and a test and that will be your entire basis for your grade . . . it seems to put a lot more stress as far as the work that you put into the class for these assignments and making sure it is absolutely perfect because if you mess up on the paper, it could screw you up for the entire class. (traditional-age female)

A couple others attributed greater interaction with community college faculty partly to differences in attendance policies between the community college and the university:

Here . . . nobody would notice you exist, so, it's just kind of discouraging when you're trying to get ready at 8:00 in the morning and, you're like, well, they're not going to know I'm there, you know, so you have to make yourself come to school here, whereas over there [at the community college], if you don't go, they drop you, so you have to do it here for yourself. (traditional-age minority female)

Similarly, another student said, "Here they don't care if you're there or not [in class], I mean, it's, it's unfortunate but . . . you're just a number" (nontraditional-age female).

However, one student had a somewhat different perspective on faculty's attitude toward attendance:

I guess you can say that here teachers don't care [because they don't take attendance] but that's really true for any college. Once you've paid your money they don't care what you do. If you don't want to come, it's your own thing. That's your issue. (nontraditional-age male)

Some students perceived university faculty as less interested in teaching than were their community college faculty:

You can definitely tell that there are some professors here at [the university] that are here for research, not for teaching. And it comes out the way they teach. In the community college, they're not going to do any research; they're there to help the students. (nontraditional-age female)

It's really one of the first times I've dealt with the concept of the professor doing more research than actually teaching, then being perhaps more concerned with the research of their personal grant than the classes they are teaching. And it's a bit unnerving because you go from a community college where the professors there have one mission and that is to teach and to help you to learn the stuff and they enjoy teaching . . . and you turn around

and you come here and there are professors that you can tell would rather be anywhere else than where they are. (nontraditional-age male)

Obviously they [university professors] are here for a reason. A lot of research. I do find that . . . in the introductory classes that I had to take, it's kind of no one wants to teach them, and I found some of the professors just kind of do it because they have to, they're more into research (traditional-age male).

## Social Integration

Some students expressed more difficulty in making friends at the university than at the community college. As one student noted, "It's hard if you don't know people here. If you have friends and stuff, but if you don't live in the dorms, you don't know people" (traditional-age female). Similarly, other students said:

There's just so many people [in a class]. You sit down next to one person one day and you start a conversation with them and you feel like you're friends and you want to sit down [next to them] the next time you come to class and you have no idea where they are because you're in a 400-person lecture hall. (traditional-age male)

Coming as a transfer student . . . it just kind of seems like there're already groups, you know, that have been established since like freshman year and there's this kind of bond, and sometimes there doesn't seem to be too much of an interest . . . in adding some more people. (traditional-age female)

I haven't been able to find my niche or really fit in; it just really seems like I go to class and that's it. . . . I feel this campus is very cliquish and that if you aren't a Greek or in the swim team . . . of if you don't belong to something, really you

don't have a good opportunity to meet and mingle with people. (nontraditional-age minority female)

In comparison, at the community college "you really get to know everybody in your class . . . and it's kind of personal and you just get to know a person you have fun with. . . . You really get to know more people in that smaller atmosphere" (traditional-age female).

For some of the traditional-age students, social integration was easier at the community college because when they started there, they already had a social network. As one student said,

Most of the kids that went . . . [to her community college] were from neighboring high schools, so it wasn't unusual for you to . . . have 30 people that you knew because you went to school with them, and so it was easy for you to know people and meet new people. (traditional-age female)

In contrast, one traditional-age male felt the university was

a lot more sociable. . . . I think a lot more people work while going to community college, so a lot of people are in a hurry. They don't really want to take the time to socialize, everyone has their own same friends from home too versus when you go away to college, everyone wants to make friends.

Social integration at the community college was also easier for one nontraditional-age female but for different reasons than those expressed by traditional-age students:

In the community college there were a lot more people like myself that were either working and going to school or coming back to school after a long break. I feel very old and out of place here sometimes . . . I might find one or two other people that have kids or are return-

ing after a break from school, so this is a very different age group.

One form of social integration, albeit with an academic dimension, is the development of study groups. A couple of the transfers wished to form study groups, a practice they were accustomed to in the community college, but could not find native students willing to participate. As one student said,

At the community college in every class you could get a study group together. Here it's a little harder, it's almost like they don't want to do study groups, and I'm hoping that once I go to higher level classes that there will be students who want to get study groups together. . . . It was just a lot easier to study together [at the community college]. (traditional-age female)

## DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

As with all qualitative studies, the results of this study are specific to the particular university in the study and can only be suggestive for other institutions. It may also be that the particular group of students who chose to participate in this study had a different perspective than the majority of community college transfers at the institution. However, most of the findings in this study are similar to those in other studies of community college transfers, regardless of the transfer students' country (e.g., Vaala, 1991), state, or receiving institution (e.g., Berger & Malaney, 2003). At the same time, the impact of the receiving university's size upon students' perceptions of faculty and certain institutional practices may be more dramatic than in some institutions because the sending community colleges in this particular state are so small in comparison to the receiving university.

As illustrated by the experiences of students in this study, the process of transfer,

at least in terms of transfer of credits, seems to be less problematic than it was for some students in earlier studies. In other words, the ideal of seamless transfer in terms of credit transfer was the reality for the students in this study, although they did not comprehend the institutional efforts necessary to achieve this seamless transfer in terms of developing articulation agreements. Seamless transfer of credit may also have been facilitated because of the ready availability of the results of these agreements through institutional websites detailing what courses would transfer from what institutions and how they would fit into university programs. The development of such websites has helped change the dynamics of the transfer of credits, with students less dependent upon institutional representatives to inform them about what courses will transfer. Additionally the receiving institution's website about how to apply and what form to use contributed to many students saying they had done most or all of the work involved in the transfer process.

Articulation agreements can serve to ensure smooth or seamless transfer of credits, but they do not suffice to ensure the academic success of students after transfer. Advising and orientation programs at the receiving institution are one strategy to assist transfer students in making a good start at their new institution. The students in this study were generally pleased with the university's advising and formal orientation programs, although they had several suggestions for information they would like to receive, whether at the orientation or in some other venue. Satisfaction with advising and institutional orientation programs is likely to vary across institutions, although recent national efforts to focus on them for community college transfer students, efforts such as the recent National Academic Advising Association

monograph (Kerr, King, & Grites, 2004), may be helping receiving institutions improve their advising and orientation programs for transfers.

What seems clear from this study, as well as previous studies of community college transfers (e.g., Britt & Hirt, 1999; Davies & Casey, 1998), is that at least some community college transfers, after successfully completing the transfer process, find their new institution an awkward fit, at least initially. For some students the fit might have been easier if they had received “a hand hold for a little bit” during their first few weeks or semester at the university.

One reason some students may have needed a hand hold initially may be because of the difference in size between the university and the community colleges in the state where the study took place. Given the community colleges’ small size in comparison to the university, these students’ fit within the university may have been particularly problematic. Accustomed to small institutions and small classes and faced, after transfer, with a “huge” university with large lecture courses, these students may have more difficulty in integrating themselves academically and socially than would transfers from larger community colleges. In this study negative comments about university faculty were usually linked to class size: Students saw the professors in large lecture classrooms as not caring about whether students attended class and disinterested in teaching them.

Two other aspects of the receiving institution likely affected the ability of some of the transfer students to integrate socially within it. The university caters to traditional-age college students who attend full time and live on or near the campus. The first-year to second-year retention rate is over 86%, partly because of major institutional efforts to involve

first-year students academically and socially. In this particular study, the nontraditional-age transfer students, finding few like themselves, perceived the lack of older undergraduates as affecting their ability to make social connections. Some of the traditional-age transfer students also had difficulty establishing new friendships because they were entering a community where many friendships had been established during the first year, partly through the university’s formal efforts to integrate first-year students into the institution through such activities as residential learning communities and freshman interest groups. University students who bonded together during the first year in school may have little interest in expanding their social groups and making new friends. Also, they may not be accustomed to finding friends in large lecture classes because they have developed friendships elsewhere, e.g., residence halls, participation in co-curricular activities. Thus it may be that the university’s efforts to help native students form friendships and connections may render more difficult transfer students’ social integration with these students.

Furthermore, the community college transfer students were accustomed to the classroom as a site for social as well as academic engagement. Expecting to find a community of other learners within the classroom, some of the community college transfers were frustrated by their anonymity in large lecture classes and by the unwillingness of other students to form study groups. Perhaps their frustration level with these aspects was higher than if they had been native students because the community college students were used to some academic involvement and integration in the community college, so not finding it quickly and easily at the receiving institution was more problematic for them.

Another important institutional charac-

teristic affecting student perceptions, particularly of academic involvement, is the research mission of the university. Classified in 2000 by the Carnegie Foundation as a Research-Extensive university, it is also a member of the American Association of Universities. Faculty receive promotion and tenure primarily because of their research publications and presentations and grants, not because of their teaching evaluations. Thus many faculty do indeed concentrate on their research, potentially at the expense of time to talk with students after class. Some students in this study were very aware that their university faculty did research, although how the students knew this is unclear. Regardless of the source of this information, e.g., the professors themselves or promotional material about the university, students did not indicate they saw a value in having faculty who conducted research in what they were teaching. Rather, some saw faculty's time spent on research as time not spent on caring about students or teaching. Thus it is not clear whether these community college transfer students understand the nature of the institution to which they chose to transfer. Not only is it much larger in size than their previous institutions, but its mission and consequent institutional culture are substantially different.

Learning itself was the lost theme in that students did not comment directly about it. Students did not talk about what they were learning or how interesting or boring the material was but rather concentrated on procedures or conditions that hindered their learning, like large class size and teaching assistants instead of professors. Generally, students did not discuss how much they learned or the impact of what they learned on their thinking or behavior. Overall, students were more likely to discuss procedural issues

as in test-taking rather than their academic engagement in university-level work.

### Implications for Research

Based on the findings from this study, two directions for future research would seem fruitful. One direction would be to focus on aspects of the college choice process when asking transfer students about their fit within the receiving institution. As community college students were deciding where to transfer, were they aware of differences between two-year and four-year institutions besides tuition costs, level of courses offered, and degrees awarded? Did they understand that large research universities would have less of a focus on teaching than did their community colleges, and if so, what effect this different focus might have upon their classroom and faculty interactions? Or did they assume all higher education institutions were similar in teaching orientation? Understanding the institutional perceptions of community college students prior to transfer to particular institutions may provide information useful to four-year institutions during the recruitment process as well as after the students have transferred.

Future research could also pinpoint more precisely students' efforts to integrate themselves socially and academically both before and after transfer. For example, students could be asked if they had participated in co-curricular activities at the community college and whether they wanted to do so at the receiving institution. Similarly, students could be asked if they had tried to talk with faculty after class about non-academic matters and how successful these efforts were. It may be that transfer students are not being proactive in efforts to become integrated into the institution. Also, we need to continue to ask students what the receiving institution can do

to facilitate this integration. Many four-year institutions may provide services to assist transfer students but the students do not utilize them. For example, at the university in this study, there are some interest groups for transfer students, but when initially contacted to join these groups, students frequently decline. Students could be asked what can be done to encourage greater use of these services and activities.

### Implications for Practice

The increasing development and use of articulation agreements is leading to greater seamless transfer of credits. However, the literal or physical transfer of the student into the receiving institution is more problematic, especially when the sending and receiving institutions are so different in their approaches to and expectations about academic and social integration. To facilitate a more seamless transfer of the student, institutional leaders could improve several aspects, ranging from the transfer process itself to the academic and social integration of community college transfers once at the receiving institution.

*Transfer Process.* During the late 1980s and into the 1990s, calls for institutional assistance in the transfer process resulted in the creation of community college transfer centers, partly as repositories for information about institutions to which community college students might reasonably be expected to transfer (e.g., Weschler, 1989; Zamani, 2001). According to the students in this study, their community colleges did not seem to have this information. Additionally, a search of these institutions' websites did not indicate any official centers for transfer. Rather, information about transfer was available through academic advising centers, counseling and career services, or student development offices. Why these community colleges do not have actual transfer

centers is beyond the scope of this study. At the same time, it may be that having transfer centers with information available in paper format is less necessary in this Internet age. Over half the students in this study used the Internet to download the university's application and to determine on their own which community college courses would transfer, whether as electives or for the university major. Given the importance of the Internet in helping students transfer to another college, it is vital that institutions not only keep their articulation agreements current (Berger & Malaney, 2003), but also post the current ones on the web page in a timely manner.

*Orientation of Transfer Students.* The university in this study and perhaps other institutions similar in size may need to reexamine and rethink the approach to orienting transfer students. Some transfer students may need more of a hand hold during their initial weeks, particularly those accustomed to small campuses where it is easier to find out what to do and how to do it. More individual attention may be needed for these students, given the large class sizes that seem to work against the academic and social integration so vital to student retention (Tinto, Goodsell, & Russo, 1993). Also, institutions should not assume that transfer students are uninterested in co-curricular activities. Information about co-curricular activities and ways to join them should be available during a formal orientation session, with a list of names and numbers to contact. Those students interested in the information will be appreciative, while those not interested will ignore it, but at least the information will have been made available.

An important step for administrators at research universities to take is to include in the orientation information about the receiving institution's mission as opposed to that of

the community college. Community college transfer students are accustomed to small classes where students and professors know one another and where faculty concentrate on their teaching rather than on research. These are hallmarks of the community college. In moving to a research university with a different ethos about teaching and research, community college transfers have to change from one institutional culture to another. As part of the college choice process, community college students should have considered differences in institutional missions when determining to which institution to transfer. Also, community college advisors and faculty should discuss institutional differences in mission. As well, administrators at the research university need to clearly specify their institution's mission, including its implications for students' academic integration into the school. The value of having faculty who conduct research in the subjects they teach should be articulated, perhaps partly by transfer students who have participated in undergraduate research teams. Students should also be reminded that these faculty will teach the smaller classes in their major, bringing cutting-edge information and insights to the subject. Students' lack of understanding of the research university's mission may lessen their commitment to the institution and thus increase the likelihood they will leave, either to attend another school or to leave higher education (Tinto, 1993).

*Academic and Social Integration.* Professors teaching large classes can do several things to counteract the damaging effect of large classes on academic integration, whether of transfer students or of native students. Professors should be encouraged to use pedagogical techniques to enable students to get to know at least a few students in the class. For example, students could pair off occasionally to discuss a point or answer a conceptual question. The

instructor could then randomly ask for reports from a few pairs or small groups (MacGregor, Cooper, Smith, & Robinson, 2000). Instructors could also be encouraged to give more assignments in the class, even if only more Scantron-graded quizzes, to encourage academic involvement throughout the course, rather than at the end in preparation for the final.

Even if university faculty attempt to create small communities within large classes through various pedagogical techniques, these efforts may be marginally successful. Native students may even resist these techniques because they have other means to find a social community, particularly at residential campuses. Native students may have joined a Greek organization or become active in other student organizations during their first year or two in college. They may have developed friendships through their university's efforts to facilitate the retention of first-year student through orientation programs, freshman interest groups, first-year seminars, residential learning communities, and other activities focusing on freshman students. In other words, the very efforts research universities make to integrate new students may work against the integration of transfer students. Four-year institution administrators need to keep this possibility in mind when they work with transfer students.

The major responsibility for facilitating the academic and social integration of transfer students will likely fall to student affairs staff. One strategy for facilitating this integration could include developing some learning communities that are not residentially based and that include transfer students. Student affairs staff could also encourage individual colleges to have transfer student interest groups where students could meet other transfer students as well as a few student affairs staff and faculty in small group settings. These efforts at academic integration will also

facilitate social integration, which is more difficult for any student, transfer or native, at large campuses (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Social integration might also be facilitated by formally connecting native upper-division students with incoming transfers or by connecting experienced transfer students with new ones in a peer support system. Formal, active institutional efforts will be required to help community college transfer students develop a sense of belonging to the university community, both within and outside the classroom.

## CONCLUSION

Student fit within an institution is a complex matter that depends on the student's entering characteristics, the nature of the institution, and the student's amount and kinds of interactions within the institution, as well as the student's desired goals and outcomes of college attendance. The findings from this study suggest that the fit of transfer students within the receiving institution may be strongly impacted by cultural differences partly due to differences in the size of sending and receiving institutions and also due to differences in institutional mission. Having experienced one kind of higher education institution—the community college—transfers from this institution are used to a particular kind of institutional culture and may lack sufficient awareness of differences between its culture and those of four-year institutions, and particularly the culture of large research universities. While the phrase “transfer shock” has been used for several decades to describe an initial drop in GPA after a student transfers, the drop in GPA transfer shock may be partly or almost totally a manifestation of the shock experienced in moving from one institutional culture to another, especially when the two cultures are

so different. When community college students transfer to institutions so vastly different in culture from the sending school, uneasiness and frustration with the receiving institution is likely to result.

However, four-year college efforts to facilitate the fit of community college transfer students into the receiving institution have been minor in comparison to efforts to assist first-year students. These students typically receive the bulk of an institution's retention efforts through such strategies as first-year seminars, living-learning communities at residential campuses, and learning communities, or a set of related courses, on commuter campuses. Transfer students are more likely to be neglected or ignored in retention efforts (Berger & Malaney, 2003; Kuh et al., 2005) because, as one of the students in this study said, institutions “think that because we've been through college already, we're more mature and we should find our way around and we don't need any assistance.” However, as she noted, “We're pretty much like freshmen when we come up here 'cause we're new, so . . . it would be nice to have somebody take you where you need to go and kind of hold your hand through it.” Institutional leaders concerned about retention of transfer students should heed these words and develop helping strategies not only during the critical first few weeks for transfer students (Herman & Lewis, 2004; Kuh et al., 2005) but also long-term strategies to ensure their academic and social integration or fit within the institution. Given the importance of the baccalaureate degree to workforce entry into middle-class jobs, it is vital that transfer between community colleges and four-year colleges “works well” (Wellman, 2002, p. 7) and that community college transfers attain the baccalaureate.

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