

Transfer and transition: The challenges faced by transfer students and service best practices

A Review of the Literature prepared for the Transfer Services Team

Phil Lewis
May 2013

Introduction

There is increasing pressure to make the higher education system more accountable, with calls for funding formulas to be based upon completion of degree courses, rather than the more traditional enrollment numbers. In his 2020 agenda, President Obama called on colleges to set goals for completion in order to qualify for federal funding, a shift from the traditional enrollment-based funding formula (Field, 2010). The 2013 Strategic Plan for the University of North Carolina System puts forward a performance funding model that will reward campuses for improving in key areas, including graduation and retention rates (Strategic Directions, 2013). Performance-based funding has already had an impact on Appalachian's budget (Langdon, 2013). The charge to the Transfer Services Team includes researching national trends relating to transfer student success. This literature review considers some of the barriers transfer students face in their transition to a four-year institution, and best practices for overcoming these barriers.

Gelin (1999) notes that effective transfer is a function of both sending and receiving institutional policies, practices, and culture. These responsibilities include orienting, advising and providing support services, as well as providing opportunities for academic and social integration (Townsend & Wilson, 2006). As long as four-year institutions provide the academic and social supports necessary to ease the transition, there is no reason why transfer students should graduate at lower rates than native students (Melguzio et al, 2011; Townsend, 2008). Currently at Appalachian, the average cumulative GPA for transfer students at the end of their first year at Appalachian is slightly lower than that for native students – 2.85 as against 3.11. Additionally, the sophomore one-year persistence rate for transfer students is slightly lower than that for native students – 85.5%, compared to 90.1% (IRAP, 2012). How do we explain these differences, and what can be done to narrow the gap? Owens (2007) maintains that, in order to gain a clear understanding of student persistence at four-year institutions, those institutions need to determine the challenges students face when entering.

Transfer students exhibit a great range of diversity in terms of age, race, socioeconomic status, and previous educational experience. They bring a range of assumptions, frequently false, from their previous institution, which, if held onto, can hinder their navigating the new administrative bureaucracy (Tobowolsky & Cox, 2012). Transfer students do not want to be treated like freshmen, but their lack of knowledge about how their new institution functions often means that this is how they end up feeling anyway (Townsend & Wilson, 2006). This effect is compounded by the fact that, although transfer students are not always full-time, residential or traditionally aged, they are frequently served by programs based on that model. Additionally, eligibility criteria, deadlines and other policies related to services such as financial aid, on-campus housing, and honours programs are usually geared towards students entering as freshman (Kodama, 2002).

Transfer and Transition

To understand some of the challenges faced by transfer students when they transfer to a new institution, it is important to consider the process involved. There are two parts to the transfer transition: the process itself, involving course choices at the sending institution and the application

to the receiving institution; and the adjustment to the new institution once the student has transferred (Townsend, 2008). Hagedorn (2005) observes that the transfer process is influenced by institutional factors, as well as individual factors, such as success strategies and personal resources.

Institutional factors impacting the transfer process can occur at both the sending institution and the receiving institution. Packard et al (2012) list three themes of institutional delay that can arise for students transferring from a community college to a four-year institution: informational setbacks; imperfect program alignment; and community college resource limitations. Informational setbacks include situations where students at the sending institution are advised to complete an Associate's degree rather than the transfer core, or where they sign up for courses that will not transfer (Packard et al, 2012). This non-transfer of credits is the most frequent frustration in the application process (Townsend, 2008). Imperfect program alignment between community colleges and four-year institutions occurs when community college courses do not transfer as expected, such as students taking three hours of mathematics at the community college without a lab, when the four-year institution requires the lab for the student to progress towards their major. The continually changing prerequisites for courses at the four-year institution also add delays for students. Additionally, resource limitations at the community college sometimes means that classes students require to work towards their proposed major at the four-year institution simply are not available (Packard et al, 2012). One further frustration is the length of time the application process takes (Townsend, 2008). Despite these themes of institutional delay, students transferring from community college generally cope better than students transferring from other four-year institutions because community college students expect challenges when transferring (Kirk-Kuwaye & Kirk-Kuwaye, 2007).

In terms of adjustment to the new institution, Flaga (2006) describes five dimensions involved in the transition process. The first dimension, learning resources, refers to the formal information resources provided by the institution, as well as the informal information resources provided by friends. Included in this dimension is the information students manage to gather as a result of their own initiative. The second dimension, connecting, involves the development of relationships with other members of the new institution. The third dimension, familiarity, develops as students internalize the information they have gathered. Flaga's next dimension, negotiating, involves students adjusting their behavior and surroundings as necessary in order to be successful. One example of this kind of behavior is when a student chooses to sit in the same place in a classroom each time, making it more likely that she or he will get to know the students sitting nearby. The last dimension, integrating, describes a developmental change that results from students' relation to the three different environments in which the dimensions of transition are situated: the academic, social and physical environments of the institution. The academic environment includes interactions in class, with faculty, with study groups, and with advisors. The social environment consists of formal and informal interactions with students outside the classroom. The physical environment includes the bricks and mortar of the institution, as well as the structure in which campus services are organized, and the culture of the campus itself.

Challenges

Transfer students face a number of barriers when transferring to a new institution. They often have to adjust to differences in class and campus size, academic rigor, and institutional culture (Lanaan, 1996). Of major concern is the culture shock transfer students experience when entering a new institution, brought about by the different institutional practices, a frequent lack of centralized information about academic requirements, and less interaction with faculty, who, from the perspective of students transferring from community colleges, appear to be less concerned about the

welfare of their students than their colleagues in the two-year institutions. Other barriers include the sometimes poor academic preparation of transferring students, the lack of family support, problems with financial resources, and the need to work more hours to address this lack of financial resources, with the subsequent impact on hours available for study (Dennis et al, 2008; Packard et al, 2012). Many institutions ignore the social challenges faced by transfer students (Tobolowsky & Cox, 2012). Mullin (2012) points out that many narratives about transfer students focus on the academic deficiencies of some transfer students, while not enough attention is given to the academically advanced transfer students in the community college student body. However, even when transfer students do well academically, they may not be socially or psychologically prepared for the transition (Kodama, 2002).

The barriers transfer students face can result in students experiencing “transfer shock”, defined by Hills as a decline in GPA in the first semester (1965). There are a number of factors that contribute to this transfer shock. Firstly, native students may already have met and worked with the faculty teaching some classes, and so develop closer relationships with these faculty than do transfer students meeting faculty for the first time (Cohen & Brawer, 2003). These relationships with faculty are crucial for student persistence (Astin, 1985). Additionally, many transfer students are entering courses in their major for the first time, which are at a higher level than those to which they are accustomed, with a consequent impact on achievement (Cohen & Brawer, 2003). More recent studies suggest that transfer shock is only minor, and that most students recover in their first year (Dennis et al, 2008; Diaz, 1992). Young, low-achieving students are more likely to experience transfer shock, which highlights the need for academic support such as mentoring, tutoring, academic counseling, and learning communities (Dennis et al, 2008).

As noted above, transfer students exhibit a great range of diversity in terms of age, race, socioeconomic status, and previous educational experience (Tobowolsky & Cox, 2012). These different life experiences and situations can impact students’ transfer experiences. Students who transfer with a large number of credits are more likely to be successful at their new institution (IRAP, 2012; Owens, 2007). Other factors which impact students’ transfer experiences include whether or not the student lives on campus, the degree of interaction a student has with his or her peers, the degree of extracurricular involvement, whether the student is full or part time, and whether he or she is employed on or off campus (Owens, 2007). These factors all relate to how engaged the student is with campus. The degree of student involvement in academics, relationships with faculty, and interaction with student peer groups is key to student persistence (Astin, 1984; Wang & Wharton 2010). Involvement refers to the amount of physical and psychological energy a student devotes to the experience (Astin, 1984). Involvement in campus activities helps students connect and feel part of the university. Where students are significantly involved, they are more likely to have a positive transition (Flaga, 2006). Bean (2005) notes, “Few would deny that the social lives of students in college and their exchanges with others inside and outside the institution are important in retention decisions” (p. 227). Failing to become involved in campus life can lead to greater rates of attrition (Tinto, 1993). Wang and Wharton (2012) list four dimensions of student involvement: academic involvement; social involvement; participation in student organisations; and students’ use of support services. Wang and Wharton note that transfer student lack of awareness of services is a factor in their lower use of these services when compared to native students (2012).

Students’ personal characteristics also impact the transfer experience. Motivation, adjustment and perceptions can sometimes be more important than cognitive skills (Dennis et al, 2008). Lanaan (2007) notes that students with a low self-concept will have greater difficulty in adjusting to the new

institution. Additionally, students with negative perceptions about the four-year institution will have difficulty adjusting (Flaga, 2006). Academic goals and academic-related skills such as time-management and communication skills are also strong predictors of retention (Dennis et al, 2008). While these student attributes are largely beyond the control of the institution, the conditions in which institutions place their students can be managed (Tinto & Pusser, 2006). Tinto & Pusser identify six conditions for student success: institutional commitment; expectations; academic, social and financial support; feedback; involvement; and learning. They note that learning communities are a good way of providing the conditions for success (2006).

Students new to an institution can experience marginality arising from feelings of isolation on campus (Kodama, 2002). This experience of marginality can impact student retention rates: The more students feel marginalized, the more likely they are to leave an institution (Schlossberg et al, 1989). The availability of support services reduces feelings of marginality, as can opportunities to work on campus (Kodama, 2002).

Overcoming the barriers: Recommendations for best practice

Clearly, transfer students face a number of barriers in the process of transitioning to a new institution. What can be done to ease the transition? This section of the paper examines the literature for recommendations on how best to assist transfer students in their transition, both before they arrive, and once they enroll at the new institution. As noted in the introduction, effective transfer is a function of both sending and receiving institutional policies, practices, and culture (Gelin, 1999). Some of the recommendations discussed in this section apply particularly to the receiving four-year institution, others to the sending community college, and a third group of recommendations apply to both sending and receiving institutions. The discussion on sending institutions is limited to community colleges, since four-year institutions are unlikely to want to establish relationships with other four-year institutions for the purpose of promoting transfer.

In terms of what receiving institutions can do to better meet the needs of transfer students, one key recommendation is the creation of a transfer services center. The center should be a campus “home” for transfer students, acting as a one-stop shop for transfer students that allows them to meet others like themselves, obtain access to sustained advising and prepare for the transition to the larger campus community (College Board, 2011; Ellis, 2013; Mullin, 2012; Townsend & Wilson, 2006). The transfer services center should provide information about the importance of campus involvement to academic success, as well as information on campus resources, and how best to meet other students out of class (Townsend & Wilson, 2006). Locating services in a single location makes it easier for transfer students to find the services they need, as well as raise awareness of additional services that might be helpful.

Another recommendation for four-year institutions is that orientation should be required (Handel & Williams, 2012; Mullin, 2012). It should be transfer specific, and should be enhanced to provide better service to transfer students. Orientation should not just be an academic introduction, but should provide opportunities for students to meet and form connections (Flaga 2006; Tobolowsky & Cox, 2012; Townsend, 2008).

A third recommendation is the creation of a transfer mentor program for incoming transfer students (Lanaan, 2006). Specifically, transfer students should mentor new transfers, providing information on what they did to adjust socially and academically to adjust to the new institution, so helping the

new transfer students get engaged with the campus (Townsend, 2008). A related idea is that transfer students at the receiving institution should be employed as recruiters (Ellis, 2013).

Many transfer students express concern about faculty approachability (Roberts & Styron, 2012). Negative comments are often linked to the large class sizes at the receiving institution, where teachers of the large classes are seen as not caring about individual students. To overcome this negative perception, teachers should use techniques that allow the students in their classes to get to know each other (Townsend & Wilson, 2006).

In its 2011 report, *Improving student transfer from community colleges to four-year institutions – the perspective from baccalaureate-granting institutions*, the College Board points out that helping students connect to the culture at their new institution is just as important for transfer students as freshmen students, and that students who connect quickly with their new environment are more likely to be successful. The report recommends reserving housing for transfer students on campus to provide them with time to fully engage in the campus community (College Board, 2011). Living on campus provides increased opportunities for students to engage academically and socially, as well as enabling them to become familiar with the new environment more quickly (Flaga, 2006). In particular, transfer-specific floors in residence halls, or residence halls specifically for transfer students, are recommended (Mullin, 2012; Townsend, 2008).

Additional suggestions for best practice include: providing more scholarships for transfer students; ensuring a quick turn around in terms of the application process so that students can visit campus ahead of time; holding receptions at the departmental level for new transfer students; identifying a transfer liaison in each department or college; and keeping seats open for transfer students in gateway courses (Ellis 2013; Flaga 2006; Mullin, 2012; Tobowolsky & Cox, 2012; Townsend, 2008).

One common theme that arises in the literature is that four-year institutions should develop and foster authentic and equal partnerships with feeder community colleges (Ellis, 2013; Handel & Williams, 2012; Mullin, 2012; Townsend, 2008). Once such partnerships are developed, improved communication between sending and receiving institution will smooth the transfer process in a number of ways. Firstly, such partnerships would facilitate advisors from the four-year institution visiting the community college to provide up to date information on what courses transfer, thus making the transfer process more transparent, an essential ingredient for student success (Ellis, 2013; Handel & Williams, 2012; Mullin, 2012; Townsend, 2008). As noted above, the non-transfer of credits is the most frequent frustration in the application process (Townsend, 2008). A key component of this transparency is the development of academic road maps to guide students (Ellis, 2013; Handel & Williams, 2012).

Collaboration between the sending and receiving institution would also enable faculty and staff from the receiving institution to reach out to students in their first year of college, enabling them to establish connections (Handel & Williams, 2012; Lanaan, 1996). Townsend (2008) believes that faculty at both institutions should work together to facilitate closer alignment on expectations. Connections between receiving and sending institutions would also result in opportunities for students from the sending institution to visit the receiving institution and become familiar with the campus, this easing the transition (Ellis, 2013).

At the community college level, student services and academic advising should make every effort to ensure transfer students are well-equipped with the tools to handle the transition (Lanaan, 2007). To

be effective, community college counselors should conduct focus groups to identify the information and services prospective transfer students need (Townsend & Wilson, 2006; Townsend, 2008). Transfer students typically identify a need for more and accurate information in general, and more information about which classes will transfer in particular (Townsend, 2008). In addition, community college counselors should explain the core curriculum, and provide students with clear and simplified information about degree plans (Ellis, 2013). One way to achieve this is to implement transfer seminar courses or workshops that focus on making the transition to the senior institution (Flaga, 2006; Lanaan, 1996). Such workshops could include students from the four-year institution who themselves have transferred (Lanaan, 1996).

Conclusion

Transfer students exhibit a great diversity and face a wide range of challenges when transferring from one institution to another. The transition to a new institution can impact student achievement and persistence rates. Under performance-based funding models, this lower persistence rate impacts the budget of the receiving institution. There is no reason why transfer students should not persist and achieve as successfully as native students, provided the appropriate supports are put in place. Successful transfer and transition depends on the efforts of both the sending and receiving institutions. Meaningful partnerships between both institutions will result in better-prepared students who are able to transition to their new institution more successfully. Enhanced support services that are transfer-student focused will result in improved persistence rates.

References

- Astin, A. (1984). Student involvement: A theory of higher education. *Journal of College Student Personnel*, 25(4), pp. 297~308.
- Astin, A. (1985). *Achieving educational excellence*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Bean, J. P. (2005). Nine themes of college student retention. In A. Seidman (Ed.), *College student retention* (pp. 215-243). Westport: Praeger Publishers.
- Cohen, A. & Brawer, F. (2003). *The American community college*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- College Board. (2011). *Improving student transfer from community colleges to four-year institutions - The perspective of leaders from baccalaureate-granting institutions*. Retrieved from advocacy.collegeboard.org/sites/.../11b3193transpartweb110712.pdf
- Dennis, J., Calvillo, E. & Gonzalez, A. (2008). The role of psychosocial variables in understanding the achievement and retention of transfer students at an ethnically diverse urban university. *Journal of College Student Development*, 49(6), pp. 535~550.
- Diaz, P. (1992). Effects of transfer on academic performance of community college students at the four-year institution. *Community Junior College Quarterly of Research and Practice*, 16(3), pp. 279~91.
- Ellis, M. (2013). Successful community college transfer students speak out. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, 37, pp. 73~84.

- Field, K. (2010). Delivering an influx of federal dollars, Obama administration wants results. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Retrieved March 24th, 2010, from <http://chronicle.com/article/In-Return-for-Federal-Dollars/124861/>
- Flaga, C. (2006). The process of transition for community college students. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, 30, pp. 3~19.
- Gelin, F. (1999). *Transfer rates: How to measure and for what purpose? A discussion paper*. Vancouver, British Columbia: Council on Admissions and Transfer. Retrieved May 1st, 2013, from <http://www.bccat.bc.ca/pubs/transrates.pdf>.
- Hagedorn, L. (2005). How to define retention: A new look at an old problem. In A. Seidman (Ed.), *College student retention* (pp. 89-105). Westport: Praeger Publishers.
- Handel, S. & Williams, R. (2012). The promise of the transfer pathway: Opportunity and challenge for community college students seeking the baccalaureate degree. *College Board*. Retrieved 13th April, 2013, from <http://advocacy.collegeboard.org/sites/default/files/community-college-transfer-pathway-5163.pdf>.
- Hills, J. (1965). Transfer shock: The academic performance of the junior college transfer. *Journal of Experimental Education*, 33, pp. 201~216.
- IRAP (2012). *Transfer talking points*.
- Kirk-Kuwaye, C. & Kirk-Kuwaye, M. (2007). A study of engagement patterns of lateral and vertical transfer students during their first semester at a public research university. *Journal for the First Year Experience and Students in transition*, 19(2), pp. 9~27
- Kodama, C. (2002). Marginality of transfer commuter students. *NASPA Journal* 39(3), pp. 233~250.
- Lanaan, F. (1996). Making the transition: Understanding the adjustment process of community college transfer students. *Community College Review* 23(69). Retrieved, 8th March, 2013, from <http://crw.sagepub.com/content/23/4/69>.
- Lanaan, F. (2007). Studying transfer students: Part II: Dimensions of transfer students' adjustment. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, 31, pp.37~59.
- Langdon, H. (2013) Private communication.
- Melguzio, T., Kienzl, G. & Alfonso, M. (2011). Comparing the educational attainment of community college transfer students and four-year rising juniors using propensity score matching methods. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 82(3), pp. 265~291.
- Mullin, C. (2012). Transfer: An indispensable part of the community college mission. *American Association of Community Colleges Policy Brief 2012-03PBL*. Retrieved, 11th December, 2012, from <http://www.aacc.nche.edu/Publications/Briefs/Pages/pb10082012.aspx>.

- Owens, K. (2007). Community college transfer students' experiences of the adjustment process to a four-year institution: A qualitative analysis. *University of South Florida Graduate School Theses and Dissertations*. Retrieved 5th March, 2013, from <http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/etd/2312>.
- Packard, B., Gagnon, J. & Senas, A. (2012). Navigating community college transfer in science, technical, engineering, and mathematics fields. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, 36, pp.670~683.
- Roberts, J. & Styron, R. (2010). Student satisfaction and persistence: Factors vital to student retention. *Research in Higher Education Journal* 6(3), pp.1~18.
- Strategic Directions 2013 – University of North Carolina. Retrieved February 12th, 2013, from http://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=unc%20system%20stregic%20plan%20higher%20education%20higher%20education&source=web&cd=2&ved=0CEAQFjAB&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.northcarolina.edu%2Freports%2Findex.php%3Fpage%3Ddownload%26id%3D1638%26inline%3D1&ei=d1gaUcy4Aon-9QTz2IHwBw&usg=AFQjCNE_IOU2MMQmGqQA64pySE1qZ5sxEQ&bvm=bv.42261806,d.eWU&cad=rja
- Schlossberg, N., Lynch, A. & Chickering, A. (1989). *Improving higher education environments for adults*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Tinto, V. (1993). *Leaving college: Rethinking the causes and cures of student attrition* (2nd ed.). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Tinto, V. & Pusser, B. (2006). *Moving from theory to action: Building a model of institutional action for student success*. NPEC. Retrieved from http://nces.ed.gov/npec/pdf/Tinto_Pusser_Report.pdf
- Tobolowsky, B. & Cox, B. (2012). Rationalizing neglect: An institutional response to transfer students. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 83(3), pp. 389~410.
- Townsend, B. & Wilson, K. (2006). “A hand hold for a little bit”: Factors facilitating the success of community college transfer students to a large research university. *Journal of College Student Development*, 47(4), pp. 439~456.
- Townsend, B. (2008). “Feeling like a freshman again”: The transfer student transition. *New Directions for Higher Education*, 144, pp. 69~77.
- Wang, X. & Wharton, B. (2010). The differential patterns of college involvement between transfer and non-native students. *Journal of the First Year Experience & Students in transition*, 22(1), pp. 49~66.