

Suggested APA style reference: Zubernis, L., McCoy, V. A., & Snyder, M. (2011). *Starting over again: Counseling considerations for transfer students in higher education*. Retrieved from http://counselingoutfitters.com/vistas/vistas11/Article_11.pdf

Article 11

Starting Over Again: Counseling Considerations for Transfer Students in Higher Education

Paper based on a program presented at the 2010 American College Counseling Association Conference, October 6-9, 2010, St Louis, MO.

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Transfer students have been called "the forgotten students," a group which has been neglected until recently. That's beginning to change, however, with more students opting to start their higher education at the more affordable community colleges and many non-traditional age students returning to school to complete their degrees due to the stagnant economy. Colleges and universities are realizing that welcoming transfer and non-traditional students makes financial and academic sense, but many still do not have effective programs in place to help these students succeed. Unfortunately, this may result in many transfer students "falling between the cracks." Counselors who work with transfer students can help these students cope more effectively with the challenges and stressors that come with a transfer, but only if the counselors themselves have an understanding of these stressors. Thus, in this article we provide an overview of the emotional, psychological, financial, and practical challenges encountered by transfer students in order to help counselors be more effective in facilitating successful academic experiences and personal growth for these students. We also examine recommendations

for changes in higher education administration and programming, for which counselors can advocate in their role as consultants or student life professionals.

The changing landscape of higher education is a natural offshoot of our increasingly mobile and diverse world, which has changed the way most people pursue both education and careers, with multiple entry and exit points, as students drop in and drop out and drop in again. Today's students often do not have the luxury of focusing 100% of their time and energy on college, instead dividing their time between school, work and/or parenting. Stopping and starting their education, as well as transferring between colleges, is thus becoming increasingly common.

From the 1970s to the 1990s, the proportion of undergraduates attending more than one institution increased from 49 to 54% for bachelor's degree recipients (Li, 2010). Currently, 40% of first time freshmen begin their postsecondary education in community colleges. The vast majority intend to transfer to and graduate from a four-year university; unfortunately six year completion rates for those who begin at a community college are much lower. Only one fifth of these students manage to graduate within the six year period (Doyle, 2006).

In addition, the National Center for Education Statistics, in their 1999-2000 report, found that nearly half of bachelor's degree recipients who began in one four-year institution eventually enrolled in more than one (Li, 2010). Students who transfer between four-year colleges are confronted with a system which is inefficient in calculating transfer credit, which results in repeating courses and delays in degree completion. Most states have now developed articulation agreements to facilitate transfer from two-year colleges, but few include transfers among four-year institutions. The complicated and random transfer process may discourage many students and delay their progress toward a degree.

Attending more than one college is increasingly common, but the 2008 National Survey of Student Engagement found that transfer students tend to be disconnected from and overlooked on their four-year campuses. Transfer students reported less interaction with faculty, less collaborative learning and fewer enriching educational experiences. They were less likely to work with peers outside of class or to talk with faculty about their future career plans (Ishitani, 2010; Lipka, 2008).

The Phenomenon of Transfer Shock

So what does the research tell us about the challenges facing transfer students, and what educational institutions can do to ease the transition? Most of the earlier studies on transfer students focused on differences in academic achievement, showing a drop in GPA during the first semesters after transfer, which Hills (1965) referred to as "transfer shock."

While the phrase "transfer shock" has been used for several decades to describe this GPA drop after a student transfers, the shock may really be more about the difficulty of moving between very different environments, as much a social challenge as an academic one. The transfer shock literature does not tell the full story of a student's struggle to transition between educational environments – academic performance is of course important, but GPA may be the result of a complex variety of processes impacting transfer students.

Whatever the reason for the transfer, the decision can be a difficult one, with parents often expressing dismay and students torn between following their academic goals or sticking with their social networks. Moving beyond GPA concerns, recent studies pertaining to transfer shock reveal that it is a social challenge as much as an academic one. It is not uncommon for transfer students to feel isolated and disconnected. They report experiencing the emotional challenges of parental disappointment, sense of failure, frustration/discouragement regarding loss of course credits, loss of peer support group and isolation (Ishitani, 2010).

Transferring can also be a financial burden to an already struggling student/family due to relocation and loss of credits. Community college students are more likely to be from low income backgrounds, yet least likely to apply for financial aid. They may be stuck in a “pay as you go” mentality which no longer works at high tuition schools (American Council on Education, 2006).

Student Success and Retention

One of the challenges facing transfer students is the credit crisis. There are often inefficient systems in place for transferring credits between universities, which results in repeating courses and delays in degree completion. Additionally, financial stress, frustration and disappointment lead to lower rates of degree completion.

Tinto’s (1993) influential student success and retention theory makes clear that persistence is influenced not only by individual student characteristics, but by the student’s experiences both academically and socially while at college. Academic experiences include faculty and staff interactions in the classroom and outside. Social interaction includes formal and university-provided co-curricular activities as well as informal interactions with peers. These experiences all contribute to a student’s sense of belongingness – if a student is sufficiently integrated into the university culture, they will tend to persist through graduation. Universities have incorporated Tinto’s research into their retention efforts – unfortunately, most attention has been paid to retaining students entering as freshmen, and much less to transfer student retention.

Additional Challenges for Special Populations

Let’s look at some considerations for working with specific populations of transfer students. What many of the following students have in common is that they are often moving from their home communities and local community colleges, which are traditionally more diverse and accepting of individual variations from the stereotypical co-ed norm of a four-year university. In addition to the aforementioned transfer stressors, these students have another layer (or layers) of difference that makes the transfer experience even more stressful and potentially uncomfortable. It should be noted that every transfer student is an individual and thus, some will not experience the problems noted here. There is always the individual who slides into a new situation with ease and transfer students are certainly no exception. Nevertheless, higher education counselors and administrators need to think about the possible layers of complexity that may come with being a non-traditional transfer student.

Many transfer students are non-traditional age students who are well past the traditional 18-22 year old cohort. They bring the wisdom of adult experience, but also the complications of adult life. It is often uncomfortable for them to receive the same orientation lectures and services that are given to freshman and traditional aged transfer students. It is important to offer services to non-traditional aged students that emphasize their developmental phase of life. Considerations such as adult/married or partnered/family housing and child care services are welcomed by adult students. Additionally, when they live in residence, it might be appropriate to excuse them from traditional programming related to college drinking, partying, and safe sex. Adult transfer students may also prefer to forego meal plans and health services geared toward 18-22 year olds. Flexibility with “required” participation is needed. Finally, many adult transfer students find it frustrating to receive important documents addressed to “The Parents of.” Where possible, adult transfer students should be grouped with graduate students for non-academic components like housing, health, and other services.

Transfer students with disabilities are often accustomed to extensive support services from their high school and community college staff and from parents while living at home. The level of independence expected at a four-year institution may be a difficult adjustment for students with disabilities. Many disability support offices follow a model of “weaning” students from freshman to senior year, providing more support to freshmen and expecting increasingly independent self-advocacy from students closer to graduation. When a student enters the system as a junior but has been receiving extensive support, the quick push toward autonomous self-advocacy can be overwhelming. For this reason, it is often advised that disability support offices and other campus offices offer freshman and transfer students with disabilities the same level of support as they learn to advocate for their accommodations.

Many LGBTQ students have already been through the coming out process in high school and/or their first colleges and/or at home in their communities. Transferring to a new college or university may mean that this process now needs to start again. For some LGBTQ students this can pose a challenge, particularly when the new setting is noticeably different from their past environments and/or does not have a highly visible LGBTQ community. It is important that all university departments use respectful language that does not force a new student to “out” him/herself immediately. Given that intolerant campus climate is one reason for transfer often cited by students who decide to matriculate elsewhere, we need to be particularly mindful of the campus climates we create at the receiving institutions.

It is not uncommon to find a large number of transfer students who identify as African American, Asian American, Latino/a or other ethnic cultural minorities. Add to this the number of international students who may be transferring to complete their degrees and you have a group of individuals who might be struggling with more than one adjustment issue. On larger campuses where student groups form based on cultural heritage or country of origin, transfer students of color may find a comfortable niche more quickly than on campuses where such groups have not formed. The importance of providing space and support for transfer students of color to find each other cannot be stressed enough.

Economically disadvantaged or lower SES students often begin at a community college and continue to work part-time or even full-time to fund their college experience.

The time spent working can interfere with their academic achievement and social growth. Additionally, many lower SES students are first generation college students who do not have the benefits of familial advice about the college experience. Added to these financial and time burdens are mixed/guilty feelings about moving out of poverty and, often, leaving friends and family behind. For the economically disadvantaged transfer students, the promise of a four-year degree may be both a beacon of hope and a painful burden.

Given that community colleges enroll nearly half of all undergraduates in the U.S., including the greatest number of students from low income and educationally disadvantaged backgrounds, they have become a stepping stone to higher education for low income and first generation students for decades. Yet according to the American Council on Education (2006), more than one million community college students failed to receive financial aid for which they were probably eligible. For many low income students, going to a four-year college may not seem feasible because of a lack of financial resources and a lack of information about how to obtain aid. Ironically, the students with the least resources are often the least likely to apply for financial aid, sometimes becoming stuck in a pay as you go mentality that worked at the community college but puts them in an academic holding pattern at more expensive four-year universities, leading to higher dropout rates.

Transfer students who opt to live off campus (commuter students) run the risk of further isolating themselves. Even in early adulthood, clusters of friends (cliques) that form freshman year carry through the four plus undergraduate years. Many of these groups form in the residence halls, making it especially difficult for commuter transfers to find a niche. This disadvantage is more than social, as opportunities to study and network must be more actively cultivated by the commuting transfer student.

Many of the aforementioned groups of transfer students will be resident students for the first time. Many are transferring from two-year community colleges where they lived with parents or other family members. For these students, a first time on campus residency can be undeniably overwhelming. This problem is exacerbated by the fact that transfer students are often housed with other upperclass students who have two or more years of residential experience. Transfer students often “fill in the gaps” around existing cohorts who have chosen to live together, thus making the transfer student the “odd one out” in a suite or campus apartment. It would be helpful if campus residential life staff could group transfer students, such that more than one new student is assigned to a floor or suite.

Community College Students

Community colleges have long been a stepping stone to higher education for low income and first generation students. With the economic downturn, they are projected to become important to a wider variety of students in the face of a poor economy and increasing tuition costs. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, in 2003-04 almost one in five students who enrolled for the first time at a four-year institution was a transfer student (Peter & Cataldi, 2005).

The United States Department of Education (2006) reports that only 28% of community college students successfully transfer to four-year institutions. Divergent academic expectations can leave transfer students overwhelmed. Townsend (1995)

interviewed students who transferred from community colleges, who reported being challenged by higher academic standards at their four-year universities, faster paced courses, and a heavier emphasis on writing skills.

But academics is clearly not the whole story. Flaga (2006) conducted in-depth interviews of community college transfer students during their second semester at a four-year university to identify the factors that students had to navigate to successfully become integrated in their new environment. Her research led to the identification of five dimensions of transition, all of which are crucial to consider in counseling: 1.) Learning resources – tools students use to gain information about the campus environment and the academic system, including formal orientation, student affairs professionals and advisors, and informal learning resources like peers and alumni. 2.) Connecting – socially through formal structures like group projects and faculty walk-in hours, as well as with the physical environment (this happened more quickly if students came on campus visits before attending). 3.) Familiarity – becoming comfortable on the campus and in the classroom. 4.) Negotiating – when students have enough information and resources to adjust their surroundings so that they can be successful. For example, students might adapt to much larger classes by sitting in the same seat every day in order to get to know peers better. 5.) Integrating – a developmental change in physical, social, and academic environments, so that students are truly integrated into their university.

Townsend and Wilson (2006) identified a variety of specific challenges facing students transferring from a community college environment, including:

1. Feeling anonymous and lost at large four-year universities:

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 think the university fails because they think that because we've already been through college already, we're more mature 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 maybe have somebody... kind of hold your hand through it. (Townsend & Wilson, 2006, p. 446)

2. Difficulty making social connections with fellow students:

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. (Townsend & Wilson, 2006, p. 448)

Coming in as a transfer student, it kind of seems like they're already groups 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. (Townsend & Wilson, 2006, p. 448)

3. Community college students also tend to be older “nontraditional” students, adults who pursue an education either full- or part-time while maintaining other responsibilities of family, employment, or other life roles:

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. (Townsend & Wilson, 2006, p. 448)

4. Difficulty connecting with faculty and related problems such as larger classes, less accessibility, and different norms for faculty/student interactions.
5. Perceived four-year faculty as less caring, less helpful, and less interested in teaching (versus research).
6. Community college students are also more likely to be commuters and be enrolled part-time, both of which have been found to affect engagement. Ishitani (2010) found a substantial negative impact of being part-time on academic achievement and student engagement.
7. For all transfer students, transfer of credits is a significant problem. For low income students, paying for college is hard enough without having to repeat courses. The frustration and added expense significantly impact retention.

Suggestions from Research: What the Community Colleges Can Do

Progress has been made in the use of standardized articulation agreements and credit transfer websites in some states, leading to more seamless transfer. Some states, like Pennsylvania, now have an online transfer portal that will evaluate courses and facilitate transfer between institutions. However, the literal and physical transfer of the student remains more problematic, especially when the community college and four-year university are so different in their approaches and expectations. The authors also recommend:

- Increased training so that advisors can do a better job preparing students for transfer, including what classes will transfer. Counselors and advisors at the community college can help students prepare for the differences between the community college environment and the four-year university environment.
- Developing transfer centers to facilitate the process, centralize information resources, and strengthen student support programs.
- Pre-college outreach programs to inform students of what they need to be successful in college after transferring, which is especially helpful for students from low income backgrounds and underrepresented minority groups.

Suggestions from Research: What the Four-Year Receiving Institution Can Do

First, colleges and universities can expand orientation for transfer students beyond the typical one day orientation. Some transfer students need more hand holding during their initial weeks, especially when they’ve been used to a much smaller campus with individual attention and support. It might also be helpful to consider renaming this program, as many transfer students do not believe they need another orientation to

college and thus, they might be more interested in something called Transfer Day, or a series of transfer programs where handouts of information and transfer advice could be distributed.

Another helpful addition might be campus visits for prospective transfer students. While incoming freshmen are strongly encouraged to visit, this same suggestion is rarely made for transferring students. If it were encouraged, it might help transfer students seek out housing and other logistical information, peer mentoring resources/peer relationships, and help them feel more comfortable on campus while getting a sense of campus life.

To foster appropriate college student development, receiving institutions can encourage and facilitate extracurricular involvement, as campus activities are a way of building relationships and feeling a part of the community, as well as a means of getting to know peers. Some universities have started mentor or peer support programs where students who successfully transferred mentor new transfer students.

It would be helpful if receiving institutions provided learning communities that are not residentially based and which include transfer students, to help students become instant members of a subgroup and thus increase belongingness. Another option would be to provide a suite of transfer student services including a transfer lounge with lockers and/or study carrels for commuting transfer students to use as a home base.

The curriculum might also be adjusted to best serve the needs of transfer students by offering experiential educational opportunities such as internship, community service, and independent study to transfer students. Additionally, transfer success courses taught at four-year universities have been helpful in requiring students to venture out onto campus, participate in study skills workshops at the university learning center, go to stress management workshops at the counseling center, connect with student organizations, etc., much like the successful freshmen orientation seminars many universities now offer. Also, pre-transfer orientation courses taught at the community college can facilitate the understanding and early use of learning resources at the four-year receiving university, so students can begin connecting right away, managing their expectations to avoid disappointment or culture shock before they fall behind. Alternatively, teaching the pre-transfer orientation course at the four-year university may allow students to get firsthand experience on campus, with parking, transportation, logistics, etc. This increased exposure can help students feel a part of things and move them towards familiarity sooner. Some universities have instituted a Transfer Council through the student government association, which allows transfer students to have a voice with administration and help create policy. This might also increase faculty engagement in the transfer process and lead to redesigning developmental curricula to develop a “transfer culture.”

Collaboration: What Community Colleges and Receiving Institutions Can Do Together

Increased communication and collaboration between community college and four-year universities could provide greater linkages and information sharing (e.g., credit transfers, campus environments, and expectations) while fostering actual relationships between counselors, advisors, and student affairs professionals at both schools. Four-year universities can sponsor programming at community colleges such as information fairs or

even a pre-transfer course taught at the community college campus. Advisors from both types of institutions can share admissions and academic program information so each has an understanding of the other and can then provide that information to students

Recommendations and Model Programs

Looking at all of the aforementioned challenges through the broader lens of student life experience, specific programs and practical suggestions for student life professionals and counseling center staff can keep transfer students from “falling between the cracks.” There are many areas where outreach from and collaboration between student life offices, counseling professionals (both counseling center and private practice counselors working with college students), and other university department programs can promote successful transfer experiences.

University counselors are in a unique position to assist transfer students in their social, psychological, and academic adjustment. The proposed programs and sample model included here explore the challenges facing transfer students, including the culture shock of relocating from a community college environment, the challenge of fitting into existing social networks, and the difficulty of living off campus and still becoming involved.

Perhaps the best model for a comprehensive transfer program can be found at the University of Central Florida (UCF). This metropolitan research institution is the third largest university in the nation, with the second largest university undergraduate population. With 53,000 students enrolled (45,500 of whom are undergraduates), UCF brings in over 8,000 new transfer students annually. In fact, 28% of Florida’s community college students transfer to UCF and over 87% of UCF’s transfers are from Florida community colleges.

With statistics like these, the University of Central Florida is clearly catering to their transfer students in a way that attracts a large number of community college students. So what are they doing? UCF’s Transfer and Transition Services (TTS) has a vision for transfer services that includes preparation, transition, and progression. The TTS division helps students before they arrive, works with them during the transition/first semester, and helps them move toward graduation by providing a solid foundation.

Specifically, UCF’s TTS division provides a peer mentoring program which facilitates students helping students in the transfer process. These transfer mentors are paid for 10 hours per week and assist with preparation (pre-admission advising), transition (significant role in transfer orientation and becoming a Knight), progression and engagement (connecting new transfers to the campus community), and facilitating Facebook communication as a way for new transfer students to partner and connect at UCF.

UCF also provides a *Transfer Student Manual* (n.d.) to all community and state college advisors via CD or online. This document contains programs of study for all majors and transfer equivalencies for these courses. University of Central Florida has a history of partnering with other colleges to create a seamless transfer experience. UCF has developed an advisor listserv and uses it to send monthly reports of UCF news and counselor updates. The TTS division enlists UCF academic colleges and departments to provide timely and detailed information to the advisors on their listserv and to establish

important links for timely communications. UCF publishes *Knightquest*, a transfer student guide, in both paper and electronic format. The print publication is used by Admissions in recruiting transfer students. It contains transfer tips and checklists, as well as contact information for important offices, e-mail addresses, and websites.

The Transfer and Transition Services Division of UCF considers the Offices of Admissions and Regional Campuses as Consortium Partners who are partially responsible for recruiting, admitting, advising, and preparing students for transfer to UCF. TTS is also involved in these components and the transition itself, retention and graduation efforts and overall advocacy for transfer students.

In addition to using UCF's TTS division as a model, counselors and other higher education professionals interested in improving the quality and quantity of services geared toward transfer students can use Chickering's Student Development Vectors (Chickering & Reisser, 1993) as a framework for setting goals in existing student life resource divisions. The vector of "Developing Competence" can be fostered by student life divisions such as advising, tutoring, academic support, and student activities. The vector of "Managing Emotions" can be facilitated by the counseling center, residence life, and campus ministry services. The vector of "Moving through Autonomy toward Interdependence" can be supported by career services, financial aid, and health services.

When higher education administrators create new programs to assist transfer students, they must of course pay attention to academic components such as transfer equivalencies and articulation agreements. While the "credits transferred" component is always of utmost importance, hopefully the preceding has stressed the additional importance of considering other student development factors in transfer programming. Whatever formal programs are developed, they should be geared toward familiarizing transfer students with the campus and campus resources; providing opportunities for social networking and personal growth; exploring the reasons for the transfer so that students don't make the same mistakes twice; and recognizing the differing needs between the group of students who were "not a good fit" for their sending college/university and those who were not academically ready for the receiving university prior to the transfer experience (i.e., not ready for the show).

Summary

Though transfer students were once called "the forgotten students," more and more higher education settings are recognizing the importance of offering appropriate services that cater to the unique needs of transfer students. As more students opt to start their higher education at the more affordable community colleges and many non-traditional age students return to school to complete their degrees due to the stagnant economy, colleges and universities are realizing that welcoming transfer and non-traditional students makes financial and academic sense. Though many still do not have effective programs in place to help these students succeed, there are guidelines in the literature and a successful model program at UCF which can help higher education administrators to develop successful programs and policies to recruit, admit, maintain, and successfully graduate transfer students. A better understanding of the challenges facing transfer students will enable counselors who work with this population to meet their needs more effectively.

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Note: This paper is part of the annual VISTAS project sponsored by the American Counseling Association. Find more information on the project at: http://counselingoutfitters.com/vistas/VISTAS_Home.htm