

Tacy Costanzo
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Perceptions of the Transfer Process: Using Student Feedback to Inform Program Redesign

Abstract

Transfer students have needs that are not met by services and programs designed for the traditional college student. Their lives are frequently complicated by financial and family obligations, they may need to commute greater distances to campus, they are generally older, and take longer to complete college than their traditional counterparts. Faculty interaction, accurate academic advising, bridge programs and support services designed to meet their unique needs, and guaranteed articulations and admissions agreements assist this student population adjust to, and be more successful at the university. The literature reviewed for this project agreed with the interviewed students' perceptions of the transfer process. Programs designed specifically for transfer students clearly boost success, shortened time to degree and increased the perceived satisfaction of this sub-population. Transfer students extend the diversity of the university and the transfer function broadens access to baccalaureate degrees. Enhanced, and coordinated, efforts between community colleges and universities will maximize outcomes and minimize waste, increasing the graduation rates of this diverse and under-served student population.

Introduction

Transfer student success hinges on multiple factors. Transfer student populations are distinctly different than the university's mainstream first-year student population due to their age, family status, work responsibilities, and lack of mobility. Transfer students

tend to be older, have dependent family members, and may be tethered to a community far from the university at which they study. With children and financial obligations, they frequently commute to distance campuses rather than relocating their family and finding new employment. These factors create unique challenges and needs for these students and universities need to review and renew transfer programs and policies to better serve the vibrant and diverse transfer student population. Additionally, universities need to nurture these students beginning at the community college and continue that support after matriculation. Transfer students add to the richness of the university and immediate action must be taken to provide access to a baccalaureate degree for this diverse and slighted population.

Literature Review

Transfer students comprise a distinct and unique university sub-population. They face multiple academic, psychological, social, and environmental adaptation issues while adjusting to the university. Although community colleges are touted as the gateway to a baccalaureate degree for many low-income, first-generation and other non-traditional students, graduation rates for transfer students at most institutions lag behind the rates of the students matriculating to the university as freshmen (Chenoweth, 1998). This is a clear indication that transfer services need to be evaluated and redesigned. The literature showed that success after transferring was positively affected by advice, support and encouragement from faculty, as well as staff (Helm & Cohen, 2001), that students flourished in transfer preparation and bridge programs (Berger & Malaney, 2003), and time to degree was shortened by proactive advising and by utilizing articulation and admissions agreements (Ehrenberg and Smith, 2003). These interactions and services are

critical at both the 2-year and 4-year institutions. Enhanced, and coordinated, efforts between these institutions will maximize outcomes and minimize waste, increasing the graduate rates of this diverse and under-served transfer student population.

Students of all ages need to be nurtured and directed in their studies. This may be especially true for transfer students, as they tend to have more complicated lives than the average first-year students. Transfer students frequently have families, work 20-30 hours per week and commute substantial distances to the school (Berger and Malany). Helm and Cohen found that quality advising is critical to minimizing completion of unnecessary courses and increasing major preparation and agreed with Ehrenberg and Smith that encouragement and advising from faculty, as well as counselors, helped students understand the transfer process and to make informed decisions about their future. Kozeracki reported that that faculty involvement in the transfer process facilitated the academic success of transfer students. Another study found that students who were comfortable, rather than intimidated by, approaching their faculty for academic assistance and advice experienced smoother transitions to the university (Laanan, 2007). Earlier work by Laanan indicated that quality time with faculty also had positive effects on students' persistence, satisfaction and performance (2001) and that students were more comfortable seeking faculty assistance at the community college than at the university (1996). Each of these examples were echoed in the findings of Wynette Lee's work on minority populations; Dr. Lee also found that transfer students floundered without accurate and timely academic advising and blossomed with the mentorship of faculty and staff. Dr. Lee's qualitative study concluded that "policy, programs, performance, and people either enhanced or deterred the success of transfer students" (p. 40).

Eggleston and Laanan state that support programs are an essential element in the success of transfer students (2001). From registration problems to housing issues, transfer student needs are not met by the support services designed for more traditional collegians. Eggleston and Laanan also found that summer programs ease the transition to the university. Integrating transfer students' old world with their new world helps them feel that they are "significant and important" at the university (Ortman) and more programs need to be designed to cultivate that sense of belonging. Svanum and Bigatti also referenced off-campus responsibilities as disrupting the transition process and refer to Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) findings that peer interaction in social settings are beneficial to acclimation. That agreed with Townsend and Wilson's findings that academic and social integration facilitate academic success and that the four-year institutions need to take more responsibility for transfer student success by creating transitional programs in partnership with the community colleges. It is imperative that innovative programs, and redesigned policy, are implemented to revive the transfer function (Zamani) and to overcome the marginality of this student population (Ortman).

Transfer student success requires careful planning and accurate academic advice. State-wide articulation agreements and transfer admission guarantees assist students in planning their academic path (Ehrenberg and Smith). Kozeracki concurred that articulation agreements simplified the transfer process and that a "lack of appropriate guidance" (p. 67) caused difficulties. Lee also addressed inappropriate advising, as she found that minority students relied on guidance from other students (which was frequently incorrect or misunderstood) and that connecting students to reliable resources was important. Catherine Flaga agreed that students tended to get information from

informal sources. She emphasized that communication between schools was critical and called for a 'new culture' that combines the resources of both institutions.

Transfer programs obviously play a critical role in the attainment of a baccalaureate degree and formalized 'admissions guarantees' clarify the process (Laanan, 2001). Laanan also found that articulation agreements directed students toward completing their lower-division major and general education requirements, shortening time to degree. "The sad truth is that insufficient numbers of students successfully navigate the process into 4-year universities and colleges" (p. 833) and transfer rates for Hispanics are especially low (Hagedorn and Lester). Hagedorn and Lester add a positive note, reporting that the University of California continues to increase the number of transfer students admitted to its 10 undergraduate campuses and which is substantiated by recorded increases in transfer enrollments. Some of this increase is attributed to the statewide articulation system (www.ASSIST.org) and to multiple transfer admissions guarantees between the 113 California community colleges and the 23 California State Universities and the 10 University of California campuses. Ehrenberg and Smith conclude that the importance of 2-year colleges will continue to grow in the future and that system-wide articulation agreements with clearly described transfer conditions facilitate student matriculation, and ultimately their success at 4-year institutions.

The research on transfer student experiences focused on an initial drop in grades at the university as the indicator of transfer disharmony and investigated a wide range of factors affecting the likelihood of transfer success. The literature showed that many transfer students struggled both academically, and non-academically, to acclimate at the four-year institution. Some felt overwhelmed by class sizes, intimidated by their

professors, unprepared for the increased academic demands and the atmosphere of competition (Lannan, 1996). They also felt alienated and out of place at the university (McDonough, M, 2000), causing disengagement. Transfer students also reported frustration and shock due to the differences in their expectations and their actual experiences during the transfer process and at the university. That gulf between expectation and reality are partially explained by the lack of communication between the student and the institutions, a shortcoming cited repeatedly as interfering with transfer student success (Flaga). Redesigned and supplemented transfer services and bridge programs address most of the factors detracting from transfer student success. Higher education systems need to continually evolve to serve all populations and transfer functions need immediate attention as more students choose community college as their path to a baccalaureate degree.

Data Collection

I collected the names and email addresses for all the new transfer students in 2005 and 2006 using the campus database. I contact the 78 students requesting volunteers for a qualitative study on transfer student acclimation. 27 students were curious enough to respond and after juggling schedules, failing to get timely IRB review, and dodging an inconveniently timed final review session, I met with 6 students in a campus conference room. I selected not to conduct the interview in my office to add some neutrality to the environment. While I was collecting beverages and snacks from the kitchen, the participants took a few minutes to re-introduce themselves to each other (most had met before) and decided on pseudonyms to mask their identity in my study. When I returned to the conference room I found: Dr. Jekyll (slightly older), Mr. Hide (extremely shy),

David Beckham (soccer player), Antonio Banderas (Latino dramatico), Madonna (Materials Science emphasis), and Anna Kournikova (tennis player); so you can see that engineering students also have a sense of humor. After some laughter and a few grapes being thrown about, the students signed their informed consent forms (with their real names) and I began the interview.

To ensure the participants understood my expectations and plans, I explained that the basic question I was researching was – what are current engineering transfer students' perceptions of the transfer experience and how can this feedback inform the redesign of programs and services aimed at assisting this unique population successfully navigate, and graduate, from the university? I thanked them for volunteering to share their experiences with me and that this specific process was for a paper I was writing for graduate school, and my motivation for selecting this topic was to better serve future engineering transfer students matriculating to UCSB.

I confirmed that no information shared in the interview would be recorded in any way that would reveal their identity, but if they said something they wished to have withheld from the transcript of our discussion, or from the final paper, to please let me know. I added that qualitative studies are enriched by direct quotes, so I might include some of their statements verbatim. I stated that although I constantly elicit feedback from students, this focus group was a new experience for me and I that I might ask them to repeat what they had said to make sure I captured the message they wished to convey.

I prepared questions to keep our discussion on track and asked that they please try not to interrupt each other, both as a courtesy to each other, and to allow me to make meaningful field notes for later transcription. I stated that each student is unique and

their stories were personal and that I anticipated differing responses to some of these questions and to please remember that there aren't right, or wrong, answers and the discussion was based on mutual respect of our differences, as well as our commonalities.

The questions I used as prompts were:

1. If you were counseling a future engineering transfer student at the community college you attended, what would you tell them?
2. What programs or services have been beneficial to your acclimation at UCSB?
3. What programs or services do you wish had been available at your community college?
4. What programs or services do you wish had been available at UCSB?
5. Describe the differences between your expectations and the realities of your experience at UCSB.
6. What are some of the highlights of your experiences at UCSB?
7. What at UCSB has been problematic or disappointing?
8. About how much time do you spend on campus when not in a class, lab or studying?
9. Please describe some of your experiences in non-academic activities at UCSB and how those experiences relate to your overall feelings about your UCSB experience.
10. Do you think there are benefits to being a transfer student? Please elaborate.

The interview provided me with new insight into transfer student struggles and affirmed my resolve to change policies that undermine, and design programs that enhance, transfer student success in my college.

Immediately after the interview I transcribed my notes, adding material I remembered hearing and spent the ensuing evening recording additional memories and making notes for clarification with individual students. Because I work closely with

these students I was able to capture some of their dialectal nuances and speech patterns, and when I re-read the interview transcript, I ‘hear’ their voices as if the interview was in progress. After letting the experience settle into my mind, I began looking for themes and commonalities between these students’ experiences. The process felt awkward at first, as my instinct is to see and serve my students as individuals, and generalizing their experiences was uncomfortable. As the similarities and disjunctions began to jump off the page at me, I realized that there *were* common patterns and similar disappointments. Frequently my students’ words paralleled the findings of my literature review and I began to understand the purpose, and power, of qualitative research.

Emerging Themes

Multiple common threads caught my attention as I was contemplating my students’ words. One needs to understand the diverse backgrounds of this cohort to fully appreciate the breadth and depth of the insight gained from this study. To illustrate the composition of the interview cohort, the following are some of their similarities and differences: 4 male, 2 female, age ranged from 19 to 39, 5 Caucasian, 1 Latino, two intercollegiate athletes, two learned English as a second or third language, two were veterans of the U.S. military, two have dependent family members, two send some of their financial aid money to non-dependent family members, four originally spent more than 2 hours per day commuting to campus, 2 continue to commute, two came from prestigious universities that were not currently meeting their needs, 4 matriculated from the California community college district, 2 students had completed 1 year of college elsewhere, 2 students had completed 3 years in the community system and 2 had stretched their preparation for the university over decades and continents. They are each

invested in the process of their own education, understand that their commitment to college will enrich their communities as well as the rest of their lives, and each had experienced difficulties with the transfer process. In gaining insight to the hurdles and life-preservers of current transfer students, I hope to smooth the way for the students who will follow a similar path.

The main themes identified from the interview are:

- ◆ faculty impact, both positive and negative
- ◆ the complications of commuting
- ◆ use of services and programs
 - NOT using them – various reasons
 - positive outcomes from using or giving services
- ◆ NEED for better and coordinated advising at both campuses
- ◆ that bridge programs contribute to success
- ◆ the lack of good information causes disjunction between expectation and reality
- ◆ time management and related skills are very important
- ◆ financial issues complicate academics
- ◆ family support helps in multiple ways
- ◆ it is important that someone on campus truly cares about the student individually
- ◆ and the rigor of the engineering programs are worth the work
- ◆ transfer students have had positive as well as negative experiences

The students had common, as well as distinctly different, experiences, and revealed both universal and unique perspectives. The themes that emerged during the focus group overlapped, intersected, separated and then reconnected, illuminating the journeys of six distinctly different individuals.

The literature review and the interview data indicated that the quality and quantity of student interaction with campus staff and faculty impacted multiple of the students' experiences. At the forefront, accurate academic advising was a much discussed issue. Each student had articulation woes with courses that did not fulfill expected requirements. Four students will take longer to attain their degree than they had

calculated. Even the students using the state-wide articulation system were surprised by campus specific detours in an already convoluted path. The students with academic records from outside California were particularly distressed by the disjunction between past accomplishments and unmet requirements. Some of the reasons for these mismatches in coursework were related to outdated, inaccurate, misunderstood, unavailable, or conflicting, information. More efficient use of technology, clearer lines of communication, and appropriately trained faculty and staff are required to combat the propagation of inaccurate information. Attention to this segment of the transfer process should increase the admissibility and preparation for these future university students.

Quality advising was a recurring theme. The students' perceptions indicated that the counselors at the community college need better training and closer contact with the advisor at the university. Given frequent budget cuts, it is not surprising that the community college counselors are stretched beyond their capacity, so use of technology to more fully empower students to find accurate information on their own, is very important. Lack of communication between campuses was also discussed. One student stated emphatically "contact the advisor at the school you want to transfer to, long before it is time to fill out your application." His opinion was that was the best advice the community college advisor ever gave him. This advising theme was intertwined with the planning thread, as both short and long term planning need to be based on accurate information.

Faculty interactions were also reported as important to perceptions of acclimation. One student reported that just one very negative experience when a professor told him that 'some students never get programming' had deeply affected him. The same student

also experienced dedicated nurturing from faculty and felt that professors were much more capable of answering students' questions than the teaching assistants were. Despite more positive faculty interactions, than negative, his professor's statement that some students never learn programming elicited the following comment from the student, "the teacher has helped me to be discouraged..." This illustrates that we all need to be careful in how we express information to students and aware that cultural differences can complicate communication. Another student told of crossing paths with a professor in a local store. Even though she is distinct in appearance, and had attended his office hours repeatedly that term, the teacher did not recognize her; fortunately another professor took his daughter to watch that student's tennis match and she had positive interactions with his family after the event.

The bulk of the reflections on the faculty's part in successful transitions were positive, at both the prior and current institution. One student stated that the engineering professor at her community college "BELIEVED in us" and helped students transition to the university by planning field trips and arranging guest speakers. Some students still felt intimidated by their professors, but acknowledged them as important university resources. One of the students who had enjoyed incredible athletic success the prior quarter stated that academic praise from one of his engineering professors had been immensely important to him. Another student expressed surprised when a professor had talked about choosing a field that the student loved, rather than expecting the student to feign enjoyment for the professors own field. So clearly, faculty influence extends beyond academics and they should be included in dialogues with future transfer students and included in bridge programs between colleges and universities.

Students that participated in transition or bridge programs between the lower-division campus and the university reported numerous advantages related to their experiences. One student's participation in a summer internship in a University laboratory helped overcome the anxiety she formerly associated with professors. The other female in the cohort added that one of her professors "really encourages me to keep up, as falling behind in science classes can kill you" and later added that she was too shy to approach some of her other professors, but having an upper-class student's advice was really helpful. Another student used the Inter Campus Exchange program to complete one course per term at the university while simultaneously enrolled in 12 units at the local community college. Consequently, he knew a few faculty members prior to arriving at the university, had experienced teaching in large lecture halls, and "had a better idea of what to expect at the university." This student also reported that professors were approachable and helpful and that he felt welcome in their classes. A couple of students in the same major agreed that the faculty advisor articulating their out-of-state transfer work was incredibly helpful. There were multiple perceptions of the change in academic rigor between the community college and the university. The students who had participated in summer-bridge programs expressed less disappointment in their experiences than the students with less or no prior interaction with the university. Programs that integrate faculty participation in transition and bridge programs will better prepare student for the university, and will also ease new student acclimation.

The students from community colleges within our campus 'service area' were better prepared for all aspects of the transfer experience. When just considering academic and campus acclimation, by removing the external trappings of commuting,

raising and supporting a family, and an intermittent and prolonged academic journey, interaction between the lower and upper division schools made a substantial impact on success. Specific advising on transfer admissions agreements and course patterns that best prepare students for transfer build powerful relationships. When potential students understand, and can meet, the criteria opening the university door for them, they are empowered. When students feel that staff and faculty at their current, and their potential, institution are giving sound advice and truly care about student success, they felt confident, when students participate in activities that bridge the two campuses, they felt engaged. Only thoughtful and well-orchestrated efforts will smooth the transfer path.

The corollary subjects that were interwoven with the primary themes of these students' experiences included: time management and long-term planning, mismatched expectations and financial issues. All concurred that time management is critical to managing the university as a transfer student. From hour to hour, and year to year, various bits of these students' stories, verified that planning, scheduling, balancing and juggling, are required to stay afloat at the university. The students who had built a relationship with UCSB while they were still community college students reported less disappointment and better matches between how they anticipated and then experienced the university. The students who received poor advising and lacked data on articulations encountered multiple surprises and set-backs, and substantial gulfs between expectation and reality. The youngest two members of the cohort had fewer struggles adjusting to campus. They more closely match the mainstream population on campus, have parental and athletic department support and do not have dependents or need to work while in school – no financial worries for them. The other four participants are self-supporting

and are faced with financial issues ranging from the exorbitant cost of gasoline and child or parent care, to the outrageous price of textbooks and the horrendously high rents in Santa Barbara. As with the main themes of the interview, each thread exemplified the critical nature of early, and informed, connections within educational systems.

The complex lives of transfer students complicate their transition, and acclimation, to the university. The faculty play an important role in transfer student adjustment and should participate in the planning and presentation of services that prepare and welcome these students to the university. Pre, and post, matriculation services assist in bridging the move from one campus to another, increase student perceptions of satisfaction, and decrease time to degree. University transfer centers should provide lounge and study space, kitchen facilities and student storage space, to maximize the time these students spend on campus. Clear and accessible articulation and admissions agreements need to be maintained and publicized, and all transfer students need to be evaluated and refreshed as the needs of the population change. Transfer students have different needs than their traditional counterparts and require specialized attention to thrive at the university. One of my interviewees described the difference between the typical freshman and a transfer student ‘we are such opposites: they are struggling to learn about life as part of college, we are struggling to learn from college as part of our life.’

Findings, Feelings and Future Considerations

In discussing this limited sample, my findings, and the literature informing this study with my engineering educator colleagues from around the state, we agreed that

high quality interactions between faculty, staff, and students are critical to transfer student acclimation and success at the university. We were also in accord that programs introducing community college students to the realities of university life, and preparing them for the rigor of its academic standards, reduced transfer shock, and increased engagement. Accurate and well publicized course to course articulations and non-ambiguous transfer admission guarantees are essential to informed decision-making and shorten the time to degree for transfer students. Multiple constraints complicate the academic journey of transfer students and policies and procedures need to be redesigned and adopt some flexibility to meet the diverse needs of the transfer student population.

My new knowledge about transfer student adjustment suggests that some simple changes could vastly improve the success of this rich population. Since the engineering curricula are very structured, many new transfer students could save money and time by enrolling via university extension during their first terms at the university. Many of these students only need a few courses to qualify for upper division major classes, but due to course scheduling only *need* to be enrolled in one or two subjects for a semester or two. Current university policy does not allow part-time enrollment, so these student must take 12.0 units regardless of subject requirements. Many of them would be better served to attend school in limited status until they have the prerequisites to move into the junior level courses. Enrolling via university extension would decrease both the time and financial investment for their initial school terms. An alternate solution to some scheduling constraints is to allow students missing a few lower-division courses to take upper division courses for which their prerequisites are met. That would potentially

shorten time to degree and decrease the accrual of unneeded units. I will propose these solutions to the administration.

Furthermore, the college needs to extend services to community colleges outside our service area. Both the literature and the students' stories showed that partnerships between institutions hasten acclimation and promote realistic expectations about the transfer process. Due to the obvious success of transfer preparation and bridge programs, I will propose that I make outreach visits to more community colleges, especially those offering pre-engineering courses. I believe that lack of communication undermines students' ability to connect with the resources that will facilitate successful transfers and that should be fairly easy to correct. Closely correlated with miscommunication is the missed opportunity to make person to person contact with students. In this era of electronic messaging, interpersonal passion for education is not shared frequently enough. Until email can laugh and rejoice with, or cry and console, our students, face to face interactions can not be replaced. Perhaps I can develop a program that utilizes university students in the Honors Program as ambassadors for transfer success, as tutors, as peer advisors and as role models. Sweeping program reevaluation and visionary leadership are required to buoy the transfer system and to truly support this under-served campus population.

I have taken fledgling steps toward clarifying and simplifying the transfer admission guarantees between the 116 community colleges that potentially prepare students to transfer to the College of Engineering. The agreement drafted in the early 1990s was antiquated and did not meet current students' needs. Drawing on multiple resources I reduced the number of courses required for admission and verified that the

new criteria shortened time to degree for most transfer students. I plan to incorporate lessons learned from this project when I redesign summer Orientation for Transfer Students and will begin outreach to community colleges beyond our services area to extend my influence to students from schools in all parts of the state. I will further my span of influence by training other outreach counselors and transfer center advisors on the benefits of, and requirements to, transferring to the College of Engineering. I will empower others to inform and support potential transfer students by sharing tools and resources with my colleagues.

A variety of qualitative and quantitative studies are required to better understand the experiences and perceptions of transfer students. Much can be learned by examining unique human experiences, as both the common, and individual, revelations of student stories compliment educators current knowledge. Our ability to serve this population is enriched by synthesizing and integrating information from multiple sources and it is time to build on missed opportunity in providing new transfer services and programs. This project has extended my assessment knowledge, deepened my appreciation of the unique struggles of transfer students and has changed the way I manage some of my workload. My own academic journey has been nourished, both as a learner and as a teacher.

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