The Changing Nature of Today's Transfer Students

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Community, an NBC sitcom, debuted in the fall of 2009, promoting itself as a comedic look into the lives of misfits at fictional Greendale Community College, where "remedial teens, twentysomethings drop-outs, middle-aged divorcees, and old people [keep] their minds active as they circle the drain of eternity" (Fitzpatrick, 2009). The college's commitment to the "Straight As of Greendale: Accessibility, Affordability, Air Conditioning, Awesome New Friends, A Lot of Classes" (Greendale Community College, 2009) nowhere acknowledges its role in providing access to universities.

This is a substantial contrast with the reality of the Community College of Denver (CCD), located in Colorado as is the fictional Greendale. At CCD, educators work with the least prepared and most poverty-stricken student body in the state and yet produce a robust pipeline of highly qualified students to the state's universities through transfer (Rouche, Ely, & Rouche, 2001). Or the efforts of Ron Harlan, at the nearly-same-named Glendale Community College in California, whose biology program feeds a substantial number of transfer students into the most prestigious universities in the state (Glendale Community College, 2006).

How students are encouraged to transfer and informed about university entry is an important part of their access. As Handel (2007) notes, there is a stunning array of resources, guidebooks, counseling, and web sites to attract and inform first-time students. What, comparably, is available for transfers? Handel made an extensive exploration of and search for such resources and found them exceedingly and comparatively scarce. Finding this information on university websites often required an insider's knowledge of university bureaucratic structures and nomenclature.

Universities are beginning to understand that transfer students have particular needs for information and services and are starting to provide them. However, this growing awareness of transfer students' needs may not be typical, as evidenced by the following report of an event at a large, public university in the fall of 2009. The university held a spirit rally for first-year students in the football stadium to conclude a week-long orientation program. (The event offered to transfer students was either one day on campus or a half day with an online component.) Thousands of new students were in the stands, but the stadium still had many more empty seats than taken. A reporter for the university student newspaper interviewed two transfer students, new to the university, who had come to attend the event—but were denied entry. So they watched the rally through the bars of a locked gate (Lyme, 2009). As a metaphor, it is especially apt.

Who is being turned away at the welcome gates? It might be a substantial proportion of our students, in some few cases even a majority. Approximately 60% of university graduates nationwide complete degrees with credits from more than one institution (Adelman, 2006). In Texas, it is closer to 80% (Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, 2009). The more-than-one-institution qualification is a low-threshold definition of transfer students; that definition might include university entry with an associate degree in hand, substantial credits from another university, or just a summer
course away from the home campus. On a national basis, part of the problem in knowing how many transfer students there are, who they are, and how they perform is the lack of a common definition of transfer student. The multi-institution qualification further suggests a student commitment to degree completion by whatever means necessary, and not unalloyed institutional affinity.

Transfer is not a simple matter of transitioning from community college to university; nevertheless, the primary source of bachelor’s degree candidates at universities is the community college (Horn & Weko, 2009). Conventional, community-college-to-university transfers are still the largest component of the transfer population (Handel, 2007). At the University of California at Berkeley (2010), for example, among the most prestigious public universities in the nation, community college transfer students represent one third of the newly admitted students each year and one quarter of the overall student body. As a result, dependence upon descriptions of community college students, while imprecise for this purpose, does at least provide some view of the transfer pool. Community college students nationwide tend to be older than their counterparts at universities. They are more likely to be Black or Hispanic. They have lower personal incomes. Their enrollment patterns are more sporadic, and they often enroll part-time. These are all factors correlated with degree-completion risks (Horn & Weko).

What Is Known About Transfer Students

Without a common, national definition of who qualifies for description as a transfer student, higher education professionals typically are dependent upon the definitions provided in research reports. State governments, the entities most concerned with defining transfer students, and particularly with establishing financial aid and academic credit policies related to their mobility, employ a variety of definitions ranging from quite minimal first-institution enrollment to completion of an associate degree (Felts & Townsend, 2009). Moreover, other sources suggest that the number of transfer students and their enrollment at transfer-oriented institutions is increasing (American Association of Community Colleges, 2010; Horn & Weko, 2009).

Horn and Weko (2009), working on behalf of the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), and from the 2004/2006 Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study (U.S. Department of Education, 2006), examined the rates of transfer from community colleges to universities, looking particularly at students who entered community colleges during the 2003-2004 academic year. Three years later, approximately 19% of those students had transferred to another institution: 11% to universities and 8% to other community colleges. The American Association of Community Colleges (2010) reported that the fall 2009 enrollment in community colleges was nearly eight million credit students. The two-year increase in this enrollment is 16.9%, or approximately 1.2 million students.

How many transfer students are there? The target is fuzzy because of a lack of definition, and it keeps moving with trends of increased enrollment at key points in the transfer pipeline. But consideration of these data sources suggest that there are a million or more students each year who are moving from community colleges to universities. It is important to note that nearly as many students are moving among community colleges. Other elements of the transfer swirl not included in this conservative estimate are the number of students who reverse transfer, or move from universities to community colleges. In California, as many students move in the reverse direction each year in the public sector as move in the conventional direction (Hagedorn, 2010).

However large the number is, it could be larger. Horn and Weko (2009) categorized the transfer intentions of enrolled community college students into three groups: (a) strongly directed, (b) moderately directed, and (c) not directed. Their evaluation was based on a combination of
student declaration of intention to transfer toward a bachelor's degree and enrollment and persistence characteristics that would support that ambition. The study's low overall transfer rate to four-year institutions of 11% can perhaps be partially explained by the fact that many students had little or no intention to transfer, nor did their enrollment patterns support such a move in the three-year time frame of the study. Why hold students responsible for a “failure” if they never intended to pursue the measured outcome (Tinto, 1994)? Yet, the Horn and Welko findings are more troublesome when strongly directed students are isolated for analysis. These students constituted 56% of the nationally representative sample and not only had indicated—and acted upon—intentions to transfer toward a four-year degree, but they were more likely to be prepared for such by high school curriculum and performance. Yet even among this highest transfer-potential group, only 28% had transferred within three years, and only 20% to four-year institutions. This suggests opportunities for better policies, more institutional action, and more facilitated outreach to qualified, transfer-intending students.

**What Is Unknown About Transfer Students**

As an associate of the National Institute for the Study of Transfer Students, I have worked with graduate students and others on the creation and maintenance of an annotated bibliography of transfer research products. I have had the opportunity to examine most of the research available, and what stands out about transfer students and their educational experience is what is not known about them. Given the vast numbers of these students, it is surprising how few scholars are focused on the issues, and the topics on which too little is known. The implications of these gaps include a decreased ability to target services and otherwise make efforts to support transfer student success.

**Transfer Shock**

Transfer shock is an example of such a topic. The phenomenon is generally understood as an initial dip in academic performance immediately following the transfer experience. As Laanan (2001) noted in his review of research literature on this topic, "Even with the abundance of research, conflicting results have been reported, ranging from the drop in GPA, called transfer shock, to an increase in GPA after transfer, sometimes called transfer ecstasy" (p. 7). Almost all of this research is quantitative, and so while strong in showing us the what of a particular circumstance or campus location, it is less useful in explaining the why.

The why that is missing is whether transfer shock, when established, is a matter of intrinsic student ability and such related factors as the quality of classroom preparation at the sending institution, or of the quality of institutional support for transfer student transition. Are transfer students experiencing a predictable challenge as a result of being at a more rigorous school, or are they foundering because they have not been given the transitional support generally taken for granted for other students new to the institution? Going from the typically smaller sections of a community college, for example, to class sections of several hundred is an adjustment for most people—one that can, and should, be anticipated and addressed.

**Student Engagement**

The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) has begun examining engagement levels of transfer students as compared to native students, and the results show a general pattern of lower levels of engaged learning, or at least practices and behaviors associated with it, for transfer students.
Transfer students are less involved in campus clubs, service-learning, research projects with faculty and other activities that constitute student engagement (NSSE, 2008).

This could be due to factors that students bring with them, such as a higher tendency to withdraw off campus, or being older on average, and more likely to have family responsibilities that we take time and attention away from out-of-class activities and learning experiences (NSSE, 2008). Another explanation could be that institutions make no particular efforts to get transfer students engaged, leaving it to the students to find and take advantage of opportunities for classroom engagement. Research, so far, is limited. Knowing more about the possible causes of transfer shock, if evidenced, is an essential element in formulating efforts to minimize or eliminate the problem.

Student Voice

Most research on transfer students relies upon analyses of existing student data, such as institutional retention rates and academic accomplishment (e.g., Adelman, 2006). Some research based on surveys of transfer students. There is relatively little research, beyond small scale studies that delves into the transfer experience using students' own words. Flaga (2006), for example, drew rich input from students on their transfer experiences to articulate a number of dimensions. However, the study, a series of interviews, was conducted among only 35 students single institution, Michigan State University. These are factors that compromise the generalization or transferability of the findings. Moving closer to the ideal of large-scale qualitative study is the Pell Institute study of positive transfer policies, practices, and philosophies at six campuses (Smith, Miller, & Bermoe, 2009).

Surveys can be designed to ask students about their experiences, but without the original input formed by the student, the questions are more likely to be nonspecific and miss the mark on concerns. Larger scale qualitative inquiries—capturing original student voice on issues with which they identify—would provide a better understanding of transfer student experiences in real-world complex contexts. A generalization about quantitative methods vis-à-vis qualitative methods that the former test theory, while the latter form theory. In the absence of a substantial body of qualitative data, doubt should exist as to whether the theoretical frameworks of transfer success are sufficient, and perhaps more importantly, if enough transfer student issues and experiences have been precisely identified for institutions to develop the most effective programs for students.

While short-term studies are useful, a more long-term commitment to capturing the transfer student experience beyond the student's first transfer year is also necessary. We cannot assume that all effects of transfer and transition will be experienced in a single semester or year after transfer. Less conventional means of research, such as blog analysis, could also be useful.

Gaps Between Intentions and Results in Transfer Policies

States have increasingly attempted to enhance transfer rates and success, particularly for two- and four-year institutions, by legislative and regulatory intervention, such as mandating core credit acceptance (Gross & Goldhaber, 2009). But research that has examined bachelor's degree completion rates finds scant evidence between the success of states that have highly regulated transfer acceptance and degree articulation laws and policies, and those that do not. As a result, gaps in bachelor's degree attainment between those who begin at community colleges and those who begin at universities, while varying by state, still persist (e.g., Gross & Goldhaber). Despite intention of these policies and laws, little beneficial effect has been found. These findings, however do not illuminate the issue of where the slippage between policy and outcomes occurs. Gross and Goldhaber state the issue plainly: "Two simple explanations for the policy failure are weak de-
or poor implementation" (p. 26). Are the policies that are intended to increase bachelor’s degree completion via transfer at fault, or is the lack of significant impact on outcomes more a matter of poor policy implementation, primarily by institutions? Again, the available research has not been able to answer this question.

With colleagues at the University of North Texas, I am engaged in research that will explore these issues at the institutional level, by examining the implementation of state law and policy and conducting confidential interviews with campus administrators about which policies help—and which impede—their intentions to complete more degrees via transfer paths. More ground-level examination of this sort in other locations would be helpful.

Assumptions and Prejudices

Even the most ardent transfer advocates have campus colleagues who believe transfer students are less desirable for enrollment. The assumptions can be many and varied, such as the beliefs that transfer students come, largely, from weak academic environments and thus have inflated credentials; are likely to have failed elsewhere; present with poor academic skills; and are not as committed as native students. These assumptions persist even in light of solid evidence that students who transfer to universities, particularly those with associate degrees and a structured approach toward their goals, complete bachelor’s degrees at commendably high levels with good academic achievement (Adelman, 2006).

Assumptions are one thing. Prejudices, and their influence on practice, are another. Do prejudices affect the programs and supports that institutions offer? Do transfer students pick up on any ambient environment of lack of respect and regard, and attendant low expectations? If so, does this depress even their attempts to transfer, let alone confidence in seeking out guidance, opportunities for more engaged learning—even such things as a willingness to ask a question in class? Studies have shown that cultural and institutional welcome and inclusion are important to educational outcomes for minority students, first-generation students, and others (Barefoot et al., 2005; Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt, & Associates, 2005). It is a logical extension to suppose that this would also apply to transfer students. Research on these issues would go a long way toward making a case for the efficacy of progressive institutional practice—and the education of educators.

Transfers and Disciplines

While there is a growing body of research on transfer students and the efficacy of institutional supports, there is very little that is discipline specific. Even single-institution case studies of best practice, supported by evidence of results, would be helpful, but there are precious few even of those.

An area that appears to be making inroads in disciplinary focus and the publication of research or best practices is the STEM disciplines (i.e., science, technology, engineering, and math). Driven in part by disciplinary interest in increasing both minority participation and the sheer numbers of graduates, and encouraged by the National Science Foundation and other federal support for such initiatives, there is considerable dissemination of information that can be adapted for program design in other places. (See, for example, best practices in STEM disciplines highlighted by the National Alliance for Partnerships in Equity Education Foundation, 2010.)
Students Who Do Not Transfer

An increasing amount is known about students who transfer and their educational experience. But what of students who could transfer, but do not? Why, and what can be done for this group?

Perhaps the issue is that the basic unit of analysis, our research and effectiveness paradigm, is not truly the individual student, but the institution. In Texas, for example, community colleges have tripled the number of Associate of Arts (AA) degree holders, a gold standard of transferability in about a decade. These are commendable results. Universities during this same period accepted virtually 100% of all AA degree holders who applied. Again, that is a demonstration of project and partnership. What, then, is the issue? Rather consistently throughout the first decade of the 21st century, only 20% of AA degree holders even applied for admission to a state university. Of the remaining 80%, there is no information on where they are, why they did not continue, whether they had impediments or issues that could have been resolved by intervention.

How can these gaps in the research be remedied? One way to jump start the agenda is to be more diligent and deliberate about reporting their experiences in the literature. Keeping valuable information in the grey literature of institutional reports and internal documents on the individual institution, but not higher education as a whole. Conventional scholars, including those at the doctoral level, could fruitfully focus more on the topics of concern.

The Future Transfer Student

As intriguing as the questions surrounding who transfers are, and what more could be known about them, more pressing and pertinent questions surround who the transfer student will be, not in 15 or 20 years, but in five or less.

The dynamics may change more rapidly than many educators and universities realize, and there is always an easy case to make. What does not change more rapidly than most of higher education realizes? But as with other large social shifts (e.g., the aging of the population, technology replacing manufacturing jobs), some institutions will be early adapters and reap early benefits, will catch up and recover, and a few will come to realize, in retrospect, that failure to understand the new environment was a substantial factor in decline.

The following list is a set of circumstances about transfer students that could dominate the environment and institutions' reactions to it in the near-term future:

- Transfer students will be more numerous than ever. A combination of factors will clearly ensure that the number of students presenting for admission at universities will previously earned credits with them.

- Economic conditions in the near future will result in more students being unable or unwilling to afford or take on the debt that four years at a university, public or private, requires. States will push students toward this circumstance by budgets that send school districts to higher education, causing colleges and universities to simultaneously raise tuition beyond inflation rates while cutting the quality of delivered services. Virtually every state has cut appropriations to colleges and universities as a result of the recession. California, for example, by 20% (Douglass, 2010). At this writing, substantial economic recovery has yet to begin, while federal economic stimulus funds that shielded some students are running out. Early attendance at a community college with an intention to transfer and complete a four-year institution will be an explicit strategy for more students. Their families will find it increasingly difficult to rationalize paying $20,000 or more
to sit in lecture classes of 500 students led by teaching assistants, when equivalent courses enrolling fewer students and taught by professional, credentialed instructors can be taken for a fraction of the cost at community colleges.

Prices will rise at community colleges, too, but the actual dollar gaps between community college and university tuitions will continue to spread apart; a 10% increase on $1,000 is far less than a 10% increase on $10,000. These fiscal dynamics have been on the rise for years but are reaching critical proportions with the onset and persistence of the recession. Prices, most likely, will not be rolled back when the recession ends on Wall Street and Main Street. The American Association of Community Colleges (2009) reported a surge in community college enrollments in the fall of 2009, with credit-enrolled students jumping by more than 11% over the previous fall. Among the reasons suggested for this were greater financial need among previously financially-stable students and families, the growing gaps in tuition costs between two- and four-year institutions, and enrollment caps at universities brought on by their own financial pressures.

Whether individuals and families are willing to take on debt to finance college may become less of an issue if the federal government moves more affirmatively toward deregulation and even ownership of the student loan industry. But this will be offset in large part by a recession-induced hesitation to accept credit even when offered, and the reluctance of Latino and other new and growing sectors of the college-age population to take on the debt loads that have been relatively common for today’s—or yesterday’s—college students. Research by the Institute for Higher Education Policy (2008), based on analyses of national databases, found that Hispanic students were less likely to borrow money for college than were White or Black students, even when presenting greater unmet financial need.

◊ As transfer students diversify by socioeconomic background, it is a reasonable supposition that they will arrive with more social capital, more savvy, and less willingness to take no for an answer. As noted earlier, national research on statewide transfer policy efficacy suggests there is little difference in eventual bachelor’s degree attainment between states with highly regulated or minimally regulated transfer policies (Gross & Goldhaber, 2009), with this being a function of poor policy and/or poor implementation. Universities can be adept at foot-dragging and dodging on policies with which they are in fundamental disagreement, and even when there is institutional commitment, the loose administrative couplings of universities makes uniformity of policy across colleges and departments problematic.

As a result, transfer students can have their credits accepted, but not applied to a degree, even when the matchup is fairly obvious. The grounds for nonapplication can be as trivial as the use of a different (but quality) textbook, a different break point between two sequential courses, or an untested assumption of inadequate rigor. Unless the university offers a major in electives, semesters and years of actual progress toward a degree can be lost. The extent to which this is a substantial issue merits more research, but virtually anyone who has worked with transfer students on these issues will have stories to tell of fairly arbitrary credit rejections.

◊ Web-based information sources, independent of individual institutions, will develop to consolidate transfer information and rights and to educate the student consumer. The utility of these sites will range from helping students gain assurance that the lower-division courses they are taking are transfer eligible or logical for their intended, long-term objectives, to providing instruction on how to challenge denials of course credits.
◊ As the number of community college transfer students grow, they will increasingly inclu
students who could attain direct university entry but do not. These students are more like
to have parents and siblings with college degrees and experience who will be watching t
situation closely and be less deferential to institutional decision makers. Many in studen
affairs have come to dismiss such involvements as will-not-let-go dispositions of helicopte
parents, and there is no doubt that many intrusions into the institution-student relatio
ship are over the line. But maybe the helicopter is not the right analogy. Maybe it is t
institution as a court, and the court is uncomfortable with the presence of lawyers at
the filing of amicus curiae briefs. Students should not have to be their own “jailhouse lawye
to get justice, and they will increasingly find that they have supporters and informati
sources to assist their case.

◊ Transfer students will have friends in the halls of government. As more students beg
the journey toward a four-year degree in community colleges, the kinks in the system a
grinding of gears between institutions will become glaringly apparent. There are very n
prospects that the percentages of bachelor's degree completions will decline as this sw
quickly presents at university doors. To the degree that these institutions benefit from st
and federal funds—and that is virtually all of them—legislators will become more involv
more vocal, more active in calling on institutions to change practices that they percei
as needing to be "fixed." Is this improper intrusion into institutional prerogatives, or t
enforcement of efficiency in government expenditures? Is it more, as Kingman Brewst
former president of Yale University, once said of federal intrusion into institutional pra
and policy through the power of the purse, "Now that I have bought the button, I ha
the right to design the coat"? (cited in Sommer, 1994, p. ix). Or is it legitimate frustrati
with the fact that more than 60 years after the Truman Commission Report called fo
much stronger role for community colleges in national education and economic strategi
stitutions are still forming committees, issuing white papers of intention, and genera
wriggling out of strong and direct articulation of credits?

The best chance that institutions have of avoiding regulation that is as ham handed a
one-size-fits-all as state and federal policy can often be is to more actively develop go
and student-considerate transfer policies and procedures, to implement them uniform
and to work with other institutions and governments to replicate and more broac
establish them.

◊ Transfer students will come to know, and use, the fact that they have choices when selecti
a four-year institution. Handel (2007) has observed the vast gap in information resourc
available to transfer students compared to those thrust upon first-time college studen
who are recent high school graduates. College marketers have even refined the art
training tracking beams and smooth pitches on the most promising of middle school
now living with mom and dad, thousands of miles and thousands of days from camp.
How long will it be before they begin to target and woo students who have some coll
seasoning, will likely graduate at rates comparable to native students (Adelman 200
and have largely shaped the directions they want to go? Physical proximity will decli
in centrality of transfer ambition and choices, and students will have an increasingly la
array of choices, both physical for the more traditional college experience of fraterni
and football games, or virtual through the increasing sophistication and legitimate ca
of online education. Degree programs and institutional pitches will be tailored to bus
prior educational experience toward the most efficient accomplishment of degrees.'
use of multi-institution application processes will make this comparative shopping easier and more transparent.

The implications include the fact that universities that do not recognize and adapt to this environment of more transfer students with more transfer options will sometimes see their applications and yield from such students decline. Some universities can afford to let that happen, knowing that there are three or more people in line for each available seat. Most institutions, however, operate on thin margins dependent upon steady or increasing enrollment and might quickly find themselves selling transfer buggy whips in an electric-car age.

The great diversity of transfer students will include more veterans. By now, this is of little surprise to those in higher education. Whether they have prepared for this escalating influx from the military services as the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq wind down, where approximately two million personnel have served (American Council on Education, 2009), is another question. Even now, almost 4% of all undergraduate enrollments in the United States are from those in active duty or reserve status with the armed forces. The new GI Bill is likely to swell these numbers even further (American Council on Education, 2009).

Just as some colleges and universities have emerged as leaders in the provision of educational services and the offering of college courses to active duty personnel, some institutions will emerge as veteran friendly and will reap the rewards of those efforts. And those institutions that focus largely or solely on anticipated issues with post-traumatic stress syndrome or assume that veterans will be like other transfer students, only more mentally damaged, will most certainly not make that cut. The American Council on Education (2010) has taken a strong and early leadership role in encouraging attention to this issue, and provides informational resources to both institutions and veteran students, a great many of whom will begin conventional enrollment after accumulating credits from a variety of sources while still enlisted. Evaluation of these credits with a disposition toward acceptance will become an important agenda item not just for individuals but also for veteran advocacy groups and the federal government.

Transfer students will continue to be a complex, diverse, promising, frustrating, messy group of folks. They will continue to apply with either a few or many prior credits. Their preparation will be weak, and it will be strong. They will be focused, and they will be unfocused on their objectives. They will work hard, and they will get by. They will be Black, White, Latino, Asian, and everything else. They will have high financial need and great self-sufficiency. They will fit right into the conventional college population, and they will come with families and off-campus commitments. Institutions will need to ferret out one-size-fits-all approaches to their acceptance—in all senses of that word—and adapt to the fact that transfer students are a very substantial part of the future. It is not just a matter of institutional positioning and doing well. It is a matter of national priority, fulfilling higher education's mission of improving society through education, and doing good.