

# Recommendations for Ensuring Transfer Student Success

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This monograph focuses on the growing population of transfer students in higher education. The authors have offered their perspectives on transfer students, given details on transfer students' complexity and diversity, and helped define current transfer issues. In addition, they have provided frameworks for institutions to assess their transfer student policies and practices, revisit their articulation agreements, and create programs specifically designed for transfer students. Using the case studies, examples of practices, and research presented, institutions can begin or continue their work to build strong transfer programs. The future of our colleges and universities depends on our ability to effectively manage transfer student enrollment, retention, and graduation. In closing this monograph, we would like to share what we have learned and offer specific recommendations for postsecondary institutions.

As we read each contribution, a central theme emerged: Institutions are realizing and, therefore, reacting to the significant impact transfer students are making in areas such as enrollment management, public policy, articulation, and student services. The degree of impact will vary among colleges and universities, but the department, office, or specialty area where it is most keenly felt is where the important work of incorporating and assimilating transfer students into the campus culture often begins. Yet, wherever the focus on transfer begins at an institution, efforts to welcome and sustain these students must become campus-wide if they are to be universally successful. We offer the following insights from this monograph to guide higher education professionals and institutions in initiating this process.

*Transfer students differ in many ways and their differences will continue to evolve over time.* With greater numbers of students beginning in community colleges and/or completing degree programs by attending multiple institutions, colleges and universities must find ways to create collaborative pathways of success for these students. As the chapter authors have noted, planning and foresight are required to assist both students and institutions in reaching their goals of access, success, and graduation. Personalization of pathways to meet individual needs is critical. Institutions should be intentional in designing recruitment, articulation, orientation, and retention services for this population. Due to the rapidly changing makeup of transfers, colleges and universities must also periodically assess their campus populations and stay abreast of national trends to ensure transfer strategies are effective. For example, while today's transfer population has significant minority and first-generation representation, returning veterans, many of whom have taken online or distance-learning courses while deployed, will become a major demographic in future transfer student populations and require very different services.

At the same time, transfer students are likely to face challenges similar to any student enrolled in higher education. A common transfer myth has been that these students come to institutions with clear ideas and goals for their education. However, as the monograph authors have pointed out, transfer students can arrive with the same indecision about a major as native students. Similarly, transfer students are frequently assumed to be college savvy based on their past educational

experiences. Like all new students, transfers require orientation to the unique policies and culture of their new institution and will benefit from assistance throughout the transition process and the first year of attendance. In sum, transfer students will need specialized support, but they are also likely to benefit from some of the same services that institutions offer to native students.

*There must be a collaborative focus among all constituents in the transfer process including the students.* Institutions should be concerned about students' success and thus build their programs, services, and policies around a framework of helping students develop purpose and work their way through the complex system of higher education. Frequent communication with the transfer population is critical to keep policies and procedures current and effective. Collaborative agreements and partnerships among colleges and universities are also essential and beneficial to both institutions and students. Articulation agreements should become living documents that create pathways of success through the intentional focus on students and not just policies. Collaboration ensures that students can successfully navigate from one institution to the other. Shared and clearly defined missions and values that support complex enrollment patterns will help build partnerships that support transfers. The focus should be on academic alignment with sister schools with efforts happening at both the institution and state level. Because state and institutional leaders can be instrumental in the development of a framework for academic alignment among postsecondary institutions, it is important to include and educate them about transfer issues and the impact of diverse enrollment patterns on degree attainment.

*Students need a recognizable path that leads them not only to an institution but also guides them through their coursework and supports them to graduation and beyond.* Previous efforts at educational alignment have been disjointed and focused on processes such as articulation, course equivalencies, and number of credit hours rather than on individual students and their needs. New efforts must focus on helping students develop a purpose at the beginning of their higher education journey and then working with students to create a set of educational experiences that will support that purpose and culminate in a degree. Ideally, transfer students are engaged in career and educational planning before beginning their first class at the sending institution and continue that planning into their first year and beyond at the receiving institution.

## Recommendations

This section offers a five-step plan to implement these broad guidelines for supporting transfer students. A strategic order to the steps is proposed; however, sequencing should be determined by what an institution wants or needs to accomplish. The steps are listed initially and described in greater detail below. To comprehensively support transfer student success

1. Determine who the transfer students are and what they want to achieve
2. Define a vision for transfer student success that includes outcomes and guiding principles
3. Review and assess current policies and procedures to determine their impact on transfers and their alignment with the vision for transfer student success
4. Evaluate current programs and revise or create programs to support transfer student success
5. Assess new institutional outcomes and programs to ensure transfer student success

First, institutions must research and understand their transfer population. Institutional research staff are key players in acquiring and analyzing this information. In addition, data from transfer student focus groups and input from special interest organizations can provide insight into transfer needs

from the students' perspective. An analysis of transfer students at the institutional level should address the following questions:

- ◇ How many transfer students are on campus?
- ◇ What do current transfer students look like, and how are they likely to change in the future?
- ◇ What needs do these students have?
- ◇ What courses are they taking, and are they succeeding?
- ◇ How many transfer students need preparatory, prerequisite, or developmental courses? and
- ◇ Are there enough classes available to meet general education and upper-division major requirements to ensure that students can take classes in the correct sequence to avoid costly graduation time delays?

Once needs are determined, a vision for transfer programs can be created and outcomes aligned with this vision. Administrators and faculty are encouraged to take a student-centered approach in developing outcomes and principles and to incorporate a transfer student focus into all undergraduate processes. Examples include incorporating transfer student topics in professional development opportunities and providing career advisors with specific training to help them better understand transfer student's complexity and diversity. Outcome statements must specify how they will be measured and how results will be applied to improvement. Along with the development of a vision and outcomes, a specific cycle for review, revision, and renewal should be implemented to ensure alignment with student needs. The reality that transfer students are an ever-changing population needs to be taken into consideration throughout the entire planning, implementation, and assessment process.

To adequately assess the impact of current campus programs, policies, and procedures on transfers, an inclusive process must be designed. For example, when evaluating course enrollment patterns, input from all faculty will be valuable since transfer students enroll in the full range of college courses (i.e., preparatory, ESL, general education, entry level, and upper division). Sharing these data with the academic administration can help ensure seat availability for transfer students. Inclusiveness in the review and assessment of orientation programs might entail involving the admissions office in the process to make sure personnel fully understand the need to have transcripts evaluated quickly to facilitate accurate advising. With all transfer student programs and services, it is critical that every stakeholder remains informed and that the information exchange is accurate, timely, and frequent.

The data gathered in step three can then be used to evaluate current programs to determine whether they are sufficient in achieving the goal of transfer student success or if new initiatives are required with clearer pathways. The program areas of orientation, advising, and support services especially deserve close scrutiny because of their impacts on transfers. This monograph has presented a strong case for the development of separate and intentional transfer student orientation programs to best serve these students. The benefits of dedicated transfer advisors have also been enumerated along with the effectiveness of a transfer center model. Other recommendations include collaborating with the student activity office for assistance in establishing clubs and organization that foster transfer students' enculturation into the campus environment and working with the institutional development office to find grants to support the work with this population.

In addition to the strategies noted above, institutions might also develop transfer seminars that address the needs of both inbound and outbound students. An outbound seminar or workshop could focus on preparing the student for transfer ensuring prerequisites are met, applications are on file, and orientations for the new institution are scheduled. In addition, topics could be included that help students realize the differences between the inbound and outbound institutions and

aligning their expectations accordingly. Inbound transfers could benefit from a seminar that guides them through the culture of the new institution and offers a reflection of why they have chosen to transfer. For undecided transfers, the seminar may help them explore major and career options and to formulate an academic plan. First-year seminars have proven to be effective in helping entering college students make successful social and academic transitions; however, the efficacy of this approach needs to be weighed against adding course requirements for students who may already have amassed a large number of credits and may have satisfied their elective and general education requirements. Moreover, the goals, structure, and success of these courses have not been researched significantly. Additional experimentation and study in this area is needed to continue to find ways of improving transfer success.

The final recommendation is to close the loop. Once a definition of transfer students has been agreed upon, a vision for success established, policies affecting transfers reviewed, and new programs created, the institution must assess how it is meeting the defined outcomes and determine whether these initiatives are successful. As in step three, this process should not be done in isolation. All stakeholders in the transfer process must be involved, including the students. Successes should be celebrated, even if they do not measure up to original expectations; program evolution acknowledged to avoid reacting too quickly; modifications reassessed; and the entire cycle repeated to ensure outcomes continue to be met and that the most effective programs are in place. When programs are deemed successful, institutions should concentrate on fully institutionalizing them, and more importantly, on sharing their knowledge with the academic community beyond the individual college or university.

## Final Thoughts

Two-year institutions continue to be the path to a baccalaureate. The majority of students are no longer earning a bachelor's degree in four years from a single institution. Students are achieving their degrees through many different enrollment patterns and timelines, which include everything from advanced credit to simultaneous attendance at multiple institutions. Additional research is needed to study the enrollment patterns of students and the institutions they choose to attend. The research should focus on why students transfer, whether and how transferring helps them reach their academic goals, and what systems effectively support their progress.

Demands for accountability at the state and national level will continue to influence the work with transfer students and the efforts institutions make to quantify the success of these students. With a greater emphasis on achieving the baccalaureate degree at the national level, institutions should continue to monitor how students achieve their degrees with an understanding that traditional methods may no longer be effective. Institutions must develop a model of review, research, and reflection to determine whether they are providing the best pathway for transfer students' retention, progression, and graduation.

Finally, it is strongly recommended that transfer students have advocates who remind institutional leaders to consider their needs when making policy decisions. In particular, advocates can argue against a one-size-fits-all approach to services and programming. In providing direct service to transfer students, advocates can facilitate the creation of individual pathways to success and educational goal attainment.

Today's institutions have a two-fold responsibility concerning transfer students: They must present a coherent and competitive transfer pathway (both inbound and outbound) to attract this growing population to their doors, and they must be accountable to policy makers in their ability to facilitate the transfer process and, ultimately, graduation of students who have enrolled at multiple institutions. It is hoped that this volume has provided insights and innovations to assist higher education professionals and institutions in meeting this challenge.