Creating Bridges Between Institutions: A Brief Look at Advisors' Roles in Transfer Student Transition (2009)[*]

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About half of first-year students take advantage of open entry and low tuition at two-year institutions. Cejda, 1997, noted that eighty-percent of these students report their intentions of transferring to pursue a bachelor's degree (as cited in Berger and Malaney, 2003, p 5); however, only forty-percent get on track to transfer. Of those on a transfer track, only about ten-percent actually transfer, and only a small percentage of transferring students actually complete the bachelor's degree (Berger and Malaney, 2003). This failure to attain the bachelor degree is an unfortunate result of the barriers many students face when attempting transfer from one institution to another.

The following article explores the barriers that affect student persistence, with special attention given to areas that impact transfer students. The authors suggest programs and activities that advisors can initiate and/or participate in that will address these barriers.

Barriers

Most college students experience barriers that can make persistence and degree completion challenging. Transfer students must learn to navigate these barriers at least twice, once at their initial institution, and then again when they transfer. The types of barriers transfer students face may determine whether students choose to transfer, and may affect students' likelihood to graduate.

Barriers discussed here are broken into four categories: (1) cost of attendance, (2) policies, (3) campus climate, (4) and post-transfer adjustment.

Cost of Attendance

One of the largest barriers to student persistence is the cost of attending college. Dougherty and Kienzl (2006) found that socioeconomic status was the biggest contributor to failure to transfer. The differences in tuition costs between two-year and four-year institutions often are not made up within federal financial aid. There has been a decline in the amount of money provided students through federal grants, and an increase in the number of federal loans taken by students (Zamani, 2001). This can be detrimental to the persistence of students who most need financial assistance as they often work while attending school, take fewer credits at a time, and stop out to save money, all of which prolong completion of their degrees.

Students must connect with financial aid counselors or programs that offer scholarships,

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[*] Modified to correct formatting from the online version at the *NACADA Clearinghouse of Academic Advising Resources*: http://www.nacada.ksu.edu/Resources/Clearinghouse/View-Articles/Advising-Transfer-Students.aspx.

e.g., Women's Centers, ROTCs, major departments, etc. Additionally, they need help in creating class schedules that will maximize the use of their money, *i.e.*, prevent them from repeating or taking unnecessary courses.

Policies

Boswell (2004) identifies how the failure of statewide policies to align secondary institutions creates barriers for transfer students. He talked specifically about (1) the misalignment of high school graduation and college entrance requirements, (2) lack of a standard tracking system, (3) failure to provide need-based financial aid for students, and (4) lack of statewide articulation agreements (p 26-27). The articulation issue is particularly problematic for students transferring between in-state schools.

Although many states have tried to mitigate the cost of transferring through the creation of statewide articulation agreements (Anderson, Alfonso, and Sun, 2006), these policies may not always have the desired effect. Articulation policies may not be enforced well enough to prevent students from retaking courses. This may be because many faculty members at four-year institutions see their courses as superior to those taken at two-year colleges or it may be because different majors may have different requirements.

Understanding what will, and will not, transfer can affect student persistence. If students are confused by requirements or if they take courses they do not need, they may become concerned about wasting money, or be frustrated by an institution's lack of help, and may elect not to attend.

Campus Climate

The climate of an institution can also be a barrier to persistence, specifically when there is a division between students' backgrounds/needs and the campus environment. Examples of disconnects between students and campus climate may include differences in academic expectations and differences in levels of formality expected between students and faculty members. Moreover, Finkelstein, Seal, & Schuster (1998) state that faculty and administrators at some four-year institutions may view transfer students as less qualified for university work and more likely to drop-out. These perceptions can negatively affect transfer students' relationships with faculty and may result in their choice to depart.

Campus climate also "encompasses student interactions across race and ethnicity, perceptions of the climate for inter-group relations (racial and ethnic tension), experiences of overt discrimination, and the ethnic and racial diversity of the student body" (Eggleston and Laanan, 2001, p. 10). The selectivity of the institution will affect the climate of the campus and the adjustment of the students who transfer there.

Since many transfer students are also nontraditional (24 years of age or older, have a spouse, and/or children, live more than five miles from school, or are employed off campus), transfer students are likely to connect less with the campus and focus more on other responsibilities. Skahill (2002) concluded that first-year students' failure to persist often is due to students'

support networks being located off campus. Although Skahill studied first-year students, his conclusions regarding student support networks also apply to many transfer students.

It is also important to consider the strength of a student's connection to members of the campus community (both academic and social) when examining barriers to educational completion. Zamani (2001) noted that students who feel a connection within a campus community are more likely to persist academically. An example that illustrates this is provided by Velez (1985) who found that students who live on campus are 43% more likely to persist than are students who commute (as cited in Zamani, 2001 p 16).

Post-Transfer Adjustment

One of the biggest issues discussed in transfer literature is "transfer shock." Eggleston and Laanan (2001) define transfer shock as the temporary dip in students' GPA during their first or second semesters after transfer to a four-year institution (p. 87). This can result from students' inability to adjust to different academic standards at the four-year institution and/or the lack of support from the transfer institution.

Eggleston and Laanan (2001) believe that the focus on student GPA after transfer, or on their academic adjustment, is not the only thing that should be considered. Other concerns are the psychological and educational environments, and the campus climate, and how these affect students' abilities to adjust. Understanding more about what helps transfer students adjust to individual institutions is important to finding the most effective ways for them to succeed.

Solutions to Transfer Student Barriers

The good news is that these barriers are not without solutions. Academic advisors can play a key role in helping students address these barriers through one-on-one advising, early intervention programs, and connecting transfer students with resources. Each campus varies. Thus, the specific approach to supporting successful transfer from both sending and receiving institutions may differ. However, certain programs are widely accepted as positive influences on the persistence and graduation rates of transfer students.

Berger and Malaney (2003) indicated that student satisfaction increased when they knew the graduation requirements at the receiving institution prior to transfer, received advice about transferring from faculty or staff at both the feeder or receiver institutions, lived on campus, and had higher social engagement. Johnson (2005) suggested that persistence increased when transfer students had a greater understanding of the academic rigors facing them after transferring.

The most important implication of this research is that collaboration between the feeder and receiver institutions is necessary if students are to successfully adjust to the transfer institution. It shows the necessity for building programs at the two-year colleges that connect early with students seeking transfer and provide them with the information needed to succeed after transfer.

A comprehensive transfer center staffed by academic advisors is a great start towards supporting transfer students as it provides a central contact point both for students and faculty/staff

interested in transfer students (Pope, 2004). Transfer centers should be housed on both sides of the transition, ideally allowing a student to work with the sending institution's transfer center to prepare for transfer, and then transition directly to the receiving institution's center. Advisors within these centers should look for ways to communicate and collaborate to support students on both ends of the transfer.

Advisors in the transfer center should be responsible for identifying potential transfer students, and providing them with the services listed below. While creating a transfer center is the most efficient and effective way to centralize and carry out these programs for transfer students, an institution, college, and/or department can elect to implement any of these programs to better serve their transfer student population. Regardless, every institution that serves a transfer student population needs to create programs that will improve student persistence and graduation (Bell, 2004).

Advising
Academic advisors aid students in selecting majors with transferable course offerings. They counsel students on appropriate general education courses, possible honors programs, and rigorous classes that can help prepare students for upper division work. A large part of advising is also connecting students with resources and explaining relevant policies, such as articulation, common core requirements between schools, common course number systems, and differences between financial aid systems.

Advisors can also help students create degree plans that will help them determine courses to take each term until they graduate. This can help decrease the number of courses students must retake. Additionally, advising targeted towards transfer may provide students with the motivation they need to complete their degrees.

Orientation
Feeder colleges should provide first-year students who intend to transfer with information specific to their transfer needs. Receiving institutions should provide orientations that serve as an overview of the school as well as providing specifics regarding what students can expect during their first terms.

Advisor Campus Visits
Advisors from receiving institutions can make a commitment to the success of their future students by visiting local two-year institutions. These visits should be held on a regular basis, and advisors should be prepared to discuss ways in which students can utilize their time at their first institution to benefit them during and after transfer. This can include being selective about academic courses as well as participating in extra-curricular activities that will improve the quality of their experiences.

Career and goal counseling
Utilizing inventories such as the Meyers-Briggs Type Indicator and Strong Interest Inventory allows students to consider career options. This fits with Tinto's (1987) focus on the importance of student goal commitment; students dedicated to their goals are less likely to depart from the institution.

Transfer Fairs
Invite advisors and/or faculty from local two and four-year institutions to discuss their colleges and their programs. This allows students to meet personnel from these institutions and discover the norms for the institution prior to entering it. This aids students in their transfer decisions.

Newsletters and transfer blogs
Newsletters and transfer blogs inform students of upcoming transfer fairs, college visits, and change in requirements at local institutions. They also provide updates about resources that will assist the student to be successful post transfer, e.g., library resources and child care.

Faculty Involvement
For nontraditional students, connecting with faculty is important to their persistence and success (Cedja, 2004). Faculty at the two-year and four-year institutions should become familiar with each other and their respective programs. There should be incentives for collaboration on courses that would allow students to become acquainted early with faculty at their potential transfer institution.

Campus Visits
This provides students with an opportunity to tour the transfer campus. Students should be allowed to sit in on a class and experience the classroom environment at the transfer institution.

Learning Communities
Learning communities can serve not only traditional students but can help connect nontraditional and/or commuter students with the campus. Learning communities provide the social support central to student retention (Bean and Metzner, 1985; Tinto, 1987; Skahill, 2002). Learning community courses are a perfect location to build a transfer student community.

Honors Programs
In order to mitigate the effects of transfer shock (Eggleston and Laanan, 2001), advisors at both institutions can encourage students to participate in rigorous academic courses, honors programs, prior to transfer.

Faculty and Staff Cultural Competence
There should be on-going diversity training for faculty and staff that provides them with the information needed to be sensitive to cultural differences. This training should occur at all campuses regardless of available transfer programs, and should be followed up with an assessment of the impact of the training on the campus community.

External Support
Bean and Metzner (1985) define outside encouragement as, "…the extent of encouragement to remain at a college that a student receives from influential persons in the student's life who are not employed by the college" (p. 504). This encouragement may come from a friend, a spouse or family member, and/or an employer. This encouragement is especially important for students who have outside commitments or are part of a close knit family and/or community. Although institutions cannot give the students this external support, they can create programs to educate

families or employers about the value of an education and how campus resources and opportunities can help their students succeed.

Additional Services
Pope (2004) suggested that feeder institutions should offer aid with applications to receiving institutions, provide support through proper referrals to student services, motivate students toward their goals, and involve faculty in the students' success (p. 148).

Conclusion

The transfer student population is growing nationwide. When our institutions place as much attention on transfer student programs as they place on freshman programs, then we can increase student retention and graduation rates. Advisors have an important role in the creation, coordination, and implementation of transfer student programs since advisors are often the first individuals students seek before and after transfer. As such, it is important that advising communities on two-year and four-year campuses consider ways in which they can create or improve transfer student programs on their own campuses.

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