



RESEARCH BRIEFS

Supporting Transfer Student Experiences and Identity Development Post Transfer

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Summary:

Transfer students are a significant and growing population of U.S. postsecondary students. During the transfer process, students often encounter multiple academic and social barriers, which can affect their academic and social success. Although research has shown that students' acclimation into their receiving, or new institutions, is important to their progress, little is known about what perceptions students hold of themselves as transfer students and how this identity plays a role in their transition to campus. In this study, we explored transfer identity, drawing from interviews with 52 transfer students at two selective four-year institutions in Texas. We discovered that transfer carried multiple meanings among students, and identities beyond transfer often had greater salience and impact on students' transition to campus than being a transfer.

Background:

Across community colleges and four-year schools in the United States, 38% of undergraduate students transfer from one institution to another within six years of starting college (Shapiro et al., 2018). Despite its prevalence, transfer is often not treated by institutional agents as a normalized experience but, instead, one that marginalizes those who decide to transfer. This perception commonly presents itself in several barriers for students, including loss of academic credit after transfer (Laanan, 2007) and navigation of unclear expectations and procedures in a new environment and with little support (Jain et al., 2011). Such experiences can result in transfers' perceptions that their institutions are unreceptive to their needs, that they do not matter to faculty and staff and their institutions overall (Núñez & Yoshimi, 2016), and that they are different from their first-time-in-college peers. Isolation



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and low engagement may result if transfers internalize these instances of disconnection (Ishitani & McKittrick, 2010; Townsend & Wilson, 2009).

An understudied yet key element of promoting transfer student success includes understanding students' experiences at their receiving institutions (Jain et al., 2011) and their perceptions of themselves and attachment to their identity as "transfer students." Greater insight into the connections among transfer students and the many actors and contexts they encounter (e.g., campus spaces, peers, and institutional agents) and the role of institutional policies and practices in the development of transfer students' identity would enhance this understanding. In our study, we sought to explore what perceptions students held of themselves and how their perceptions of themselves as transfers played a role in their transition to a new campus.

Methods:

To explore students' identity and experiences as transfers, we asked the following interrelated research questions:

1. What are the academic and social experiences of transfer students at their receiving institutions?
2. What role do transfer students' experiences play in their identity construction as transfer students?

We chose two selective four-year institutions in Texas to answer these questions (pseudonyms are used for both schools): Northern University, a private institution located in a major metropolitan area in the northern region of the state, and Southern University, a public institution in a major metropolitan area in central Texas. We conducted one-time interviews with 52 students, including 27 at Southern University (14 vertical transfers, meaning those transferring from community colleges to a four-year school, and 13 horizontal transfers, or those transferring to Northern or Southern from another four-year institution) and 25 at Northern University (13 vertical and 12 horizontal transfers). Interview questions focused on transfers' academic and social engagement after transfer; sources of support used during the transition; whether they identified as a transfer student and when this affiliation emerged; and what it meant to them to be a transfer student at their institution.

Findings:

How Students Identify as Transfers

While it may seem unsurprising, the majority of transfer students in our study identified as transfer students and called themselves transfer students. Students' affiliation with transfer had multiple meanings though, with some students describing transfer as an important part of who they are. For example, Gavin, a 25-year old senior at Southern and in-state horizontal transfer, described how transfer was a prominent aspect of his identity and his experiences at Southern:

[Transfer] is not like a sense of pride. It's more of a sense of it shaped who I am. So, every single experience that I have, it's shaped who I am so transferring definitely shaped my college experience. It's more of a yes, I'm a transfer student and I've been here for a different amount of time than everyone else and have had a different experience. So, definitely part of the identity.

For Gavin, transfer was internalized as he realized that his pathway to Southern was different than those who entered as first-year students. His perceptions of transfer as something different led him to believe that the transfer student experience was lesser than that of his peers, resulting in his dissociation with others on campus.

Other students described transfer not so much as a part of who they are but as a means of movement from one school to another and a way to earn a bachelor's degree. For many students who described transfer as such, transferring was not a negative experience. Gabriella, a 33-year-old sophomore who transferred to Southern after completing an associate degree at an out-of-state community college, captured this sentiment, stating: "[Transfer] is just a logistical identity, versus I came here to Southern and I'm doing my entire degree here. I'm not. I have transferred." Gabriella elaborated:

[Being a transfer means] I have a different background than someone who might've just come from high school, applied, then come here. So, I have experience at a university previously. I have studied, taken finals, and I graduated...So, I've gone through all of that. I have a bit of a back history. I'm not walking into this blind as a 19-year-old who just has no idea what to expect. I know what it's like to study for college-level finals. I know what it's like to commit to something like that. I know what to expect buying books that are way overpriced. I understand all of that.

In this sense, transfer served a way for Gabriella to assert herself and her experiences as different and, also, as a tool that aided her success at Southern.

The Role of Transfer Identity in Students' Experiences

For some transfers, academic and social experiences were connected, and being a transfer affected both of these domains. Students frequently described losing academic credit or having to retake courses post transfer as negative setbacks to their academic progress and affecting how they viewed themselves as transfers. Those who lost academic credit or had credit that did not apply toward their degree were often placed into lower-division courses alongside first-year students. Audrey, a 20-year old Southern student who transferred from a four-year school in Texas, argued that she had worked too hard to transfer to Southern only to be treated like a new student by being placed into introductory-level courses:

[People in my classes are] all freshmen; they think they're all that. I'm like, "I already..." Yeah, but I still have to take the classes. I don't mind taking the classes, but I would talk to other sophomores in my sophomore class and they're all taking these other classes, and I'm like, "Well, I can't take those until I finish this." So, I did feel like I was behind.

Alternately, some students expressed that having nurturing experiences or people throughout the process encouraged them to view transfer positively. Mary, a 20-year-old sophomore at Southern and in-state vertical transfer, described her participation with a staff- and peer-led transfer learning community on campus as helpful: "It's guaranteed friends... They're familiar faces until you get...a little more settled in and comfortable with meeting other people besides [transfer learning community] friends. Those people are always going to be there for you."

Transfer students with underrepresented backgrounds also frequently noted that these affiliations played a role in their transitions and association with transfer as an identity. For example, some transfer students at Northern were more vocal about social differences between themselves and the traditional Northern student, which they perceived as one whose family could afford to pay for a private school tuition out of pocket. They also described how there was little racial/ethnic diversity on campus, which also contributed to feelings of shock throughout their transitions. For Amanda, a senior, out-of-state horizontal transfer at Northern, this lack of visible diversity on campus resulted in her developing a deeper affiliation to her Hispanic heritage: "I think that at Northern, it's really given me a clearer view of my ethnicity. I'm definitely one of the few people of color in my classes."

Conclusion and Recommendations:

We found that meaningful and intentional institutional support during the transition process tended to foster positive affiliations with transfer among students. If students did not receive tailored support or believe that they were a member of the campus community, they often perceived this as a signal that transfers were a marginalized group on campus. In addition, throughout their transitions, students experienced a lack of support for the multiple identities and affiliations they hold beyond transfer. While many colleges and universities offer a student orientation for incoming transfers before they begin their first semester of coursework at the receiving institution, support must be extended and sustained through students' undergraduate experiences. Examples may include:

- Creating an institutional focus of transfer student success and encouraging all staff and faculty members to recognize that they play a role within the transfer process and must be actively engaged in creating a transfer-receptive culture (Jain et al., 2011). Faculty and staff should become familiar with transfer students and learn from them about the multiple identities they hold; if not, resources and services provided by the institution for transfers may ultimately be unhelpful and create a negative transfer experience for students.
- Seeking ways to foster transfer students' affiliation as transfers but realizing that not all transfer students will benefit from this support. Connecting transfers with specific opportunities and events that support or are related to their other identities, such as race/ethnicity or being a parent or veteran, can be ways for educators to create a network of support for students. Transfers may also find meaningful interactions beyond the institution, often in forms more aligned with other, non-transfer, identities that they hold. As such, faculty and staff can work to ensure that initiatives meet students' current needs, goals, and assets and honor the multiple identities and roles students may have in addition to transfer.
- Offering intentional support for transfers beyond admission and orientation throughout their undergraduate experience at the receiving institution. For example, creating and sustaining transfer learning communities can help students transition academically and socially into their receiving institution; these spaces can allow students to build an academic community, make peer connections, and establish relationships with faculty who can connect them to resources and events.

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