



RESEARCH BRIEFS

Transfer during COVID-19: Understanding Student Experiences in a Shifting Context

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Summary

At the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic, higher education institutions rapidly closed their campuses and switched to remote instruction. Transfer students had to navigate the transfer process and transition into a virtual educational environment. This study sought to understand how students described their transitions and planning in a shifting context. We found that transfer students experienced challenges with academic planning, motivation, and social connections as they managed the transition into a large public university in the Midwest (MidU). Higher education administrators and faculty must consider the student services and supports offered for transfer students during a time of virtual learning and uncertainty to support their continued transition and overall academic success.

Background

Transfer students may experience academic and social integration challenges as they enter a new educational environment (Ortagus & Hu, 2019; Townsend & Wilson, 2009). A multitude of institutional barriers can impact a student's transfer process, such as inaccurate transfer advising or inadequate articulation policies (Laanan et al., 2010). Research has demonstrated that forming relationships with peers is challenging for transfer students who are unfamiliar with campus resources or have external obligations that hinder their participation in student organizations (Townsend & Wilson, 2009). In general, higher education institutions must create a "transfer receptive culture" to provide the support needed for students to complete the transfer process successfully (Jain et al., 2020).



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In spring 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic forced colleges to close their campuses and switch classes and student services online. The experience of transitioning to remote instruction and living amidst a global pandemic was jarring for many students (Jaggars et al., 2020). They navigated inadequate internet access and devices, lost on-campus housing and employment, and struggled to stay motivated in makeshift learning environments which featured an overwhelming load of “busywork” (Jaggars et al., 2021; Motz et al., 2021). As the pandemic continued, health and economic hardships were exacerbated for People of Color and low-income communities across the United States. Community college students – who are often from the underserved populations most affected by the pandemic – demonstrated declines in enrollments and altered transfer pathways (Huie et al., 2021). For some students, health and financial hardship concerns contributed to their decision to pause academic and transfer goals (Fishman & Nguyen, 2021). Moreover, for transfer students who typically experience social and logistical challenges when moving to a new academic environment (Ortagus & Hu, 2019), the pandemic introduced an additional shift to their transition and planning.

Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to examine transfer student experiences during COVID-19 at a large public university in the Midwest. To delve into these unique experiences, the following research questions guided the study:

1. How did the transition to remote instruction due to COVID-19 affect key challenges for transfer students or students interested in transferring?
2. What support services and resources do transfer students perceive they need in order to be successful during this a time of multiple transitions and uncertainty within higher education?

Methods

This study encompasses a subset of data from a larger study that seeks to understand the experiences of transfer students’ transitions and academic outcomes at a large, public research university in the Midwest (MidU). We employed a narrative methodological approach (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) to understand the lived experiences of transfer students and the ways these students described their transfer planning and transitions within a shifting context. Data was collected after the shift to remote instruction in spring 2020. We conducted 14 one-on-one semi-structured virtual interviews with students who already transferred to MidU from community colleges or four-year institutions, including from MidU’s four open-access regional campuses ($N=7$); and students preparing to transfer to MidU in Fall 2020 ($N=7$) from a local community college and MidU’s four regional campuses. In this brief, students’ individual identities are masked using pseudonymous names.

Findings

For both student populations examined in this study, challenges with the transfer process or transition into MidU were heightened due to the shift to remote instruction. Transfer students shared their concerns with factors impacting their academic motivation, matriculation into MidU, and connections to peers.

Challenges with Planning to Transfer to MidU

Students planning to transfer to MidU in fall 2020 generally shared feelings of nervousness with navigating a new institution. However, these feelings were amplified due to the shift to remote instruction. Alex, an incoming transfer student shared: “There’s a big group of us [transferring together] and we all talk about it. A lot of us are kind of like, ‘What’s even the point of us [transferring] when we’re going to be on online classes all day?’” Although there were students who questioned the purpose of transferring to MidU, there were also students who remained certain of their decision to transfer. Unfortunately, one student, Kris, faced complex academic logistics while completing their transfer process into MidU because of the campus closure. They expressed:

What was really frustrating is that [when MidU was remote], I was still trying to finish some [transfer] paperwork. I was trying to contact people in advising. I had to do this paperwork in person, but the campus was closed...That just made it...irritating because it’s hard to schedule classes and get everything organized unless you’re officially a MidU student.

Because Kris did not have access to institutional support to help them authenticate their status on campus, they were delayed in scheduling classes for the fall semester, which negatively impacted their academic planning.

Challenges with the Transition to MidU during COVID-19

For students who already transferred into MidU, the switch to remote instruction due to COVID-19 interrupted their adjustment into a new campus, creating barriers towards academic improvement and the formation of social connections. Jordan shared how they centered their first semester at MidU around their social experiences on campus and did not earn the grades they expected. As they prepared to focus on improving their grades during the spring 2020 semester, MidU closed, and they were forced to move home and attend class virtually. The transition to online learning impacted their motivation towards their academic work; Jordan described their experience with attending class from home:

It's hard to do 12-15 hours a day of schoolwork at my desk, in my room, at my parents' home...I just lost motivation...to be perfectly honest with you, I did almost nothing [the rest of the semester] I'm ashamed to say.

The loss of connection with the campus and a nonconductive learning environment contributed to a decline in motivation and a derailment of academic goals. For some students, technological obstacles that hindered their academic progress. As one student, Shay, shared:

I didn't have a computer because the week I got back from spring break, my laptop decided to die completely and crash...I couldn't talk to any professors or communicate with anybody. I think [my professors] were kind of aggravated with that, but that's the best I could do at the time.

Although MidU was lending devices to students who demonstrated need, Shay was unaware of the lending program and struggled with the switch to remote instruction. As a result of the lack of communication and clarity regarding potential institutional supports, transfer students experienced intrapersonal challenges within their new educational environments.

Alongside these intrapersonal struggles came interpersonal difficulties. For instance, transfer students expressed difficulty in finding meaningful social connections through virtual platforms. Charlie shared that their first semester at MidU was challenging because they had not found a group of friends within their new academic environment, and the shift to remote instruction complicated that process further. Charlie shared:

I want just a couple people I can talk to...I can discuss assignments with or just general things...things I need help with...anything...I am worried [because] online it is difficult to make friends...I guess my worry is just how I can reach out to people. What's the best way for forming meaningful relationships through online classes?

Virtual spaces presented challenges for some students who were seeking to cultivate meaningful relationships with their peers within the classroom. Another transfer student, Jamie, suggested that a virtual social space would have been helpful during their experience transitioning into MidU:

[MidU] should have done some type of social Zoom... with other [MidU] students...where they would set up some type of online network where you could still interact with students. That would've been so cool.

Overall, additional challenges with the transfer planning and transition processes transpired due to the shift to a virtual educational environment.

Conclusion

Research indicates that transfer students are likely to experience challenges as they transition into a new educational environment. The switch to remote instruction due to COVID-19 exacerbated the challenges students faced as they navigated the transfer process and transitioned into a virtual educational environment. The onus is on higher education institutions to support transfer students throughout the entirety of the transfer and transition process to support their overall academic success. Therefore, it is critical for administrators, students affairs professionals, and faculty members to consider extending forms of support for transfer students during this time of uncertainty with remote instruction (Jaggars & Rivera, 2020). Examples of practical implications for higher education institutions to reduce ambiguity for students may include:

- **Cultivate a community of care and prioritize students' emotional, psychological, and physical well-beings.** With the continuing effects of COVID-19, it is imperative for higher education institutions to foster a sense of care for students across campus. Institutions can offer virtual counseling and share resources regarding mental health and food and housing insecurities to ensure holistic support for transfer students.
- **Adapt and extend academic and support resources to virtual spaces.** For example, virtual orientations could reduce logistical challenges students may experience at a new institution. Academic advising offices could also provide additional remote support for transfer students with questions or concerns about the matriculation process or graduation requirements.
- **Develop peer mentor and online communities for transfer students.** Institutions could form peer mentor programs to support new transfer students. Colleges and universities can also generate a virtual space for transfer students to cultivate relationships with one another, staff, and faculty to help ease the transition into a new academic environment.
- **Promote flexible academic policies to support students experiencing adversity.** Administrators can encourage faculty members to be sensitive to the distressing experiences students are facing and to provide flexibility by, for example, accepting extensions for assignments or allowing opportunities to retake exams. Additionally, institutions can implement policies to apply coronavirus-related pass/fail credits towards academic major requirements.

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