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Let's Talk Transfer: Building a Model for Transfer Student Success

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Providing adequate preparation and support services to address the unique needs of transfer students can be a challenge. By adopting a comprehensive Transfer Center model, Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) attempts to create a transfer culture through pre-admission advising services and streamlined credit evaluation and transition support. Created in 2009 to be a centralized unit for incoming transfer credit evaluation, the Transfer Center has evolved into a unit focusing on the entire transfer transition and the elimination of barriers to degree completion.

Prior to the Transfer Center, the responsibility for transfer credit evaluation and support for transfer students was decentralized across the academic departments. Today, the Transfer Center is comprised of professional Transfer Advisors dedicated to providing information and support to transfer students. These advisors, who are given major/program specializations, meet with prospective and continuously enrolled transfer students regularly. By engaging students during each step of their transfer process,

Assistant Director Whitney Lovelady advising a transfer student. Photo courtesy of Samantha Simpson, Virginia Commonwealth University.

the Transfer Center's advisors make an effort to simplify transition to VCU. Transfer advisors maintain a close connection with advising/counseling teams within the community college system, engaging in constant dialogue about the best way to prepare students for transfer. The Transfer Center also administers a four-phase practice designed to meet the needs of an evolving transfer student population.

The first phase, ***Preparation***, consists of working with prospective students to ensure they are taking the recommended courses in order to ease the academic transition to VCU. Transfer Advisors

provide pre-admission advising sessions, helping with course selection and suggesting transfer routes based on the student's intended major at VCU. This often includes unofficial transcript evaluations. Students are also taught how to use online advising tools available on the Transfer Center's website. These Transfer Pathways documents and articulation agreements (approved by VCU faculty) are designed to assist students with course selection and sequencing, suggested by major, and reinforce the notion that a guided pathway/structure to transfer (e.g., Associates Degree or General Education Certificate) is an important step toward academic success.

The second phase, *Transition*, is the official onboarding process for the student. Once students have been admitted, the evaluation of incoming transfer credits by transfer advisors is the first step to a successful transition. Via a Welcome e-mail, students learn how to view their academic transcript (to see how transfer credits are applied), set up e-mail, and navigate institutional terminology and policies, which most likely differ from their previous institution(s).

Another component of the Transition phase is New Student Orientation (NSO). Transfer students at VCU attend a separate orientation from incoming first-year students. During NSO, transfer advisors work closely with departmental academic advisors to provide supplemental advising to transfer students. The strong partnership between the Transfer Center and academic departments on campus proves to be key in helping new transfer students navigate campus seamlessly. Finally, the Transfer Center helps students navigate possible barriers to transition on campus. Unfamiliar terminology, new academic policies and procedures, different academic expectations and advising structures, and technologies unique to the institution are just a few of the common barriers that transfer students must over-

Director Artis Gordon with Transition Leaders. Photo courtesy of Gary Halliday, Virginia Commonwealth University.

come. Students are sent weekly e-mails containing important alerts so they are aware of events, such as class registration, billing schedule, and add/drop periods. Students also are made aware of resources set up to help them succeed, including the Writing Center, Tutoring, and Supplemental Instruction.

Research from the 2004 Community College Survey of Student Engagement suggests that the greater the social integration the more likely a student will continue enrollment; therefore, VCU's Transfer Center focuses on helping students engage. Once students have

> "Transfer Advisors provide pre-admission advising sessions, helping with course selection and suggesting transfer routes based on the student's intended major at VCU."

completed orientation and registered for classes, they enter the third phase, **Engagement**. One goal of the Transfer Center advising team is to help students begin their first semester with a great experience. The Transfer Center offers a series of Transition Workshops for all new transfer students that provides them with insight on how to be academically and socially successful at VCU. Academic support resources, research opportunities, and faculty engagement are part of each workshop. During these workshops, students are also formally introduced to peer mentors (Transition Leaders), who are eager to welcome them to VCU. The engagement phase also includes a transfer student success course. This one-credit course is structured to help students develop the skills needed to transition from new student to young professional. Topics in the course include networking, career planning, goal setting, and community engagement.

Throughout the first semester, Transfer Advisors maintain constant contact with transfer students via e-mail and social media. Students who are on academic warning after their first semester, for example, are monitored by transfer advisors and sent correspondence outlining available support resources. Lastly, the Transfer Center staff collaborates with offices, such as Career Services and the Wellness Resource Center to host events geared toward supporting transfers students.

Assessment is the final phase of this comprehensive approach. The overall academic performance of transfer students who attend transition programming is evaluated during this phase. We stress to prospective students that they should follow a guided pathway before transferring to VCU (i.e., completing an associates degree or certificate). The number of transfers entering with an earned credential and the one-year retention rate of students who enroll in the transfer student success course are tracked annually.

Since the advent of the Transfer Center in 2009, the number of students who have transferred into VCU with an associates degree has increased by 47%. Also of note, the one-year retention rate of students who have attended any programming sponsored by the Transfer Center is more than 80%. The number of students who transfer into VCU with 60 or more credits has increased by 19%, and these students have a higher success rate than all other incoming transfers. Through strong online messaging (transparent guided pathways) and relationships built with community college partners, the Transfer Center is able to successfully impact the transfer student population.

In assessing the progress of transfer students at VCU, the Transfer Center model has helped give students extra support and a place of comfort. This one-stop model has allowed students to resolve issues related to transition in a timely manner and has eased the complexity of an overwhelming process. This model allows a team dedicated to transfer student success to create programming and messaging and to provide early interventions, motivating students and giving them a sense of belonging. e

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Promoting Academic Confidence and Success in the First College Year

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Like so many other institutions of higher education, Murray State University is confronted by issues of low persistence and graduation rates; declining budgets; and transition concerns for first-year, transfer, sophomore, and senior students. Traditionally at Murray State, faculty department chairs teach a first-year transitions course for students in their majors with content specific to the major and featuring departmental and university resources. In a focused effort to improve the transition experience and academic outcomes for first-year students, a group of academic and student affairs professionals at the university collaborated to create a new strategy: the incorporation of student success content into the first-year transitions course.

The new model is an intentional effort to frontload success skills for first-year students, provide opportunities to increase their knowledge about Murray State, and help them make important connections to the University early in their academic career. It is also a unique initiative that allows first-year students to be connected with faculty and student affairs professionals on campus. Undergirding the new design is knowledge that persistence increases when students are involved in a collaborative and well-designed first-year experience (Cuseo, 2010). Additionally, students who are both academically and socially integrated at their campus persist at higher rates than students who are integrated in just one of these areas (Tinto, 2012).

The redesign of the transition course included a partnership between student affairs professionals and faculty. In each 16-week, one-credit hour course, the faculty member taught eight sessions devoted to major and departmental content while the student affairs professional taught eight sessions on student success topics.

Student success content for the new model was identified in several different ways, including a committee review of the best practices for topics to be taught in first-year seminars and the results of a first-year student survey conducted by the retention office. Data from the retention survey indicated that time management and class attendance were problematic for first-year students, thus these were the first two topics addressed in the seminar. Other topics covered were drawn from the student success literature (e.g., Cuseo, 2010; Gardner, 1996) and included motivation and goal setting, learning styles, learning strategies (i.e., study skills, reading and annotating texts, note-taking, taking exams), and critical thinking.

In fall 2014, 1,368 first-year students enrolled in a first-year transitions course, which included both those students who took the student success content seminar (456 students in 27 sections) and those who took the traditional transitions course (912 students in 27 sections). Fifteen student affairs professionals and 12 academic faculties were involved in the collaboration.

Assessment was essential to understanding the impact of the seminar on the academic and social integration of the students and their retention in the first year. We used a mixed-methods program evaluation to compare experiences and outcomes of those enrolled in the seminar with student success content (SSC) versus those in the traditional transitions course (TC).

The Institutional Integration Scale Survey (IIS; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980) was administered at the end of the term to gather quantitative data on students' social and academic integration and to measure their use of campus resources. The IIS survey included 29 questions relating to campus integration in five areas: (a) Peer-Group Interactions, (b) Interactions with Faculty, (c) Faculty Concerns for Student Development and Teaching, (d) Academic and Intellectual Development, and (e) Institutional Goal Commitments. Two additional open-ended questions were added to the IIS, with permission from the author, to determine whether the SSC model had an effect on the students' perceptions of their success in college. A total of 852 students completed the ISS.

The purpose of this program evaluation was to determine whether the addition of success content to the first-year transitions course would help increase the persistence of first-year students. The most notable findings indicated that such content can positively impact first-year college students' academic integration and confidence in their ability to succeed in college. There were statistically significant differences ($p < .05$) in *Academic and Intellectual Development* between the students who participated in the SSC and those who did not. In the other IIS categories, which were mainly social in nature, no significant differences were found between course models. A possible reason for this particular finding is that the culture of Murray State already encourages social integration through its residential college system. Additionally, survey data indicated that students who participated in the SSC seminar visited the library and the multicultural center more often than students participating in the TC, reflecting students' willingness to access other university resources.

Although, the goal of the SSC seminar was to teach first-year students the advanced academic skills necessary for success in college, the results of our program evaluation showed that it also appeared to increase their perceptions of their academic abilities. Qualitative data from the questions added to the IIS survey provided insight into that which students perceived to be helpful during their transition semester. Students who participated in the SSC seminar clearly felt it helped with the transition process. Results indicated that almost half of the students in the SSC seminar had a positive perception (49.4%) of their first-semester experience versus slightly more than one third (36.7%) of those who took the TC. The SSC students also expressed a more positive perception of the University than the TC students. Nearly 12% of TC students had a negative perception of their first-semester experience compared to only 3% of SSC participants. SSC seminar participants also indicated more confidence in managing their time and in making good grades than students in the TC.

> *"*[The new model] has elevated the teaching, advising, and understanding of first-year students among our faculty and staff.*"*

<< Continued from ACADEMIC CONDFIDENCE, p. 5

The results of the pilot program and evaluation indicate that the inclusion of success content improved the students' perceptions of their academic self-efficacy skills and advanced academic behaviors for those who had it. This new design also has the potential to improve retention and graduation rates. Retention data indicated that students in the SSC seminar had a 1% higher fall 2014 to fall 2015 retention rate than those not in the TC. In addition, it has elevated the teaching, advising, and understanding of first-year students among our faculty and staff. Ultimately, the SSC seminar and the dedicated people involved have shown that the success of our students is a process involving both academic and social integration and requires the collaboration of all professionals on campus.

Our plans for the upcoming year include following the retention data of the first and second cohort who participated in our pilot program and securing more funding for our seminar for future years. For the first time, limited funding to continue to pilot the seminar for fall 2016 was given through a University Strategic Initiatives Grant. However, with the possibility of a percentage of the university's state appropriations in the fall 2017 being dependent on an increase in our retention rates, there is great interest from university administration to make the SSC model mandatory for students in all transitions courses. Thus, implementation of the new model campus-wide will require further conversations, innovations, funding, and continued collaborations. e

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Kennesaw State Pilots Learning Community for First-Year International Students

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As the number of international students enrolling in U.S. colleges and universities increases, developing programs that support their transition to higher education while providing meaningful opportunities for interactions with peers, faculty, and staff is becoming essential. Institutions that fail to address their unique needs "may leave these students feeling disappointed, unfulfilled, and even exploited" (Sherry, Thomas, & Chui, 2010, p. 34).

Participation in learning communities (i.e., two or more courses that have been intentionally linked around a theme or topic that provides a central focus for readings, discussions, and integrative assignments) has been attributed to positive outcomes related to students' cognitive and affective development (Zhao & Kuh, 2004). In addition to the general research on participation, there is evidence that learning communities aimed at international student populations can result in academic and social gains (Dodge & Kendall, 2004). Learning communities may be of particular benefit to international students who often cite "lack of familiar friends and social networks" (Sherry et al., 2010, p. 36) as a barrier to college success.

Given the research on the importance of supporting international students, Kennesaw State University (KSU) developed a Global Gateways initiative that includes a specially tailored first-semester learning community for international students. It was designed by faculty in University College at KSU and provides a source of academic, social, and emotional support for participants while contributing to feelings of belonging and academic confidence, specifically with respect to English fluency.

Global Gateways

To help facilitate their transition into college life, participants in Global Gateways enrolled in a learning community that included a first-year seminar and an English composition course, received English proficiency assistance in the ESL Center, joined the Conversation Partners Program (where they were paired with KSU students or faculty for monthly conversations), and went on a group trip to Six Flags amusement park in Atlanta. Students were recruited for the learning community during first-year orientation. At that time, 15 students volunteered to take the two courses and participate in the pilot study.

To determine the efficacy of the learning community, incoming students were surveyed at the beginning and end of the semester to determine their level of confidence in their abilities to succeed in college and communicate in English and their level of comfort studying in a foreign country, along with other areas of concern. This information served as a baseline for assessing development of their social and academic integration and confidence as a result of participation in the program. Students were also interviewed twice—upon immediate completion of the program and six months later—in order to gauge the short- and long-term impact of the learning community.

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What We Learned

Findings from the pre- and post-surveys administered to students in the Global Gateways pilot indicate that participation in the learning community contributed to feelings of belonging, as well as comfort with and skill in spoken and written English. Specifically, data collected on the students' expectations versus experiences in the program and at the University were all statistically significant and demonstrated the extent to which the program helped them learn to navigate campus resources while becoming part of the university community. In the areas of development related to English language proficiency, students perceived improvement in both written and oral communication, which likely contributed to their overall gains in academic confidence.

Qualitative data collected during both small group and one-on-one interviews indicate that peer networking and support were the most valuable aspects of the learning community. Participants commented on how few peers they interacted with in their non-learning community classes compared to those in the learning community. By contrast, the same participants noted that in the Global Gateways community, peers supported each other through projects and assignments and reminded each other of upcoming deadlines. While they felt connected to their peers in the learning community, several participants expressed a sense of isolation from the larger U.S. student population at the University.

> "…at the end of the spring semester, participants indicated that they remained in contact with each other, continuing to offer academic and social support to their peers."

Learning community students and faculty. Photo courtesy of Kelsey Gulledge, Kennesaw State University.

Additional findings from the qualitative data indicate that participants in the Global Gateways learning community frequently met with each other outside class. During the interviews conducted at the end of the spring semester, participants indicated that they remained in contact with each other, continuing to offer academic and social support to their peers. One participant described how several students in Global Gateways planned to take classes together the next semester, even after the learning community had concluded. Another participant talked about developing a close friendship with a student in the learning community, and a third talked about being able reach out to a friend from Global Gateways when he needed something. Most students indicated they expected the peer relationships developed through Global Gateways would continue long after the learning community officially ended.

Going Forward

As a result of the findings from the research study embedded in Global Gateways, changes have been planned to the program design to allow more flexibility for international students during registration. Rather than offering just one learning community for international students, one possible approach might be to reserve several seats across multiple learning communities to ensure the opportunity for first-year international students to forge stronger connections with their American classmates. In 2016, another dedicated Global Gateways learning community will allow first-year international and American students who are interested in global, international, and/or study abroad experiences to enroll in the learning community with a globally focused first-year seminar as one of two academic courses in the link.

The Global Gateways learning community is a promising practice that colleges and universities can adapt, but the research associated with the project also illuminates important and useful information about the transition international first-year students' experience. Through further study of the impact of interventions like the Global Gateways learning community, faculty, staff, and administrators can develop first-year programs that better meet the nuanced needs of international students while continuing to support their academic and social transition to college life. e

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Examining Synergies in a First-Year Leadership Course

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Iowa State University (ISU) lacks a formalized first-year experience office; instead, each academic college creates first-year seminars for incoming students interested in studying in the college's respective majors. Because first-year seminar administration is decentralized, there is no consistent curriculum across the university and little to no collaboration among academic departments and student affairs in the seminar's design and implementation. This article describes a first-year leadership course that offers a model for providing a more integrated approach to the first college year while fostering interdepartmental collaborations.

ISU's Leadership Studies Program (LSP), implemented in 2008, was designed to enhance leadership skills during students' undergraduate studies by exploring areas of synergy between the classroom and cocurricular experience through the lens of undergraduate leadership development theory. The LSP curriculum is informed by a variety of theoretical models, including the Social Change Model (Higher Education Research Institute, 1996), the Leadership Identity Development Model (Komives, Mainella, Owen, Osteen, & Longerbeam, 2005), and the Thriving Quotient (Schreiner, 2013). The program focuses especially on students who may struggle to find their place at ISU. For example, LSP qualitative assessments suggest that Women in Science and Engineering (WiSE) and students of color report feeling isolated in their programs of study while finding leadership courses supportive of their identity development.

To build support for these and other at-risk populations at ISU, LSP focuses on building key, student-centered connections among (a) the Student Activities Office, (b) the Multicultural Student Affairs Office, (c) the Learning Communities Office, and (d) WiSE. These departments provide support to the majority of students who enroll in LSP and in particular, the first-year courses offered at the university. Moreover, these departments focus on identity development, common curricula, and programming for first-year students.

A central component of LSP is the campus leadership development course, CLPS 270, an interdisciplinary course targeting first-year students. Each college's advising unit assists in recruiting students for the course with a total enrollment of 60 students in fall 2015. The course meets twice a week: one session is devoted to a large lecture format led by an LSP faculty member and the other session features small-group discussion lead by peer mentors. To enhance the application of leadership theory, the course incorporates a service-learning project in which students work with a nonprofit community agency offering academic enrichment for low-income Iowa youth. Students develop and implement academic programming for children during two site visits. The course text, Kouzes and Posner's (2007) *The Leadership Challenge*, provides a central framework for the curriculum, student involvement, leadership development, and their understanding of the service-learning project at an individual and group level.

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CLPS 270 fosters an environment where students can apply academic knowledge to real-world issues and reflect on their experiences in the first year. Such engagement leads to their persistence at the University. In fall 2015, course participants had 92.4% first-to-second-year retention rate compared to the overall retention rate of 87.4% for the first-year cohort. Students in CLPS are also more likely to use campus services, volunteer, identify as global citizens, and seek out opportunities to apply their leadership skills than those who did not enroll in the course. At the end of CLPS 270, students participated in focus groups to assess their experiences with the course and their leadership identity development. Participants expressed a stronger sense of identity as a leader as a result of completing the course.

The LSP faculty view the increases in persistence, engagement, and leadership identity development as key markers of student success and intend to expand the availability of service-learning into spring course offerings. The course will also be expanded to more than 100 students in three specific learning communities in fall 2016 [WiSE, Leadership ISU, and Exploring Careers, Education, and Leadership (EXCEL)].

The CLPS 270 course also serves as a way to strengthen the synergies among campus partners to solidify one component of learning in the first-year experience (Figure 1). These departmental partnerships help strengthen student leadership in not only one course but also within student organizations and the first-year transition.

> "CLPS 270 fosters an environment where students can apply academic knowledge to real-world issues and reflect on their experiences in the first year."

Fiigure 1. Synergy created by involvement of multiple departments creates a holistic CLPS 270 course in the LSP.

Implications and Future Directions

Leadership classes, such as CLPS 270, implemented early in the college years contribute to a successful transition to higher education. As the field of leadership studies expands, the focus needs to be on teaching advocacy and engagement early, especially in the first semester, to enable students to chart a path for themselves and their peers through college (Stephens & Beatty, 2015). Moreover, the CLPS 270 leadership course serves as a vehicle to create and maintain key campus partnerships at a large four-year university. Since there is not a formal first-year experience program at ISU, the course provides a bridge to first-year success, developing leadership skills among entering students. e

Students in the CLPS 270 course work with at-risk youth in an academic enrichment program during a site visit. Photo courtesy of Leadership Studies Program, Catt Center for Women and Politics, Iowa State University. Used with permission

Nominate Your Program for the 2017 Institutional Excellence for Students in Transition Award

The award for Institutional Excellence for Students in Transitions will be presented annually to institutions that have designed and implemented outstanding collaborative initiatives enhancing significant transitions during the undergraduate experience. Award recipients will have demonstrated the effectiveness of the initiative in supporting student success, learning, and development at a variety of transition points beyond the first college year and in responding to unique institutional needs. The award package includes two complimentary registrations to the 22nd National Conference on Students in Transition, recognition at the conference, and opportunity to present a poster session on the award-winning initiative. Nominations will be accepted starting mid-May until early August. Please visit http://sc.edu/fye/awards/IE_Award.html for more information and submission instructions.

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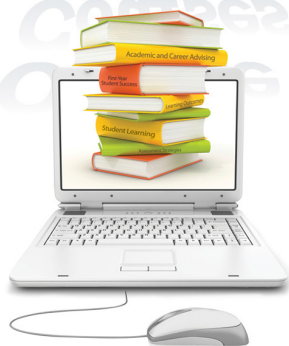
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