

Executive Summary

Transfer Student Experiences: New School Who Dis?

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Introduction

Thirty percent of the U.S. undergraduate population will transfer at least once in a six-year period. As more students seek non-traditional paths to a college degree, it is important for institutions to review their transfer process from an academic and social perspective. While most literature regarding transfer students is concerned with the facilitation to and from public institutions, there is a growing number of students making lateral transfers to private four-year institutions. This study adds to the literature regarding not only lateral transfer students but also those transferring to a private highly selective institution in Illinois. By examining the student and administrative experience of transfer students, this study helps identify gaps in the literature and provides recommendations to remedy barriers students and administrators face at North Lake University (pseudonym).

Methods

The researcher used three different data collection methods in this study. First, artifact analysis was used to analyze institutional data and policies that affect the facilitation to transfer students. The institutional data used was from the 2019 enrolled student survey which asked students to describe their experience on a number of items including, housing, academic advising and balance. Additionally, national data trends from the National Center for Educational Statistics were also analyzed to better understand that national context of transfer student enrollment trends to private institutions and enrollment patterns to the region. Second, interviews were conducted with current transfer students (n=5) and administrators who have interactions with transfer students (n=3). Interviews provided greater insight to institutional data and highlighted individual's experiences regarding the transfer student experience. All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and coded for relevant themes. Third, the researcher joined a meeting with administrators and a current first-year transfer student to discuss potential barriers that first-year transfer students may face.

Key Findings

The following are the key findings that emerged from the data collection:

- **Affect and Balance.** Data from the enrolled student survey (2019) shows that in comparison to non-transfer students, transfer students are very or generally dissatisfied with the ability to balance academics and other social aspects of college life. Interviews with students also highlighted this point naming the competitive culture of the campus and students as environmental factors they did not anticipate. Transfer students overall do not know what to expect in terms of North Lake University's social culture. This impacts their ability to reacclimate themselves to a new environment, which is already difficult due to a new academic system.
- **Satisfaction with Housing Community.** Data from the enrolled student survey (2019) and interviews with students highlighted that transfer students are disproportionately less satisfied with their housing community. Some students who were interviewed were told that they would be around other transfer students but found that not to be the case.

Meanwhile, other students were placed in singles which they felt isolated them from making any meaningful relationship. However, two students said that they had a great experience with their housing experience. These two students stayed in residential colleges, which differ in programming in comparison to residential halls. During the interviews some students expressed a need for a more established residential hall community. Residential colleges have that structure in place which may attribute to these students having a more pleasant experience. Literature also suggests that faculty and staff involvement in residential halls greatly increases students' social belonging and connectedness to campus.

- **Credit Articulation.** Overall students felt that the articulation process was manageable, however, students did reflect on the amount of work they had to do to understand which of their classes from their previous institution would count at North Lake University. While some students were able to get clarity on some classes, the response time and approach varied greatly per student. Some of these issues are partially due to the pace of the quarter system and the availability of administrators to respond in time and the timing of finals with faculty availability. Another cause of this is the decentralization of the institution, while it does allow for more flexibility it also causes more variability because there is no standardization between colleges and departments.
- **Administrative Resources & Advising.** Administrators at the research institution expressed that they do not have enough human resources to adequately provide transfer students with the 1:1 attention most require, particularly in their first year. Literature on transfer students suggests that these students require more administrative hours, therefore the administrators at this institution cannot provide the same level of advising which is evident from the enrolled student survey (2019); transfer students are more dissatisfied with the ability to talk with their advisor when needed than non-transfer students.

Limitations

This study was conducted at one private highly selective institution in Illinois, therefore results from this study cannot be generalized to other higher education institutions. This study is also limited by the number of participants (n=8), greater variety in participants would give the study more depth to the transfer student and administrator experience. Additionally, the researcher had unique access to participants through their work in the Provost Office. Furthermore, during the data collection portion of the study, the global pandemic, COVID-19, limited the number of responses of potential study participants.

Recommendations

- Expand residential college programming to residential halls with the most transfer students, doing so will increase student touch points and may encourage more social integration on campus with peers, staff, and faculty.
- Hire more academic advisors who specialize in transfer student articulation to close the gap in advising availability. This is not necessary for every department, a deeper analysis needed to see which departments would benefit the most from this intervention.
- North Lake University should explore joining the Illinois Articulation Initiative as a receiving-only institution to streamline in-state transfer student process. This can help reduce the number of credits lost/repeated and have an impact on transfer student financial aid.