Chapter 5

Focusing on the Forgotten:
An Examination of the Influences and Innovative Practices that Affect Community College Transfer Student Success

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ABSTRACT

Despite the increasing numbers of transfer students, particularly those transferring from two- to four-year institutions, campus programs and services continue to center on assisting first-year students who are entering higher education for the first time. This chapter brings transfer students, an often “forgotten” population, to light through the following: a review of the scholarship and research on community college transfer student transition and success, an examination of factors that affect that transition, and a description of innovative practices that respond to the need of this growing population. The information in this chapter can be used to develop campus programs and services to assist with the transfer student transition to four-year colleges and universities.

INTRODUCTION

Transfer students are a growing population on college and university campuses (Hossler, Shapiro, Dundar, Ziskin, Chen, Zerguera, & Torres, 2012). The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2008) has estimated that one in five new students at four-year institutions have transferred from another college or university. In fall 2012, the enrollment in community colleges comprised more than 42% of the overall college and university enrollment in the United States (Shapiro, Dundar, Ziskin, Chiang, Chen, Harrell, DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-8481-2.ch005
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and Tores, 2013), or on average, 10.6 million students each year (Miller, 2014). Of the students enrolled at community colleges, almost equal numbers are enrolled in for-credit courses (or degree courses) and non-credit courses and/or programs (Bailey, 2008). Most of the students in the for-credit courses and programs at community colleges indicate that they intend to transfer, which has resulted in two-year institutions becoming a pipeline to the baccalaureate (Bailey, 2008). The transferability of students from two- to four-year institutions is becoming more important because “jobs requiring a bachelor’s degree will be the fastest growing segment of the occupational structure” (Bailey, 2008, p. 27).

Although there are increasing numbers of transfer students, particularly those transferring from two- to four-year institutions, many campus programs and services, such as new student orientation, first-year seminars, and early alert communication plans, are primarily aimed at helping first-year students entering college for the first time. With a focus on first-year or traditional students, transfer students are often overlooked or forgotten (Jacobs, 2004). While transfer students have experienced the initial transition to college, the transition to a new institution can be challenging for these students and, in some instances, can result in “transfer shock” (decline in GPA), particularly for students transferring from two- to four-year institutions (Townsend & Wilson, 2006). The explicit reasons for transfer shock are unknown, but it appears that this phenomenon involves both intrinsic variables and extrinsic forces (Cutright, 2011). Because many of the reasons are unknown, the process of identifying resources to help students negotiate transfer shock can be complex. The purpose of this chapter is to provide a review of the scholarship and research on community college transfer student transition and success; identify factors that affect that transition; and describe innovative practices that respond to the needs of this growing student population.

BACKGROUND

The experience of many transfer students is nuanced and, as more points of entry to and through higher education emerge, it is likely that the distinctiveness of the transfer student experience will only intensify. For example, community college students, often non-traditional aged, students of color, first generation (Cutright, 2011; Bailey, 2008), or those from lower socioeconomic statuses (Cabrera, Burkum, & La Nasa, 2005; Bailey, 2008), may face challenges that their four-year institution counterparts do not. Yet, community colleges serve as the “initial gateway to higher education” (Miller, 2014, para. 1) for these same populations of students. Also contributing to challenges of transfer students from community colleges is the reality that many institutions, particularly those that are private and selective, tend to enroll more lateral transfers (i.e., those from other four-year institutions) than those from two-year colleges (Dowd, Cheslock, Melguizo, 2008). Other researchers found that students beginning at community colleges were significantly less likely to complete a bachelor’s degree in nine years compared with their four-year institution peers (Long & Kurlaender, 2009). Conversely, in a recent report published by the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (Shapiro et al., 2013), the authors used national data for the 2005-06 academic year and found that approximately 62% of the transfer students from two- to four-year institutions attained a bachelor’s degree within six years of transferring. Those students who had earned an associate’s degree before they transferred were more likely to complete their bachelor’s degree (Shapiro et al., 2013).

To develop a better understanding of why some transfer students persist and others do not, it is useful to examine the myriad concepts associated with the uniqueness of the transfer student transition, including cooling out or warming up, transfer shock, returning after stopping out, transfer gap, reverse transfer,
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