

Assessing the Climate for

TRANSFER STUDENTS

at Two- and Four-Year Institutions

THE TRANSFER FUNCTION IS ONE OF THE DEFINING MISSIONS OF COMMUNITY COLLEGE SYSTEMS, AND IT IS OF GREAT IMPORTANCE TO UNDERSTAND THE EXPERIENCES OF THE STUDENTS WHO ARE OR HAVE BEEN ON THE TRANSFER PATH. ALONG THESE LINES, IT IS ESSENTIAL FOR BOTH SENDING AND RECEIVING INSTITUTIONS TO KNOW HOW THEIR EFFORTS TO ASSIST STUDENTS WITH THE TRANSFER PROCESS ARE BEING PERCEIVED, AND TO UNDERSTAND WHAT ELEMENTS OF THE COLLEGIATE EXPERIENCE ARE EFFECTIVELY AIDING THE TRANSFER STUDENT POPULATION. THIS ARTICLE EXAMINES SOME EFFECTIVE WAYS IN WHICH THE CAMPUS CLIMATE AND TRANSFER STUDENT LEARNING EXPERIENCES HAVE BEEN INVESTIGATED, AND INTRODUCES A NEW TOOL FOR ASSESSMENT IN THIS AREA BASED UPON PROMISING RESEARCH THAT WOULD PROVIDE INSTITUTIONS WITH ACTIONABLE RESULTS WITH WHICH TO HELP INCREASE DEGREE ATTAINMENT.

TRANSFER

HOW UNDERSTANDING DIVERSE LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS CAN HELP REPAIR THE PIPELINE

ONE of the largest routes on the pipeline to a baccalaureate degree is from the community college system to the four-year college system, with approximately 40 percent of students entering higher education for the first time doing so through a community college (National Center for Education Statistics 2006). Although previous studies have shown that approximately four out of five students entering a community college intend this as a stepping-stone to a four-year college and eventual baccalaureate degree, only about one in four ever eventually transfer (Cejda 1997). The rate is lower for those who obtain that sought-after degree. Clearly there is much work to be done to patch this leaky pipeline and increase degree attainment, and this pathway is under increased scrutiny.

The first-ever conference on community colleges hosted by the White House in the fall of 2010 is but one of the recent reminders of the importance of paying attention to the student population that begins their postsecondary education at these institutions. Being that the transfer function is one of the defining missions of community college

systems, it is of great importance to understand the experience of the students who are or have been on the transfer path. This article examines some effective ways in which the campus climate and student learning experiences of transfer students have been examined, and introduces a new tool for assessment in this area based upon promising research that would provide institutions with actionable results with which to help patch the leaky pipeline.

One such study examined the impact of the Transfer Alliance Program (TAP) at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). TAP is a program that created curricular articulation agreements between UCLA and community colleges in California as a means of strengthening the transfer function, and also helped faculty at community colleges become more actively engaged in helping their students become eligible for transfer. Laanan (1996) compared transfer students who participated in TAP with transfer students who did not using a 104-item questionnaire that examined student background characteristics, community college experiences, and experiences at UCLA. Taking into account both the types of students in the pro-

gram and the social and psychological factors involved in the campus climate for transfer, as this study did, allowed a more in-depth assessment of the program's impact than if it had been based solely on differences in GPA. Students who had been involved with TAP were more likely to have contact with faculty and to perceive interactions with academic counselors as positive, as were the students who did not participate in TAP. All students, however, had a difficult time adjusting to the new climate if the new environment was considerably different from their old one, which tended to be the case with both TAP and non-TAP students.

In another study that utilized information about student background characteristics, community college experiences, and university experiences, Berger and Malaney (2003) measured achievement and satisfaction levels for students who had transferred to a four-year university. Satisfaction is an important factor in Bean's Model of Student Persistence (1980) but one that had previously not been studied much among the transfer student population. The authors found that white students were more likely than underrepresented minority students to be satisfied with their university experience and their transfer decision, and were also more likely to have higher grade point averages. They also found that knowing the graduation requirements prior to transferring positively predicted satisfaction, while working off-campus and having family commitments negatively predicted satisfaction. Older transfer students also tended to have higher grade point averages, but students who reported spending more time socializing with their peers had lower ones. By looking at how different students adapted to academic and social life at one university, institutions can gain insight into what practices are useful for certain transfer student populations.

Utilizing elements of Tinto's model of student attrition (1975) in their framework, Nora and Rendon (1990) created a new causal model to predict community college students' predisposition to transfer by examining the relationships among student background characteristics, initial commitments, social integration, academic integration, and the dependent variable, predisposition to transfer. The student background characteristics that were utilized were parents' educational attainment, high school grades, encouragement by others, and ethnic origin. Initial commitments were measured by the levels of educational goals and the institutional commitment indicated by the

students. Social integration was a single item measure, but Tinto's more controversial concept, academic integration, was measured using academic perceptions, transfer perceptions, behavior counseling, and academic counseling. Three indicators used to measure the dependent variable were number of four-year institutions the student planned to apply to, transfer behavior, and transfer perceptions.

Some of the key findings in the study were that high levels of congruency between students and their environments led to high levels of student predisposition to transfer. In addition, students with higher levels of initial commitment had lower levels of transfer behavior and of transfer perceptions. This finding indicates that something is happening at the community colleges after the moment of initial enrollment that detracts students from seeking the appropriate resources and leads them to have experiences that are incongruent with their expectations. Since initial commitment plays a large role in predisposition to transfer, it is important to understand the experiences that students undergo while they try to reach their end goal.

Studies like the ones described here highlight the important role that community colleges play. On the receiving end, four-year institutions are faced with the task of ensuring a smooth transition for those students who do transfer. It is important for both types of institutions to know how their efforts to assist students with the transfer process are being perceived and to understand what elements of the collegiate experience are effectively aiding the transfer student population. Yet relatively few institutions collect this information, and none do so using a common instrument that provides a strong research-based design and the opportunity for benchmarking.

Recognizing the need for this information on a national level, the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) embarked on a two-year process (partially funded by the Ford Foundation) that culminated in the Diverse Learning Environments Survey (DLE). The DLE can be utilized to study transfer students, both at the sending (community college) and the receiving (four-year college) institutions and is the first national survey that integrates assessment of climate, institutional practices, and outcomes. The outcomes of particular interest on the DLE are ones that examine academic skills for learning, competencies for a multicultural world, retention, and achievement. The survey measures were created through a thorough ex-

amination of diversity measures in more than 90 surveys used locally and regionally.

Campus climate is measured with concepts such as sense of belonging, student financial difficulty, interpersonal validation, academic validation in the classroom, satisfaction with diverse perspectives, discrimination and harassment, positive and negative cross-racial interactions, and perceptions of institutional commitment to diversity. Institutional practices can be looked at with items about navigational action, student support services, curriculum of inclusion, and co-curricular diversity activities. Outcomes that can be examined with the survey are integration of learning, habits of mind, pluralistic orientation, social action, civic engagement, and student enrollment mobility. All of these themes and constructs were arrived at using factor analysis and fall into a conceptual framework that includes behavioral, organizational, structural, psychological, and historical elements of the institution in relation to a student's identity.

One of the unique features of the DLE is that it features optional modules targeting specific topics. Two of the modules are focused on the climate for transfer, one specifically for two-year colleges and the other for four-year institutions. The two-year module asks about practices at two-year institutions regarding the transfer pathway and climate of support, whereas the four-year module asks respondents about their transitional experiences and their understanding of the campus climate. The latter module contains questions that are relevant to both students who transferred to the institution and those who did not. Both of these climates for transfer modules incorporate elements of the studies cited in this paper. Data collected from the two-year module can be used with Nora and Rendon's (1990) causal model of predisposition to transfer because the survey has demographic input as well as measures of academic integration and predisposition to transfer. Data collected from the four-year module can be used to look at achievement and satisfaction as was done in Berger and Malaney's (2003) study. Their study looked at inputs and involvements that led to transfer readiness at the community college level, and then measures of university involvement that contributed to achievement (based on GPA) and satisfaction at the university level. The DLE survey and the four-year module in particular have measures on nature of involvement, outside commitments,

and satisfaction that can be utilized to look at how different transfer student populations adapt at a particular institution. Laan's (2003) study of social and psychological factors that contribute to adjustment and GPA can also be recreated using DLE data since the four-year module incorporates items that look at experiences prior to transfer, experiences after transferring, and adjustment.

THE DIVERSE LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS SURVEY PILOT

The DLE was piloted in the spring of 2010 with fourteen institutions and a total of 4,527 students: including twelve four-year institutions and two community colleges. Pilot schools were encouraged to pick optional modules, and five schools used the transfer modules: two community colleges (N=1,609) and three four-year colleges (N=601). Each school sent requests via email to the students chosen to participate. These requests briefly explained the project, human subject rights, and included a link to the survey instrument and consent forms.

Community colleges using the DLE climate for transfer module found that there were significant opportunities to improve the student's use of programs designed to facilitate transfer. Approximately half of the community college students never talked to a transfer admissions counselor from a four-year institution (51%), never talked to a peer advisor about transferring (49%), and never attended a college fair (49%). Almost as many, 40 percent, had never visited a four-year college campus. All these are designed to measure the student (and campus, in the aggregate) predisposition to transfer. It is possible that the low-level usage is related to fact that half of the students responding reported that it was difficult to access support services outside of regular business hours. Despite the low-level of use of such types of assistance, most students reported a favorable climate for transfer. Almost everyone reported that it was "easy to find help applying to colleges and universities here," with 89 percent agreeing or strongly agreeing with this statement.

The module on climate for transfer students at four-year colleges found that more than half of the students who had transferred into the four-year school, 54 percent, had not participated in a transfer preparation program prior to arrival. Even more, 64 percent, had never participated in a transfer-focused program or activity since arriving on campus. Although 62 percent reported that

they thought that campus administrators care about what happens to transfer students, about as many, 59 percent, thought that most transfer students feel lost once they enroll. About one third, 31 percent, at least occasionally felt excluded from campus events because they were transfer students. Although this data is based on only a few schools and students, the questions and responses are indicative of the types of information that can be collected using the DLE that provide actionable information on the preparation for transfer and the climate for transfer.

In summary, although the academic achievement of community college transfer students has been studied, there is a dearth of actionable information about the experiences that lead to other outcomes. This new survey tool provides the opportunity to obtain information using the latest theories on success for transfer. It is designed to be used by both two-year community colleges and four-year baccalaureate-granting institutions to examine what efforts might be needed to increase transfer student preparation, to assist with a smooth transition and adjustment, and to lead to high levels of satisfaction with the collegiate experience for students from diverse communities. It is only through the use of theory-based actionable information which can link campus climate, institutional practices, and student learning outcomes, that we can make progress in repairing the leaky pipeline towards the baccalaureate degree for all those who, regardless of the starting point of their journey, desire that goal.

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