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ABSTRACT

During the 1998-1999 academic year, 734 students who transferred from Southern California Community College (SCCC) completed a 96-item survey about their experiences at SCCC and the transfer institution. The results of the survey were presented to SCCC faculty, and a Transfer Education Advisory Committee (TEAC) was established to evaluate the survey findings. In addition, TEAC members conducted student focus groups to address transfer and other issues. Results from the focus groups (48 students) included: (1) 61% of students were White, 18% Hispanic, 16% Asian, and 4% African American; (2) 41% aspired to a master's degree, 38% to a doctorate, and 21% to a bachelor's only; (3) students worked an average of 19 hours per week while attending SCCC, and 12 hours per week while at the four-year institution; (4) about half the students expressed dissatisfaction with their Counseling Center experiences; (5) in general, students found that greater familiarity with computers was expected at the four-year institution than at SCCC; (7) students reported that the amount of reading required at the four-year institution was substantially greater than at SCCC; (8) students' perceptions of how well SCCC prepared them for the research and writing requirements at the four-year institution varied considerably; and (9) students were highly appreciative of SCCC's faculty. The document concludes with recommendations in the following subject areas: counseling; computer skills; reading skills; writing skills; research skills; and faculty advising. The sample focus group protocol is appended. (EMH)

**Southern California Community College
Transfer Readiness Research Project
Focus Group Findings**

by

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August 7, 2000

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This report presents the development, methodology, findings, and recommendations from six focus groups that were conducted with students who transferred from Southern California Community College to one of five local four-year institutions.

Background Information

During the 1998-1999 academic year, 442 students who transferred from Southern California Community College (SCCC) completed a 96-item survey, which allowed respondents to express their opinions about their experiences at SCCC and at their four-year institution, and their adjustment to the four-year institution. An additional 292 students participated in a pilot test of the survey. These 734 students attended one of the following four-year institutions:

- California State University, Northridge (CSUN – a public institution)
- Loyola Marymount University (LMU – a private institution affiliated with the Catholic Church)
- Mount St. Mary's College (MSMC – a private women's institution affiliated with the Catholic Church)
- Pepperdine University (a private institution affiliated with the Church of Christ)
- University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA – a public institution)
- University of Southern California (USC – a private institution)

The results of the survey were presented to the SCCC faculty in August 1999. During the next two months a Transfer Education Advisory Committee (TEAC), consisting of twelve SCCC staff and faculty, was established to evaluate the survey

findings and create a series of institutional recommendations designed to improve student readiness to transfer. In addition, two research coordinators were hired to conduct a number of focus groups that would clarify and expand the survey findings. This group met a dozen times during the 1999-2000 academic year.

At the meetings, TEAC members identified a number of findings from the survey, and from their own areas of interest, that they wanted addressed in the focus groups:

- students' experiences and satisfaction with the Transfer/Counseling Center
- student perception of their academic preparation (computer skills, reading, writing, research skills) for the four-year institution
- faculty involvement in the transfer process.

The focus groups were conducted by the researchers during the spring semester 2000.

Focus Group Methodology

A representative from each of the six target institutions, either in the admissions or institutional research office, was contacted to obtain permission to conduct the focus groups and to advise the researchers about the best way to invite the students to participate and to select a time and date for the focus groups. Students were contacted either by letter or by e-mail. At five of the institutions all students who transferred to the institution in fall 1998 or fall 1999 were invited. At CSUN, which enrolls a large number of SCCC transfer students, a random sample of students was contacted. It should be noted that, because of the time lapse between survey distribution and the focus groups, the students who participated in the focus groups were not the same students who completed the surveys.

In an attempt to recruit participants with different viewpoints, respondents to the invitations were asked for the following information: their sex, majors, and satisfaction with their overall SCCC. Participants included 32 women and 18 men, including 8 women at MSMC, which is a woman's college. In terms of major, 33% were social science majors, 22% were business/accounting majors, 18% were health, life, or natural science majors, 14% were liberal arts and humanities majors, 6% were engineering or computer science majors, and 6% were classified as "other" majors. The vast majority of students who expressed interest in participating in the focus groups assessed their satisfaction with SCCC as a 4 or a 5, and the focus group participants reflected the sentiments of the respondents.

Focus groups were held at five of the six target institutions, and two groups were held at UCLA, with one group consisting of honors programs students and the other group non-honors students. An insufficient number of responses from the students at Pepperdine University resulted in the cancellation of that focus group. The list of questions for the sessions, which each lasted between 90 and 120 minutes, was developed by the research coordinators and refined through feedback from members of TEAC.

Focus Group Results

At the focus group sessions, students were asked to complete a short, anonymous survey requesting demographic information, hours worked while enrolled at school, and educational and career goals. For the 48 students that completed the surveys, here are some of the results:

- Race/Ethnicity: 61% White, 18% Hispanic, 16% Asian/Pacific Islander, and 4% African American
- Degree Aspirations: 41% Master's, 38% JD/PhD/MD, 21% Bachelor's
- Average Hours Worked per Week: 19 while at SCCC, 12 while at four-year

Following are the findings from the discussions that took place during the focus groups, categorized in the following areas: transfer/counseling center, computer skills, reading requirements, writing requirements, research skills, and faculty involvement with transfer. "Four-year" will be utilized as a short hand for the four-year college or university to which the students transferred.

Transfer/Counseling Center

About half of the students expressed dissatisfaction with their experiences with the Counseling Center and its staff, and the remaining opinions were split pretty evenly between those who found the counselors to be helpful and those who found the "self-service" approach to counseling to be effective. Specific problems mentioned by students include conflicting information from different counselors; a lack of information, especially as related to majors and the private colleges; outdated information; and advice that resulted in the students taking unnecessary classes or classes that were not transferable.

Another area of complaints centered on the long waits required to see a drop-in counselor and the difficulties students encountered in trying to make appointments and develop relationships with counselors, especially the part-time counselors. "The turnover rate was high, and every time I went in there there would be different counselors. And

then when I tried to make an appointment, a lot of them would only work two days a week.”

On the positive side, there were a number of students who were able to establish productive relationships with counselors and visited them regularly for advice. A number said that once a student decides on a major, the counselors are helpful in helping them to achieve their goals. Other students emphasized the importance of making an appointment to see a counselor, relating that they had no trouble setting up meetings. Several of the students had attended a financial aid workshop and others made visits to college campuses over spring break and the summer, and found those to be enlightening. A few students expressed their liking for visiting multiple counselors to get a variety of views: “I think part of the experience is going to different counselors, getting different inputs. . . I think it’s a good thing, because there might be one crucial thing that would make it or break it for you going to UCLA and this counselor has no clue about it.”

A significant number of the students, about a quarter of the total, were happy with picking up the IGETC sheets and other forms outlining the requirements, and simply following those. “I really didn’t use the counseling services very much, because it was pretty self-explanatory. There was a sheet you had to follow, the IGETC, and it pretty much laid everything out for you, and I didn’t like standing in lines.” A few students at the private institutions mentioned that it was more difficult to find the requirements for their schools than for the UCs and CSUs. A number of students mentioned that they had consulted the Websites from the four-year institutions or had spoken directly to the counselors at those schools.

Computer Skills

In general, the students found that greater familiarity with computers, above and beyond knowing how to do word processing, was expected at the four-year than at SCCC. Although the experiences of students varied by major and by institution, most found that being able to search the Internet, either to do research or to access class information, and use e-mail were necessary for their classes at the four-year. In contrast, most instructors at SCCC only expected the students to type their papers. However, there were exceptions to this. Some SCCC faculty encouraged students to use the Internet and e-mail, and a number of them encourage students to make use of the computer labs on campus. A few of them even offered to take students over to the labs or help them set up e-mail accounts.

Students who took computer courses (excluding computer science majors) and used the labs on campus had varying perceptions of these services. Many felt the courses were not “hands-on” enough, and emphasized the configuration of the computer hardware over instruction on how to use software applications, which students agreed is much more useful to them. A number of student complained of long waits at the computer labs, due in part to students using computers for non-academic purposes, and of staff members that were just not helpful. A few mentioned that while staff could answer technical questions, they were not trained to assist students with course-related questions.

Despite the relative lack of computer requirements and training at SCCC, most of the students did not feel terribly disadvantaged. They were either already familiar with computers, were able to learn on their own, or took courses once they transferred to the

four-year. Older students, not surprisingly, tend to be less comfortable using computers than the traditional-age students.

Reading Requirements

In most cases, students reported that the amount of reading required at the four-year was substantially greater than at SCCC, and that the reading materials were more difficult. One student ventured that her reading load tripled. Of the students that commented on the issue, most seemed to feel that the increase was due to the change from lower-division to upper-division courses, rather than to SCCC being less demanding than the four-year. Perceptions of the differences between reading requirements at SCCC and at the four-year varied substantially by individual instructor and student major. English majors, for example, felt that their reading requirements at SCCC were extensive, sometimes even more so than at the four-year.

Surprisingly, despite the general perception that the four-years require much more reading than SCCC, not a single student recommended that SCCC change its policy. Students feel that the community college serves an important transitional role in student learning, and that the reading requirements at SCCC are adequate. One student said, "It's a gradual change. It's really hard to go from high school to college with all this reading, but if you go through SCCC it's a little bit more, and then when you get here it's a little more. It just kind of flows through." However, a few students did suggest that the SCCC faculty test students or employ some other means of ensuring that the students complete the readings.

Writing Requirements

Students' perceptions of how well SCCC prepared them for the writing requirements at the four-year varied considerably. While most students reported that they were taught how to write research papers in English Composition, several students said this topic was never addressed. One student found the Advanced English Composition class to be tremendously helpful: "I think I made such strides in writing through that class; she was so honest. She took the time to sit with me and say 'this is what's wrong.'" Other students had the opposite experience. "I had a real bad problem with the English teachers. They didn't really lecture on the 'dos' and don'ts' of writing, and, of course, when you do your essay and get marked off, they don't tell you what to do."

Student experiences with writing across the curriculum, an issue of concern identified by TEAC, varied. A number of students said that the only papers they wrote at SCCC were in their English classes. Others reported doing writing in many of their social science courses, but that those instructors did not necessarily give them feedback on their writing. "The feeling that I got was that each instructor was mostly concerned about how you convey whatever their area was and that they weren't so concerned about the other parts." A few SCCC professors in subject areas were instrumental in improving students' writing skills.

Students in a number of the focus groups remarked that the grading standards are much harder at the four-year: "I had an English class my first semester [at the four-year] and my paper was butchered. And I had gotten A's in SCCC and when I got here my grades were butchered to C's." A student at another university stated, "I feel that I wasn't prepared when it came to writing when I got here. The first course I took here

was one to learn how to write and it was that course that I found out I was deficient in it.” Grading at SCCC is perceived as being too lenient by some students. A few mentioned receiving good grades for essays that were not well written.

Research Skills

As with many of the topics, student comments about the extent to which SCCC taught them to write research papers were varied. Many students related that SCCC English instructors did show them how to cite references and format a paper, but that they did not receive sufficient instruction on how to find and evaluate sources of data. Most of the students reported that the research paper required for English Composition at SCCC largely consisted of critical analysis – obtaining a few books from the library, using them to formulate an opinion, citing them in the paper, and creating a bibliography.

Faculty rarely encouraged students to use the Internet or to cite journal articles in these papers, and very few of them actually expected students to collect data, although one or two students mentioned doing interviews for a class project. “I feel like I did some research papers at SCCC and the teachers gave me some useful information, although as far as sources they basically stressed using the library. . . I came here and the research papers I do here, they stress the library, but they also gave us the computer as a source, the Internet. That really, really helped me.” Another individual said that students who actually complete the assigned research papers at SCCC get a lot out of the process, so the professors should hold the students accountable for the work.

At the four-year, the need for students to do research papers differs by major. Some students have not had to do any research papers at the four-year, and other students feel that research papers are an integral part of their education at the four-year. Of those

that have to do research papers, opinions vary widely as to how well SCCC prepared them. Some feel that SCCC gave them an adequate foundation, some find that the professors at the four-year provide them with the guidance they need to complete the research work, and others feel that SCCC should have given students more exposure and instruction in this kind of work. One suggestion that was repeated by students in several of the focus groups is that faculty at SCCC should do a better job of introducing students to the resources available on the Internet for research purposes.

Faculty Involvement with Transfer

Perhaps more than in any other area, the discussion of faculty inspired a tremendous amount of unrelated, and overwhelmingly positive, comments. While our questions focused on the role the faculty played in the transfer process, many of the students took this opportunity to comment on the excellence of the teaching faculty at SCCC. “All of the instructors that I had at SCCC were awesome, and that MSMC had a lot to live up to because of the quality of instructors at SCCC.” “I loved the teachers. I feel like I knew my teachers better at SCCC than I do here. . . I remember establishing personal relationships with them.” “I think that since they are the ones that actually grade papers and are in contact with you, and are not wrapped up in their own research, they’re much more passionate about teaching. . . They’re not being forced to teach because they can’t do something else, and that makes a big difference.” Faculty enthusiasm for their discipline was inspiring to students, and a few students mentioned changing their majors because of faculty influence. Students like when faculty would reveal something about themselves – why they chose their academic field and their interest in teaching – because that helps to establish a connection with the students.

Faculty discussion of transfer and career planning with students was sporadic, more often taking place during office hours than in the classroom. Professors were largely seen as being accessible and usually easy to talk to outside of the classroom, but students had to take the initiative to go and see them. Some faculty told university or industry “war stories,” others would tell students that they were going to prepare them for the four-year by holding to high academic standards. One instructor encouraged students to get good grades so they could transfer and get a good job, and not end up working at McDonald’s. “I didn’t talk to my professors about transferring, nor did they bring it up in class. But they did emphasize that what we were learning we were going to use again at the university level.” Faculty in more applied areas, such as child development or administration of justice classes, spoke about their own experiences in the field. Students mentioned their appreciation for faculty who wrote them letters of recommendation.

Recommendations

Counseling

- (1) Have counselors acknowledge that students might sometimes receive different advice from different counselor, depending on the counselor and the student’s situation at the time they meet with the counselor. ASK the student if they’re confused by anything that has been discussed. Does it contradict prior information? Are there any questions that need to be answered?
- (2) Students seem comfortable with self-service counseling. Facilitate this process by ensuring the IGETC sheets and requirements for different schools (including the private institutions) are readily available.

- (3) Take advantage of students' growing familiarity with the Web to place additional transfer-related information on the Internet. Consider creating e-mail listservs of students interested in a particular four-year institution or major so that updates to requirements can be sent to them quickly.
- (4) Hold group meetings with students who are interested in a particular four-year to get the important information across to students in an efficient manner.
- (5) Consider assigning students to particular counselors – either by major or even by last name – so they can build a relationship with one person.
- (6) Define certain counseling topics that all counselors should be able to address, and make sure they're trained in these areas.
- (7) Be more proactive in raising the issue of financial aid with students and let them know about the services and information available from the financial aid office.

Computer Skills

- (1) Have faculty require use of e-mail and the Internet as part of their courses. This may entail creating workshops for faculty to familiarize them with these tools.
- (2) Offer more short-term (suggestions ranged from one-day to six-week) workshops or courses on software packages.
- (3) Extend the hours at the computer labs and give priority to people working on school assignments over those people just checking e-mail or surfing the Internet.
- (4) Improve the customer service focus of staff at the computer labs.
- (5) If possible, train the computer lab staff to be able to assist students with class assignments as well as questions about software packages.

Reading Skills

- (1) Hold students accountable for doing the readings.
- (2) Let students know that reading requirement at the four-year tend to be substantially higher.

Writing Skills

- (1) Emphasize basic skills instruction for all students.
- (2) Provide feedback on writing skills, and give students the opportunity to discuss any questions they have.
- (3) Let students know that expectations for writing skills at the four-year tend to be high.

Research Skills

- (1) Introduce students to journals and the Internet as sources of information.
- (2) Provide examples of different citation formats.

Faculty Advising

- (1) If the faculty member is comfortable with doing so, students like to hear some personal information about their professors – why they chose the field they did, their educational background, and related work experience.
- (2) Make links between the work being required for the course and the students' futures, either at the four-year or in the work world.
- (3) Regularly encourage students to meet with them outside of class.
- (4) Let students know, as appropriate, that they are willing to write letters of recommendations.

Appendix 1: Sample Focus Group Protocol

Introduction –

welcome them;

who we are;

tell them about why we are collecting addresses and when they can expect their pay – if you don't get the check in 2 weeks, e-mail us;

we want to hear from everybody – and don't be afraid to express opinions not held by the other members of the group;

you will only be audio taped, and we will only be using first names so you won't be identifiable;

we are going to call on people so that no one ends up speaking over the others;

we may have to occasionally cut a discussion short so that we will be finished on time.

We'll be covering three main topics today: counseling, academic skills, and the faculty's role in transferring.

Why SCCC – 10 MINUTES

(1) How did you find out about SCCC and why did you decide to attend? (Go one by one)

Counseling Center – 20 MINUTES

(2) We'd like next to have you talk about your experiences with the transfer center and any counseling you received related to transfer and financial aid. We're interested in what kind of interactions you had with the counselors, your perceptions of the people who worked with you, and whether you were satisfied with the information you received. Who wants to start?

Follow-up if necessary about:

-financial aid info

-help in completing applications

-did they get info from 4-year institution?

-any really outstanding counselors they met with

-get sense of whether students developed relationship with counselors

Conclude with: What would have improved the services provided by the counselors or the transfer center?

Academic Skills – 40 MINUTES

(3) We would like to shift over to the area of academic skills. We're generally interested how the quality and amount of work expected at YOUR UNIVERSITY compare to the requirements at SCCC, and how well you think SCCC prepared you to do this work. The four areas we'll be asking about are computer skills, reading, writing, and doing research papers.

- (a) let's start with computer skills. What are you expected to know how to do at YOUR UNIVERSITY, and did SCCC teach you what you needed to know?

Find out what they learn on their own vs. what they learn at school
-what was most helpful to them that SCCC offered

Conclude with: What should SCCC have offered to you, and what format would be most helpful? (If asked, give example of full-semester courses vs. individual tutoring)

- (b) Next we want to think about reading requirements. Tell us about the amount of reading required and the level of difficulty of your reading assignments at SCCC (how many classes and how much reading)

Follow up and how this compares to your assignments at YOUR UNIVERSITY, and tell us whether you felt prepared for these requirements

Touch on:
-in which classes do they receive reading assignments

Conclude with: What could SCCC have done to better prepare you to keep up with the reading assignments at YOUR UNIVERSITY?

- (c) We want to follow a similar pattern for writing assignments. Tell us about the number of writing assignments at SCCC, and the expectations for the papers

How does this compare to the writing requirements at YOUR UNIVERSITY, and did you feel prepared to meet these standards?

Touch on:
-in which classes are they expected to write papers
-in how many SCCC classes were they expected to write papers

Conclude with: What could SCCC have done to better prepare you for the writing assignments at YOUR UNIVERSITY?

- (d) The last academic skill we want to address is doing research and writing research papers. First, tell us whether you were expected to do research papers at SCCC, and did you receive instruction on how to do this?

Follow up with: Tell us about the type of research and research papers you are expected to do at YOUR UNIVERSITY, and for how many of your classes are you expected to do research papers. Did you feel prepared to handle these assignments?

Conclude with: What could SCCC have done to better prepare you for these research assignments?

Faculty – 15 MINUTES

- (4) The last item we want to talk about is the role that the faculty played, if any, in helping you to transfer. This includes both in terms of academic preparation, and any ways they might have encouraged students to transfer. In general, how important are the faculty in the transfer process?

Follow up with:

- can you think of specific help provided by faculty members?
- what characteristics make an instructor inspirational in terms of encouraging students to transfer?

Conclude with: What else would you like to see the faculty doing?

Final Thoughts

- (5) Knowing what you know now, if you could go back to SCCC, what would you do differently?



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