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Postsecondary Student Mobility from College to University: Student Expectations and Experience

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Abstract

While studies focused on student GPA scores, transfer credits and the nature of articulation agreements help to inform research related to the transfer student experience, studies investigating the students themselves are still very limited. This study extends the direction modeled by previous literature that has gathered perceptions and comments by narrowing its scope to the individuals most affected by transfer and transition policies: transfer students. After collecting and analysing the data provided directly from students who have transferred to a university in Southern Ontario from a number of different colleges, and gaining an understanding of their experiences and behaviours this study makes recommendations towards developing a more efficient and productive transfer system.

With the current potential for increased growth in students transferring from college (or a two-year institution) to university (or a four-year institution), the need for research into the transfer process has never been greater. In Ontario, sources connected to the provincial government, such as the CUCC (College University Consortium Council), ONCAT (Ontario Council on Articulation and Transfer), MET (Ministry of Education and Training), MTCU (Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities) and CMEC (Council of Ministers of Education, Canada) have long expressed an interest in increasing the ease of transfer between postsecondary institutions (MET, 1996; MTCU, 2011; CMEC, 2013). Strategies to increase the number of transfer students through curricular design and easing the transfer process are being discussed at both the faculty level and at student recruitment levels. While studies focused on student GPA scores (Bell, 1998; Cradock & Lawrence, 1999; Nutting, 2004; Gawley & McGowan, 2006; York University, 2007; Gerhardt, Arai, Carroll & Ackerman, 2012; Martinello & Stewart, 2013), transfer credits (Carter, Coyle & Leslie, 2011; Skolnik, 2011) and the nature of articulation agreements (Gawley & McGowan, 2006; McGowan & Gawley, 2006; Lang, 2007; Kirby, 2008) help to inform this area of research, studies investigating the individuals most affected by transfer and transition policies are still very limited.

Previous studies have utilized similar procedures to the ones used here to gather student perceptions and comments. Significantly, a review of these studies indicated that there were several key areas of concern reported by students that remained unchanged despite a ten-year gap between studies (1996 to 2006). One such concern was transfer shock, a term commonly used to indicate the decrease in grades when moving from one institution to another (Laanan, 1996; McGowan & Gawley, 2006). Other key areas mentioned in the literature include: difference in assessment methods (Laanan, 1996; Gawley & McGowan, 2006); the amount of

independent work required at university and anxiety about larger class sizes (Andres, 1999; Laanan, 1996; Gawley & McGowan, 2006; Townsend & Wilson, 2006); the need for clarity surrounding the transfer process and the shift of academic responsibility to the student (Andres, 1999; Gawley & McGowan, 2006); the lack of assistance in the transfer process and fewer assessment opportunities in university (Laanan, 1996; Townsend & Wilson, 2006) as well as the finding that students had more positive experiences with university professors than they were expecting (Laanan, 1996; Gawley & McGowan, 2006; Townsend & Wilson, 2006). This literature attending to student expectations and experiences is garnering some interest; however, it remains an underdeveloped area of research and the findings are dated. In order to provide the most current, accurate and relevant information on the transfer experience, it is important to carefully investigate the main stakeholders in the process: the students themselves. Accordingly, this study has limited its scope to collecting and analysing the data provided directly from transfer students.

Although there are many different forms of transfer (e.g. college to university; university to college; college to college; movement prior to graduation; movement after graduation) the current study focuses on Canadian students who transferred from a college to a university. To clarify the terminology we have employed; we recognize that in the United States, educational institutions are more commonly referred to as two-year and four-year institutions. Although some colleges in Ontario have a number of programs that extend beyond two years, the current paper uses the term “college” to refer to traditional two-year institutions, as well as Ontario Colleges of Applied Arts and Technology (CAAT). The term “university” is reserved for institutions offering four-year programs terminating in a bachelor’s degree.

An important element to consider when evaluating the range of existing literature on CTS (college transfer students) is the different purposes and mandates of community colleges in the United States as opposed to their Ontario counterparts. Some American colleges are designed to be feeder institutions to university campuses (Andres 1999). On the other hand, the Ontario college system was initially designed as a completely separate system (Bell, 1998; Decock 2004) of technical training for subjects not normally taught at universities – what would typically be referred to as a Technical Institute in the United States. While literature coming from provinces such as Alberta and British Columbia may focus on the roles played by community colleges as feeders for their university systems, this has as much to do with their traditional roles as anything else. For many years, these provinces had a wider network of colleges providing postsecondary opportunities to students while only one or two universities existed in those provinces. Ontario, by comparison, has 28 colleges and 20 universities operating in the province as of August, 2013 (ONCAT, 2013). There is great pressure on Ontario universities to adapt their model to those used in other provinces and in many American states despite the fact that the province has “one of the highest university participation rates in the world” (Skolnik, 2005, pg. 5). Articulation agreements that allow transfer credits are one potential model in use to facilitate greater movement between institutions. Several studies, however, have shown that an increase in articulation agreements does not necessarily increase the rate of transfer (Anderson, Sun & Alfonso, 2006; Lang, 2007; Lang, 2009).

Other studies have indicated that the rate of transfer is not significantly different across North America despite the vast differences in institutionalized relationships between colleges and universities depending on their geographical location (Lang, 2009).

In 2004, Decock reported that the number of college students who intended to transfer to university was increasing. Given the increase in articulation agreements and transfer policies in recent years, one might expect to find exponential growth in the number of students transferring to university studies that supersedes even Deacock's estimations. Five years after Decock's study, however, Lang (2009) indicated that the actual rate of transfer, in both the USA and Canada, had not risen significantly since the mid-1980s. Furthermore, Anderson et al. (2006) reported that student transfer rates in institutions with articulation agreements are basically the same as those without. Lang (2007; 2009) also suggested that an increase in articulation agreements will not increase student transfer levels stating that "there are few empirical reasons to presume that an expansion of articulation will lead to a large scale or across the board expansion of transfer" (Lang, 2009, pg.367).

Academic advisors and counsellors at both college and university are critical sources of information and the need for the advisors to be both accurate with their information and accessible to the students is well established (Hartman, Bjerregaard & Lord, 2009). While university and college academic advisors are seen as a critical source of information, Lang (2009) found that high school guidance counsellors never placed higher than tenth in a survey of factors affecting student choices of postsecondary destinations. If high school guidance counsellors are perceived by high school students as being low quality sources of information (or at best, lower than nine other sources and always lower than parents) there is little indication, at least in the available literature, that their perceptions will change drastically simply by entering a postsecondary institution. As such, they may never seek out academic advisors for support. Townsend & Wilson (2006) confirmed this perception indicating that only 4 of 19 students actually asked someone at their institution for help in figuring out the transfer process.

Some studies have found students reporting positive experiences with academic advising (Davies & Casey, 1999) while others have reported negative experiences (Gawley & McGowan, 2006, Flaga, 2006). While the student reports of these experiences are varied, the two main reasons for those negative reports seem to be consistent: a lack of clarity in policy understanding and delays in communication.

The current research, carried out on a main (original) and satellite campus of a medium sized university in Southern Ontario, gathered information relating to student expectations and experiences and the transfer process in general. This paper focuses on student expectations and experience as well as including discussion regarding the source of their expectations. As was mentioned, the current study has limited its scope to collecting and analysing the data provided directly from transfer students. Focusing on the students' reporting of their transfer experiences is crucial to developing an understanding of their preferences and behaviours and is a critical step in developing a more efficient and productive transfer system.

It also affords some feedback as to the efficacy of current communication practices regarding the transfer process and gives a limited, but important, measure of the discrepancy between what students expected...and what they found...when transferring between institutions.

Method

In January of 2012, invitations were emailed out by the Office of the Registrar of a medium sized multi-campus university in Southern Ontario, on behalf of the researchers, to all college transfer students enrolled in the Faculty of Arts on a main campus and to all those enrolled at a satellite campus. Because of the limited time available for research, only one email invitation was sent to each student. Students were instructed to click on an email link to contact the researchers if they were interested in participating in a focus group gathering information on their experiences as a college transfer student. One of the researchers personally responded to book a convenient time for each student to participate in a scheduled focus group. Focus groups were held at various times and days across both campus locations in early February 2012 in an attempt to provide students with as many opportunities to participate as possible. The result was that eleven time slots were made available to those students who had responded with the intent of maximizing participation. Focus groups were conducted in a conference room located on each respective campus and lasted between 45-75 minutes.

Of the 11 focus groups that were conducted, 6 groups were from the satellite campus and 5 from the main campus. Of the 31 individuals who agreed to participate, 16 females and 10 males attended one of the focus groups, which resulted in groups having between 1-4 participants. Of the 26 participants, 20 students had attended one of 9 different colleges in Ontario, one attended a college (CEGEP) institution in Quebec and one arrived from a college in New York, USA. Four students chose not to disclose their previous college name.

The following is a list of questions that were asked at each focus group interview (adapted from McGowan & Gawley, 2006; Davies & Dickman, 1998).

1. What is the college program you transferred from and what program have you transferred into?
2. Prior to starting at this campus, what were your expectations of university life?
3. How would you describe your experiences in transferring from college to university?
4. How many transfer credits did you receive?
5. What specific assistance did you receive from your college when transferring to university and then also what assistance did you receive from the university?
6. What parts of university life do you find enjoyable and what aspects do you not enjoy?
7. Did you find the website helpful?
8. What were your expectations about academics at

university relative to your college experience of academics? And since arriving have your expectations been met?

9. What advice would you offer other college transfer students who were either about to start university or thinking about doing this?
10. Anything else that you wanted to add to the discussion?

Each focus group session was recorded using a Panasonic RR-XR800 digital audio recorder after participants had signed an informed consent form. Written transcripts including all verbal and segregate information were produced directly from the audio files by a professional transcriptionist and then verified for accuracy by the lead author. The authors analyzed each of the transcriptions independently and developed a list of themes that reoccurred over the 11 focus group sessions. The authors then identified and agreed upon thematic responses that were consistent between both lists.

In order to attend to the issue of trustworthiness of the data, the researchers triangulated the data by looking at the information obtained during the focus group transcripts from more than one source (Stake, 2010). In addition to focus groups with students, the researchers also conducted interviews with university staff members who had experience dealing with college transfer students. Although not all of the themes discussed below were expressed in the exact same words, the vast majority were mentioned, independently, by the staff members as being part of conversations that they had had with college transfer students. Thus, without being prompted, the staff members were able to indicate a measure of consistency (Guba, 1981) in college transfer student responses. Furthermore, because the staff members were encountering the students in a different capacity and environment, a measure of objectivity or neutrality, it was established that the responses obtained in the focus groups were not simply a function of the conditions of inquiry (Guba, 1981).

Expectations and Experience

General Expectations

Students responded to questions about the expectations that they held prior to attending university in a variety of ways. Some students re-iterated a more traditional paradigm as reflected in comments like: "College is more hands-on, university is more research focused." However, other students foregrounded their perception that this model espoused a false dichotomy, and that the amount of emphasis that is being placed on either theory or praxis is more closely correlated to individual disciplines rather than being an institutionally specific mandate. Several conversations within the focus groups identified how programs in both colleges and universities either reify or resist that generalized assumption about the types of learning that take place in each institution. For example, one student noted that the types of learning and modes of assessment they experienced were distinctly "program based." In other words, they had engaged in some theoretical approaches in college, as well as experiencing some hands-on experience in their university context. This sentiment was echoed by multiple members of each focus group. These observations seem to indicate that, at least from a student perspective, the old model of identifying colleges with

“practical” knowledge, and universities solely with “theoretical” knowledge is giving way to a paradigm that identifies programs and disciplines, rather than institutions, as the determining factor when evaluating specific sets of learning and assessment models.

Sources of General Expectations

Students identified several sources for these perceptions. Almost all of the focus group participants mentioned family members and/or friends as important forces that shaped their perception of what colleges and universities are, how they function, and what is so different about the two institutions. Those same students were also quick to report that those sources had varying levels of experience, and that they were not always accurate. Other sources such as entertainment media (films, television shows, videos) and information media (news, magazines, newspapers) were also identified. The final source for these perceptions included college instructors and high school teachers. As would be expected, students reported that college instructors provided a sense of what to expect at a university setting, almost always emphasizing the higher academic standards (students were often told to expect dropping a full letter grade if they transferred). College instructors also warned students about the shift from a more structured academic environment in college, to the university context in which students were expected to manage their own academic motivations and goals. Previous studies have also noted this shift in academic responsibility (Andres, 1999; Gawley & McGowan, 2006; Townsend & Wilson, 2006).

A significant insight that developed from the focus group discussions was the impact of high school teachers and guidance counselors on students’ perceptions of college and university programs. In contrast to previous research by Lang (2009) and Townsend & Wilson (2006), several students mentioned how the descriptions of, and information about, colleges and universities that they received in high school shaped their perceptions of what those institutions do, and where, as students, they “belonged.” One student reported having a low GPA in high school and being told that they would never go to university. After a year in the workforce, the student attended college and received very high marks – the student transferred to a university program in year two and has recently been accepted into a graduate program.

In addition to direct comments about a student’s potential for success in college or university programs, students seemed to decode a host of other, subtler, indicators of their academic abilities that ranged from the types of programs they were “slotted” into, to the types of work they were given to complete. This area did not fall under the purview of this study, however, a future study that re-examines the impact of high school experiences on transfer students may yield some important insights into those decision making processes.

Academic Expectations

As was mentioned above, most students expected a “more intensive” academic experience in transferring to a university program. This expectation included both, the types of episteme, and the particular methods of evaluation that they would encounter. One participant

commented, "I was expecting more theory but I was [also] expecting the standards to be at least as tough as they were in college." While there were students who expressed some anxiety about this prospect, the vast majority expressed enthusiasm at the prospect of facing these new challenges. As one student noted: "I was so excited to come to university and to be around other people who took school seriously." In fact, multiple focus groups identified the expectation of encountering a culture of serious academic inquiry at university as one of their single most important expectations. While the actual experiences of students will be discussed in detail below, it is worth noting here that many students' experiences did not align with these expectations.

Sources of Academic Expectations

As with the more generalized perceptions about university life, students' expectations about academics were shaped by a variety of forces. While at least one participant confessed that they "didn't know what's expected of me so I think I sort of came into it blind," most students had a definite, if not always accurate, image of what pursuing academics in a university setting would entail. Students reported that both high school teachers and college instructors issued "warnings" about the difficulties of university life. Both groups of educators seemed to emphasize that in their own settings (high school and college) a greater amount of assistance was being provided to assist with student success.

Other sources included both friends and family. After working through the actual transfer process, however, students also realized the limitations of such sources. One student who was accessing information about the process from friends realized that her situation (transferring from college to university) differed quite drastically from her friends who had transferred from one university campus to another. Another student who relied on the fact that the student's "dad went to the same university" found that his input had value in preparing the student for the most general challenges of university life, but helped less in negotiating the nuts and bolts of actually transferring from one institution to another.

Academic Experiences

The discussion about student experiences elicited responses that can be organized into a few key categories. This section will begin with some of general feedback provided by students, particularly in reference to their expectations of entering into a "culture of serious academic inquiry" as they transferred to a university setting. The second category collects student feedback on the shift in class size and the role of the individual instructor in the transfer process. The last major category reflects the students' emphasis on the issues surrounding assessment at university in contrast to their experiences of assessment at college. This final category is broken into two sub fields: assessment models and assessment rationales.

The culture of academia

Students reported that certain preconceptions about transferring from a college to a university were confirmed, while others were modified by their experiences. For example, students who had been advised that, in transferring from college to university, there would be a shift of academic

responsibility from the staff and faculty to the actual student found this to be true. Several students reported that, to be successful in university academics required a greater level of self-determination, self-motivation and self-confidence. As one student put it, "there's a lot more that you need to be doing on your own time."

One surprising feature of the focus groups was the number (and nature) of the comments that students made about their academic experiences. While students had received "warnings" from high school teachers and college instructors about the type of intellectual work that university studies require, many reported that the level and amount of work was quite manageable. It was not uncommon to hear students make remarks such as: "I have noticed differences but [they are] not as extreme as they've lead us to believe" or "I thought it was going to be a lot more difficult than it is." Granted, we did not correlate the GPA of the focus group participants to their comments and have no way of knowing if their perception of their own success is consistent with the assessment of their work by their instructors. However, several students reported that they were experiencing academic success (meaning that they were meeting or exceeding their own academic goals). As one particularly self-reflexive student remarked: "I found that I've actually been doing a lot better in university than I ever did in college. I'm not sure if it's because I came in expecting it to be harder, or if I just care more now...that I've realized I want to pursue more education."

When probed about these experiences, students followed up with some important insights about the differences between the college and university experience. Even as some students noted, "that the pace was ... quite a bit slower than what I was used to at the college level," others were quick to clarify that "from a college aspect...the work ... wasn't as intensive, there was just a lot more to do." These comments led to discussions about both, the number of courses and assignments that college students were used to and the type of analysis that they were expected to perform on them. This comparison will be outlined in greater detail in the section on assessments, what is more pertinent here are the perspectives of the students on those differing pedagogical models. Far from distaining one and favoring the other, most students reported a distinct value in both.

While most transfer students agreed that the pedagogical model in their colleges left students with less "free time," because of the number of courses and assignments that were required, and that the pedagogical model in universities had fewer assignments and enabled more "free time" they also explained that "it's not spare time because you actually have to get [the work] done so it's just it's a different way of working." Again, students valued aspects of both models noting that "it's not a matter of [being] more demanding... it's just demanding in a different way."

As mentioned above, most students reported having an expectation of finding a "culture of serious academic inquiry" as they transferred into their various university programs. While students felt challenged by this perception, this was also one of the central motivating factors for pursuing a transfer in the first place. In short, they wanted their university experience to align with this image, regardless of how much it might also cause a certain level of anxiety in them. College students held an "expectation

that... students would be much more serious at university than college.”

While their experiences with the course material, and course instructors bore out this reality, many students reported that broader campus culture did not. Almost every focus group included one or two comments that reflected this discrepancy between the perception of an academic culture at university, and what college-transfer students experienced. Several students noted that they were “surprised ... that...nobody’s really taking this as serious as I thought.” To clarify, these comments were not directed at the academic standards held by the institution they were attending. Rather, they were observations about their student cohort, the orientation process, and the general student attitude that appeared to be more focused on the social aspect of university life to the exclusion of the academic. One transfer student has recently begun her graduate work and only now feels like she is “around people that are like-minded” in terms of their commitment to academics, scholarly research and learning.

There was also a mixed response to the ways that universities structure their degree programs. Some students felt a loss of focus in transferring to a university program, as if they were being required to take courses that did not directly influence their specific educational goals. For example, one student noted that, “You want to learn about Early Childhood Education, [but to] learn about ECE here you have to take Contemporary Studies classes like World in the 21st Century or ...Applied Scientific Reasoning.” However, others experienced this to be one of the advantages to attending university – they reported that their exposure to multiple disciplines and subjects enhanced their overall perspective, challenged them to think about new subjects and caused them to think about their own field in new ways.

Class Size: Potential impacts on communication, assessments and student satisfaction

While most students found their new academic programs to be “well structured” and their “professors very knowledgeable and willing to help in any way,” they also noted the drastic shift in certain aspects of their educational experience, in particular, the size of the courses that they were taking, and their interaction with both their cohort and their instructors.

Most college students reported that, every semester they had “the same people [in] all seven of their classes every day so there was 30 of us [and] it was interactive with the teacher.” They also remarked on the shock they experienced in transferring to an institution whose pedagogical model (in 1st and 2nd year courses) included large class sizes. Here is how one student explained the transfer experience: “In college my classes there were 20 to 30 people and I knew all my profs really well and...socialized with them, they all knew who I was. In university ... none of my professors have any idea who I am you just kinda like blend in with the crowd, there’s 200 people in your in your courses and you don’t really get to know them.” While that student’s comment regarding the difficulties in adjusting to large class sizes was common, the student’s comment about not knowing the professors was unique. The majority of college transfer students interviewed reported having very positive experiences with their professors. A more typical assessment of the student -professor dynamic included students who felt as though their professors were knowledgeable,

accessible, and willing to help. As one student noted, “a lot of professors do care about students... and want to be there if the students are willing to make themselves available.” The student’s last comment seems to indicate that students themselves must accept some responsibility in whether or not they have a positive or negative experience with their professors.

As this paper has previously indicated, college transfer students need to be aware of the shift in academic responsibility. On the whole, university professors were reported as being just as helpful and accessible as their college counterparts; however, where college instructors would pursue students on a more regular basis, in university, the responsibility for initiating and maintaining contact with the professor rests squarely on the student. As one transfer student commented, “I was [not] just going to be a number that wasn’t going to have any dialogue with profs or anything like that, and I really have been able to. [...] I have been able to take the time and...get one on one consultation which I didn’t think I was going to be able to get...which you know makes me happy. I found it...helped me be a better student.”

In fact, college transfer students made astute observations about the roles and responsibilities of university professors. One student remarked, “students know that teaching is not 100% of the prof’s job description, that it’s actually quite a small percentage most often...especially professors with tenure.”

One student commented that, in their experience, “a lot of professors do an amazing job of finding that balance between their own stuff and the teaching and the interactions with the students” but were also quick to add that, “there’s like a handful of professors that don’t enjoy the teaching [or] do it more of an obligation.” These comments seem to acknowledge that students attribute the level of positive or negative interaction with their instructors on an individual, rather than institutional, basis.

Transfer students also speculated about a link between class sizes and assessment models. A number of focus group participants theorized that there might be some correlation between the sizes of those entry-level classes and the proliferation of certain assessment models – such as multiple-choice exams. One transfer student mused, “I guess with 200 people in the class it’s hard for the prof to be able to mark, mark through each one of them so it’s just quicker to do Scantron.” Thus, transfer students recognized the difficulty in marking short answer or essay-based evaluations of student knowledge in courses with 100-200 students. While transfer students understood the practicality of this possible link, they also reported frustrations with certain pedagogical models that seemed, in their experience, to limit the types of learning that were possible. Several students mentioned that courses relying exclusively on multiple choice exams as an assessment model limited their learning by focusing on “regurgitating” data from the textbook, and that these assessment models left little room for “critical thought.” While some transfer students liked multiple-choice exams because they were perceived as being easier, the majority of transfer students preferred other assessment models. Significantly, their preference for those other models (such as essay and short answer) were tied directly to their desire to engage in those aspects of “higher order reasoning” that attracted them to university studies in the

first place. One student explained it this way: "I prefer the tests that we have now [in university] I find that I learn a lot more and I'm a lot more motivated to pay attention in class and to take notes and to be there otherwise I can just go home and read the textbook on my own and answer those multiple choice questions so I feel like I'm getting more for my money and I'm learning more when I have...the short answer and the essay questions and things like that."

Assessment Models

Another common assumption is that the modes/types of assessments are radically different in college and university settings. Focus group participants confirmed certain aspects of that assumption, while rejecting other aspects and, again, suggested that changes were discipline specific and related to course size, rather than being institutionally based.

One of the most common comments that surfaced repeatedly in focus group interviews was how unappealing group work assignments were to transfer students. Transfer students were quick, however, to point out that they experienced group work assessments in both college and university settings, and that these experiences appeared to be rooted in the philosophies of individual programs rather than being a part of broader institutional differences. Transfer students who were being assessed through individualized assignments expressed a certain level of anxiety about having their mark depend entirely on their own achievement. These same students, however, also reported a stronger sense of academic accomplishment and pride when they did well.

As well, transfer students across focus groups made continual references to one key difference between college and university assessment models: the number of assignments (assessment opportunities). Most transfer students identified having more "free time" in university than they did in college. Part of the reason for this perception is that college students typically have a higher course load than university students, but also because college students tend to have a higher number of assignments in those courses. While several students noted a certain level of stress as they struggled to manage their time, they also recognized that multiple assignments also meant multiple assessment opportunities. Thus, if a college student performs poorly on one assignment, there are still multiple opportunities to mitigate that mark and do well in the course.

Transfer students noted some difficulty in adjusting to their university's pedagogical model – one that had far fewer assignments (hence the perception of a greater amount of free time) but one that also had fewer opportunities for students to display their progress in working through course material and impact their final mark. One student reflected on the fact that in college you could perform poorly on an assignment and still have multiple opportunities for success in the course, whereas in university if you perform poorly on even one assignment "you're done."

Thus, two of the central challenges in assisting transfer students in their transition from college to university are: making them aware of the shift in assessment models and, helping them to develop adjustment strategies.

While this challenge was expressed by almost all transfer students, students transferring into arts programs found it particularly difficult. Their college assessments were often oriented towards group work, or objective, information-based content. In university, these transfer students found that assessment models, both assignment and exam formats, required the ability to critique the information being presented, and the ability to express that critique clearly through their writing. As one transfer student put it, "it's not just about...the types of assessment used but the types of knowledge, the types of thinking that you're doing."

Transfer students reported that they had encountered writing assignments in their colleges, but that everything – from the subject matter, to the formatting - was different from the expectations they encountered in university. One student explained, "in my (college) program we did actually have to write a number of essays but it wasn't that they were lower expectations they were just different expectations, instead of like putting forth your ideas and arguing etcetera maybe you just write a report to reflect on like a practical experience or like if you were writing an assignment about something a little less abstract."

Regardless of the program, most transfer students reported experiencing specific challenges with writing assignments once at university. Significantly, these challenges did not diminish their desire to have writing assignments as a key part of their assessment model. In other words, while transfer students found writing assignments (or writing based exams) more difficult, they also found them more rewarding. The frustrations they experienced in attempting to adjust to this assessment model had less to do with the model itself, and more to do with the perceived lack of assistance in being able to master it.

In summary, students reported a shift away from thinking about college education as a "hands on" model and university education as being more theoretical. Almost all students recognized discipline-specific trends that crossed through both educational experiences, and, perhaps more importantly, found value in engaging in both college and university courses. Transfer students also reported a surprisingly high enthusiasm for the academic difficulty that was promised to accompany university studies – and were disappointed to find a general lack of serious academic inquiry amongst their peers. Respondents also noted that the awareness of, and adjustment to, the differing pedagogical models between institutions was crucial to minimizing transfer shock. More specifically, transfer students need help early on adjusting to a university model in which there are fewer assessments in a course that are worth much more, rather than a college model in which students have far more assessments that are worth less. Perhaps the most notable element of the responses was the insight respondents had to the value of both types of pedagogical models in meeting their own educational goals.

Limitations

Although focus groups were held at various times across both campus locations, the response rate from the students themselves was low. Future studies may consider some sort of compensation for participation to increase overall numbers. An online "sign-up" system may also help participation by reducing the amount of work a student would have to do to

find a convenient time to participate.

Only one email invitation was sent to each college transfer student, which most likely had a significant effect on the number of eventual participants. Dillman (1978) suggests an initial invitation followed by three follow-up reminders; however, due to a compressed 90 day timeline from project initiation to project completion imposed by the funding agency, the researchers decided that there was only time to issue the initial invitation. Future research should make additional attempts to contact students with the hope of increasing the overall number of participants which will increase the representativeness of the sample and potentially generate additional themes for discussion. As well, the qualitative nature of this case study, the views and perceptions expressed by the students who participated in the focus groups sessions, can only be represented as the views and perceptions of these particular individuals.

Recommendations

One online location for all formal articulation agreements and transfer credit policies is recommended to make it easier for prospective college transfer students to obtain the information they need to make an informed decision regarding which institution to attend and how their credits will be applied upon admission. This online location should also contain information regarding the potential pedagogical and assessment model differences between the two types of institutions. Furthermore, one location would ensure a higher degree of transparency with the transfer information itself. This does not necessitate, nor does the data indicate, that there is a need for a single system-wide transfer credit policy. In fact, the data suggests that a single system wide transfer credit policy may not be effective in accommodating any given student (Gerhardt et al., 2012). Lang (2009) also cautioned against a one-stop solution: "while systems might wish to promote transfer as a matter of public policy, it does not necessarily follow that the most effective means of promotion is a system wide articulation, or that articulation is even the right paradigm"(pg. 367).

One suggestion put forth by a transfer student was to establish a "university adviser at the colleges" – not just for logistical information, but ostensibly, one who can advise on the specific issues surrounding the awareness of and adjustment to different pedagogical models that transfer students face when going into a university context. This is a recommendation for a position in colleges that is dedicated to disseminating accurate information about universities, helping to form the curriculum for transfer streams, and for assisting students in the transfer process. If a full time position cannot be created, transfer students recommended that some representative from the university be sent to hold information sessions, workshops, etc. at local colleges. As one transfer student stated: "the university has to start looking at the college as its recruiting grounds. There are some really good students out there that do want to continue on a university level of education."

The creation of Headstart programs and/or Orientation week events specific to college transfer students may help these students navigate the non-academic aspects of university and also allow them the opportunity to make social support connections, which may increase the chance that these students can engage in dialogue about academics at the university

level prior to the beginning of their first term of university study. Headstart programs are run during the summer months and act as a half-day transition or pre-orientation day where students and parents can have their questions answered prior to arriving the traditional Orientation week (held the week prior to the beginning of the Fall term). Since the Headstart programs are held on multiple dates earlier in the summer, questions about transfer, academic and otherwise, could be attended to in a more timely fashion.

Conclusion

One of the important results to come out of this research is that in spite of ongoing academic research, as well as institutional and government attempts at overhauling the transfer process, the experiences reported by students are fairly consistent with statements reported in the literature (Andres, 1999; Gawley & McGowan, 2006; Laanan, 1996; Townsend & Wilson, 2006) and thus confirms their findings. This finding has also been explicitly reported by Townsend & Wilson, 2006. Regardless of the number of studies published or the number of conferences organized, the academy as a whole, while identifying a need for change, has made very little noticeable progress, at least from a student perception perspective. While recommendations have been made that involve students' changing their habits and expectations, colleges and universities, as institutions, need to adjust their policies and procedures to more adequately deal with class size shock and the inevitable shift in pedagogical methodology that the student transfer populations face.

The data discussed above indicates that students are aware of differences between college and university academics but in some cases, are unaware of where to gather more information. This confirms findings of students having difficulties accessing information reported in the literature (Andres, 1999; Gawley & McGowan, 2006; Townsend & Wilson, 2006). Since the internet is a main source of information, institutional websites and transfer-specific government websites need to be updated continually and, in some cases, greatly expanded to make as much academic AND non-academic information available as possible. Current transfer students should be used as a resource to guide the content of these information websites since they are so intimately involved in the transfer process across institutions and across the entire multi-year experience. Skolnik (2005) stated quite frankly that, the Government (of Ontario) will have to take measures to ensure the improvement of postsecondary transfer because "in general, Ontario universities do not attach high intrinsic value to attracting transfer students from CAATs" (pg. 12). ONCAT and other government policy vision statements (MET, 1996; MTCU, 2011) have initiated some improvement, although an environmental scan of transfer policies and agreements carried out in January/February of 2012 by Gerhardt et al. (2012) still shows significant variability in available information and depth of agreements. Furthermore, several aspects of the environmental scan had to be updated during the research phase of their report because policies had been updated and it was only by chance (verification of data gathered prior to submitting their report) that these changes were even noticed. This speaks to the critical importance of establishing an online location for up-to-date transfer credit and transfer process information. This administrative information combined with

information regarding Headstart programs, mentoring support as well as what students can expect in their post-transfer experience will help ensure that students have relevant and accurate information upon which to base their expectations of this next step in their academic careers.

Note: The authors would like to gratefully acknowledge CUCC/ONCAT for financial assistance in support of this research project.

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