

Transfer in British Columbia: What Does the Research Tell Us?

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The British Columbia Council on Admissions and Transfer (BCCAT) maintains a select research program to assess the effectiveness and efficiency of the transfer system in British Columbia. Although operating with a modest budget, the research agenda is strategic and often builds on the work and expertise of others. The cumulative effect of this research over the past decade is that a solid and extensive portrait of transfer in B.C. is now available.

The good news emerging from BCCAT research is that the transfer system has performed well: many students have transferred, they have done so with relative ease, and they have achieved bachelor's degrees with much the same success as students who enrolled in university directly from secondary school.

Many observers believe that the B.C. post-secondary educational environment is changing and becoming more complex, and thus the success of the transfer system to date cannot simply be taken for granted. One chapter of the history of B.C. post-secondary education is drawing to a close, and the next chapter is still being sketched out.

The majority of this newsletter is devoted to summarizing the conclusions from the research describing the B.C. transfer system over the past decade. It concludes by identifying some of the anticipated challenges that may serve to influence both the work and the research agenda of the Council in the coming years. Because of historic transfer patterns, most of the findings reported here concern the transfer of students into universities. With the

increased diversity of the post-secondary system and growing numbers of degree options and transfer destinations, current and future Council research focusses on a broader range of transfer activities.

Many students take the transfer route

Looking across the three largest universities and averaging across the decade of the 1990s, B.C. universities admitted three college students for every five B.C. secondary school students. Including a fourth university in the five year period ending 1998/99, approximately 22,000 students transferred from a B.C. college, university college, or institute.

In 2001, four universities (SFU, UBC, UNBC and UVic) formed a partnership to survey their 1996 baccalaureate degree graduates five years after they had completed their degree. In 2003, these survey results were analyzed on the basis of admission: B.C. college transfer student versus direct entrant from high school. Respondents who had transferred to university from a college, university college or institute

were almost as numerous (47% of the total) as those who had entered university directly from high school (53%), clearly indicating that a year or two of prior study at a college is a very important way to enter a B.C. university and earn a degree.

The foregoing data exclude college students who completed their degree at one of B.C.'s five university colleges. Currently, university colleges and provincial institutes award almost 20% of the undergraduate degrees, including Bachelor of Technology degrees, in the province.

IN A UNIVERSITY-BASED STUDY, transfer students can be defined in more than one way:

- *Any student who previously attended college*
- *Students who transferred college course credit towards their university programs*
- *Students who transferred sufficient college credits to be admitted to university in the separate admissions category of transfer student*

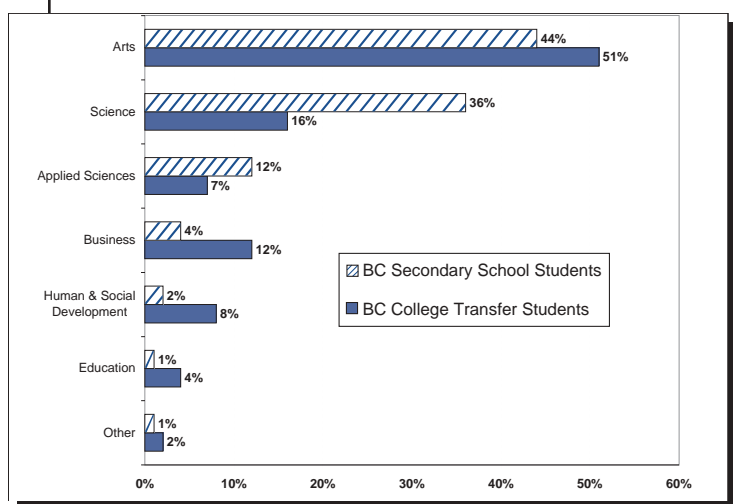
Readers who choose to consult the studies should note the definition used in each.

Transfer students have some distinctive characteristics

Transfer students are half as likely to have studied Science or Applied Science at university as are direct entry students. Instead, they are over-represented in the faculties of Business, Arts, Human & Social Development, and, to a lesser extent, Education.

Approximately one half of college transfer students registered full-time in their first semester or session at a B.C. university, in contrast to the over 80% of direct entry students. Despite their high level of part-time studies, 32% of transfer students (compared to 16% of direct entrants) used student loans as their primary source of funding at university. Furthermore, the follow-up survey of 1996 university graduates found that of those with student loans, the average debt load of transfer students was \$5,500 higher upon graduation.

FIGURE 1: Distribution of B.C. College Transfer Students vs. B.C. Secondary School Students Admitted to B.C. Universities by Destination Faculty (1994/95 to 1998/99)



Source: *Profile of B.C. College Transfer Students*, December 2001.

Students vary in their planning for transfer

Some qualitative studies commissioned by the Council in the mid 1990s found that many students who had already transferred to university had entered college with that goal in mind and had planned carefully for transfer. Yet a number of students still at college who intended to transfer in the future appeared to employ

an unfocussed, unsystematic – and in a few cases, almost indifferent – approach to transfer. This latter group seemed to have a general sense that everything would work out in the end, that the transfer system is robust and would serve them well.

These findings about potential transfer students led the Council to undertake a number of initiatives, including the development of a user-friendly handbook, *B.C. Transfer TIPS*, first published and distributed widely to institutions in 1999. Recent outcomes data indicate that students may now be more aware of resources and the need to plan. A 2002 survey of former college and institute students in B.C. found a somewhat smaller proportion had unmet transfer expectations compared to two years earlier, possibly suggesting better knowledge and planning.

The transfer process works smoothly

Former college students regularly report on follow-up surveys that the transfer process worked well for them; in 2002, 48% were "very satisfied" with their experience and another 40% were "satisfied." Transcript assessments conducted by university registrars' offices found that transfer students received credit at university for 85% of the credits they earned at college. The credits that did not transfer were primarily in courses that were not intended for transfer (e.g. upgrading or English as a Second Language courses), or did not transfer for a number of other valid reasons.

In a 2002 survey, 92% of transfer students reported that they were admitted to their preferred institution, 94% obtained their preferred program of study, and 85% got all the courses they wanted in their first session at university. Some institutions and programs, however, had lower than average accessibility, indicating specific problem areas which bear out anecdotal accounts of the difficulties some students encounter in accessing increasingly rationed university education.

A 2002 study using records from university administrative systems found that 15% of qualified transfer applicants were not offered admission to a B.C. university in 2001/02. The Council is doing further work to determine the extent to which turn-away transfer students enrolled at a university college or elsewhere, in subsequent semesters. In the meantime, concern is mounting regarding a potential "transfer bottleneck" in the B.C. post-secondary education system.

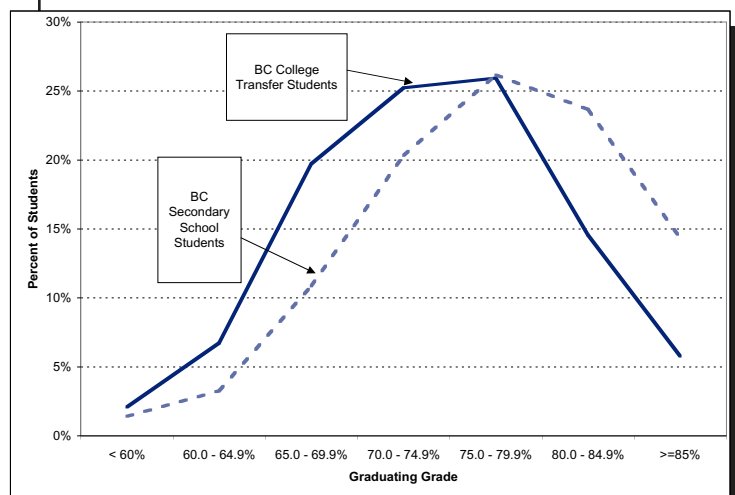
After adjusting to university, transfer students perform well

The grades of transfer students initially drop at university, but gradually recover and are remarkably similar at graduation to those of students who entered university directly from secondary school. The common term "transfer shock" may be a misnomer in that the grades of direct entry students initially drop as much or more as those of transfer students; "university entrance shock" might be a better term.

The initial decline in GPA was a consistent cause of anxiety for interviewees. Nevertheless, transfer students reported in retrospect that transferring from college to university remained their preferred route. They described college as having provided a solid foundation that eased the transition to university.

During the 1990s transfer students entered university with a 70% admission average and completed their degrees with grades that were within five percentage points of direct entry students. Some preliminary work commissioned by the Council suggested that the differences in graduation grades disappeared when transfer students were compared with a sample of direct entry students who had similar grades in secondary school. Given their diverse backgrounds – many transfer students were not admissible to university when they left secondary school – college transfer students performed very well at B.C. universities. The more credits students transferred, the better their performance in subsequent studies.

FIGURE 2: University Graduation Grade Distribution – B.C. College Transfer Students vs. B.C. Secondary School Students (Admitted to B.C. Universities from 1994/95 to 1998/99)



Source: *Profile of B.C. College Transfer Students*, December 2001.

The number of students who have been able to use diploma-to-degree block transfer, rather than course-by-course transfer, has been small. The amount of research on these students is also limited, but some work by the University of Victoria found that such block transfer students performed as well as students who entered university directly from secondary school.

Outcomes for transfer and direct entry students compare favourably

BCCAT's 2003 study comparing the university post-baccalaureate outcomes of transfer students with direct entrants five years after graduation showed no major differences on most key outcomes. These include satisfaction with the university experience, continuation of studies, unemployment rates, salaries and social engagement. What differences did emerge had more to do with the characteristics of the students themselves, such as age and debt loads, than with their educational experiences and subsequent pathways.

Conclusion: Two viable routes to a degree

A number of factors, including location, affordability, maturity, mobility, and competitiveness of admission requirements may influence an individual's choice of post-secondary institution. The Council's research shows that beginning university-level studies at a college or at a university are both viable routes to a degree. B.C. residents, unlike most Canadians, are fortunate to have this choice.

The question of whether to attend college before university is best posed for individual students. Given the student's own circumstances and preferences, one route might indeed be more appropriate than the other. Whichever route is chosen, students can be confident that they are not likely to be disadvantaged for having chosen it.

Emerging challenges and future research

The educational landscape described in the Council's transfer research over the past decade is changing in two significant respects: a growing number of degree-granting institutions and what many observers believe to be an inadequate number of transfer spaces in universities and university colleges.

Course-by-course transfer arrangements in B.C. originated when there were only three universities to receive transfer students. With

the growth to over a dozen degree-granting institutions, the imminent introduction of applied degrees in the college sector, and government policy intended to facilitate the development of private degree-granting institutions, what was once a manageable system has taken a quantum leap in complexity. Additional ways of conceptualizing the transfer system to provide new transfer routes will have to be developed, although the core practices of the past will remain important.

A first step in understanding the impact of new transfer routes will be for the Council to expand its research on the role of university colleges as receiving institutions. The Council has initiated some studies of the extent to which university colleges are responding to this growing demand, but it could be several years until changes in record keeping at university colleges and the

number of transfer students are such that the research questions can be answered conclusively. In the meantime, small insights are being gained and the transfer demand remains unabated.

Capacity challenges in the post-secondary system have been reflected in rising university admission Grade Point Average (GPA) requirements. Given the admission demand from transfer students as well as from direct entry students, the Council is shifting its research agenda to focus more on the admission aspects of its mandate to help provide information about the access to, and capacity of, baccalaureate degree programs. Transfer students will remain an important component of admissions, but the Council's changing emphasis means that they will be studied in the broader context of all student flows into and within the B.C. post-secondary education system.

References

An annotated bibliography of BCCAT Research is available at: www.bccat.bc.ca/publications. It provides a roadmap to an extensive set of electronic reports, including the following, elaborating many of the points made here.

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