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## EXPLORING THE SUCCESS OF TRANSFER PROGRAMS FOR COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENTS

### ***Abstract***

The state's educational systems must collaborate together to enable transfer students to gain the necessary skills that support degree completion strategies. Given the current economic state, an investment in California community college transfer students in order to provide the best possible university transition would seem wise and fiscally responsible. This outcomes-based assessment evaluation focused on assessing outcomes of a new transitional summer program, called Transfer Bridge; designed to aid under-represented community college students transfer to a public comprehensive regional university. The results showed that successful transfer programs must be customized for the transferring students they are intended to serve in order to effectively address their transition needs to the university.

**C**ommunity college transfer students continue to need high quality support programs upon arrival at four-year institutions. According to Eggleston and Laanan (2001), those responsible for shaping transfer support programs must consider the characteristics of this student population in order to effectively address their needs. Transfer students report, among other things, a need for more transfer-centered orientation programs, knowledge of campus resources, and support services (Eggleston & Laanan, 2001).

There is a strong need for senior institutions to continue to develop support programs for transfer students to enhance their retention and persistence. There is (also) a need for further research in the area of program development and evaluation for support programs that assist the transition of transfer students at four-year universities and colleges.

(Eggleston & Laanan, 2001, p. 95)

Unfortunately, there has been little rigorous research, and little discussion locally about the academic success and failures of the growing community college transfer population (Jenkins et al., 2006). At the institutional study site, similar to most four-year institutions throughout the nation, support programs specifically for transfer students do not formally exist (Eggleston & Laanan, 2001). It is critically important to gain additional insight into the strategies and resources necessary to increase the success of transfer students.

In many cases, postsecondary educational policies that promote the presence of community college transfer students at institutions are not sufficiently supported budgetarily. As articulated by the California State University (CSU) Chancellor's office, transfer students are the highest priority for new student enrollment. Resources, however, in terms of transition support for transfer students to CSU campuses do not align with this priority. There are small amounts of data collected and/or shared regarding this population, and far fewer discussions and support programs at campuses such as the institution, which was studied, that focus on the strategies necessary to improve transfer student success. Consequently, we examined what is known in the literature about the challenges, trends, and patterns for developing transitional support programs and the importance of program evaluation, with particular emphasis on students of diverse backgrounds from California community colleges. As a result of this program evaluation, themes were identified that increase the opportunities to improve and develop successful strategies, programming, and evaluation to support transfer students in meeting their personal and academic goals; all in an effort to reduce transfer shock and increase persistency to graduation while maintaining a self-sustaining, cost-effective programming model.

Identified from the literature are important attributes needed for successful transition programs. An important consideration is that a successful transfer program requires strong institutional commitment to the transfer mission, as well as maintaining external collaborations as a means to strengthen the transfer process for students (Berger & Malaney, 2003; Chenoweth, 1998; Evelyn, Greenlee, Brown, & Weiger, 2000; Suarez, 2003). Some of these areas discussed in the literature and in this section have no bearing on institutional funding or a lack of resources. In many cases, they reflect a lack of communication, cooperation, and institutional will between 2-year and 4-year colleges and universities. The literature suggests that a shared recognition of the responsibilities to put in place the programs necessary to strengthen the transfer student pipeline can lead to effective outcomes and retention of this population. Transfer Bridge at the university under study is an opportunity to address these expectations.

In establishing and implementing transitional support programs and services for transfer students, administrators must take into account the needs of transfer students such as customizing new programs which include addressing negative perceptions of the transfer process, cultural diversity, personalized academic advising, and financial literacy (Eggleston & Laanan, 2001). In addition, such a program needs to be designed to be self-supporting. In other words, the price that students pay must be affordable (or free) in order for low income/first generation college students to participate. External funding and revenue generated from registration fees (Full Time Equivalent) must cover all aspects of the summer program.

Just as important as implementing transitional support, however, is the need to assess its effectiveness. "The state currently lacks sufficient information with which to guide funding designed to increase the number of college graduates produced in the state" (Johnson & Sengupta, 2009, p. 16). By identifying our desired outcomes for successful transfer programs and aligning our resources with the desired outcomes and their evaluation, we can provide the evidence to inform decisions that improve our transfer efforts and the way we evaluate them. In doing so, we can examine both our direct costs and opportunity costs of student retention and success.

Kezar (2006) points out that there has been a significant body of research on first generation college students, examining the factors that inhibit and enhance their success. Oberlander's (1989) research describes several hundred universities now sponsoring summer programs that give high school students a glimpse of the rigors to come. Other researchers (Chenoweth, 1998; Haras & McEvoy, 2005; Kezar 2006) describe some initial studies that illustrate how students provide strong ratings for the social aspects of the programs such as mentoring, community development, and building self-confidence. "Studies examining retention and grade point average indicate that students in support programs tend to perform better (GPA) than students who did not receive the same type of support" (Kezar, 2006, p. 4). It is reasonable to assume, therefore, that a support program such as Transfer Bridge at this university could also serve as an important resource for transfer students and have a significant impact as they begin their university experi-

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ence. As new students to the university community, transfer students must also learn to navigate the campus culture, processes, and connect with important campus resources. A summer transition program designed to meet the needs of transfer students could provide all of these important experiences.

### Significance of This Study

With the largest population of post-secondary attendees, American community colleges have never been more central to the enterprise of higher education (Sullivan, 2006). The transfer process for many of these students remains a critical function to the baccalaureate degree and the upward ladder of mobility. There are numerous obstacles facing post-secondary education. California community colleges, with a population of over 2.8 million students, have a particular challenge to successfully embrace and support students from culturally diverse backgrounds for retention and matriculation to four-year institutions (Community College League of California, 2008; Suarez, 2003).

As the primary entry point for students from culturally diverse backgrounds, community colleges must collaborate to develop support programs that carefully address student needs, while paying close attention to campus culture and the impact on students (Berger & Malaney, 2003; Byrd & MacDonald, 2005; Suarez, 2003). Ultimately, the transfer responsibility is mutually shared amongst the four-year institution (receiver), the community college (sender), and the student stakeholder as the person charged to take advantage of the institutional support mechanisms (Berger & Malaney, 2003).

Student service programs should serve as campus-wide models in designing effective strategies to assess student learning and development. In doing so, we must also provide practitioners with the tools, language and framework to contribute to the central educational mission of the institution (National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, 2009). These tools of measurement will allow for the opportunity to address program deficiencies and improve support for transfers where it is needed most. Developing the Transfer Bridge, with a particular focus on local community college transfers is an important piece in building transitional support for this critical population.

This campus model also stands as a self-sustaining program. With the support of grant funds, private foundation funds, and class registration fees returned to the department (Full Time Equivalent), all 101 transfer students were able to enroll in the three unit Transfer Bridge course for free. Additionally, course materials, parking, and lunch each day were provided complimentary. Given this significant investment in the local community, practitioners have the opportunity (and responsibility) to assess the student learning outcomes and to make program improvements where necessary.

Outcomes-based program evaluation provides an important blueprint for assessment that allows managers to document the outcomes of their program. By capturing the critical impact of co-curricular programming efforts, faculty and staff are better prepared to “present both the compelling argument and the strategic direction that should underscore the thinking and practice of co-curricular professionals” (Bresciani, Zelna, & Anderson, 2004, p. 2). What has often passed as finger-pointing, satisfaction surveys or global outcomes, must now be interpreted as student learning and outcomes-based assessment. By continuing to develop evidence of student learning, departments are better prepared to manage the expectations for accountability, and to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of their program (Bresciani et al., 2004). Particularly with the development of non-traditional programs, managers must often justify the innovation and continuation of services and programs outside of direct classroom instruction.

Given what the literature described as important components of effective transitional programs, the director of the program customized components of the Transfer Bridge program explicit to Student Educational Services at this university. Developing the appropriate assessment tools, which allowed for direct (e.g., evidence that demonstrated specifically what students learned and how they developed through projects and assignments administered as part of Transfer Bridge) and indirect student feedback (e.g., survey that was constructed to gather student self-report data) was a key component of this

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evaluation. Thus, each of the assessment tools used in this outcomes-based evaluation process support a systematic, reflection of each program outcome in a manner that provides data for stakeholders to make program improvements. Program managers, as a result, are better prepared to determine whether the program accomplished what was intended, and to justify the program costs when warranted.

## Methodology

Outcomes-based assessment provides an important blueprint for assessment that allows managers to document the outcomes of their program. In the case of Transfer Bridge, we examined four learning outcomes identified as key areas of support for transfer students during their transition to the university:

- 1) Academic Advising – Students will effectively utilize academic advising/counseling services during Transfer Bridge and be able to identify their institutional graduation requirements for their major.
- 2) Library Literacy – Students will effectively identify and utilize the institution’s Library and Information Access facility and support services available during Transfer Bridge.
- 3) Financial Literacy – Students will demonstrate financial literacy in the areas of federal financial aid, student loans, credit ratings, and scholarship searches through workshop interaction, group activities, and/or individual exploration.
- 4) Peer Mentor Relations – Students will demonstrate the value of peer relations to support their university transition by virtue of cohort interaction and peer mentoring.

Greene (2000) argues that program evaluation should not be used for abstract theoretical questions, but rather for priority and practice questions that decision makers will use to inform and improve services and programs. As such, this methodology was used to develop tools that are currently in practice, relevant to the department, and practical in use pertaining to the learning outcomes discussed in this study. By systematically implementing these methods, the program can identify whether the end results (i.e., outcomes) have been achieved (Bresciani, 2006).

The table below describes direct evidence of student learning. For each of the four learning outcomes, student essays describe the learning outcomes that took place and when they were put into practice during Transfer Bridge. Observation of students successfully using the campus registration system, which also meant that students selected the appropriate classes, provided additional evidence of direct student learning for the academic advising learning outcome. Focus groups A and B also provided direct evidence of student learning for each of the four learning outcomes. The out of class library assignment which was successfully completed by all 101 students provided direct evidence of student learning pertaining to the library literacy learning outcome. Mentor journals and observations of students and mentor interactions as well as personal discussions with students provided further evidence of direct student learning regarding the peer mentoring learning outcome.

The table below also describes indirect evidence of student learning. Outcomes tools used to evaluate each of the learning outcomes include Transfer Bridge (class) completion, end of first semester grade point average, and persistence from first semester to second semester. The student essays and focus groups A and B also provided indirect evidence of student learning for all four learning outcomes. The student survey was an additional indirect measure of student learning for all four learning outcomes. Mentor journals provided further evidence of indirect student learning regarding the peer men-

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toring learning outcome. Table 1 summarizes all of the specific tools in their respective categorization of direct or indirect methods used in this study to evaluate each outcome.

Table 1  
*Outcome Tools Evaluation Table*

Outcome	Direct Measures	Indirect Measures
#1 Academic Advising	Essay Observation of Registration process	Focus Group A, B Survey Essay Class Completion End of 1 <sup>st</sup> Semester GPA 1 <sup>st</sup> to 2 <sup>nd</sup> Semester Persistence
#2 Library Literacy	Essay Focus Group A, B Library Assignment	Focus Group A, B Survey Essay Class Completion End of 1 <sup>st</sup> Semester GPA 1 <sup>st</sup> to 2 <sup>nd</sup> Semester Persistence
#3 Financial Literacy	Essay Focus Group A, B	Focus Group A, B Survey Essay Class Completion End of 1 <sup>st</sup> Semester GPA 1 <sup>st</sup> to 2 <sup>nd</sup> Semester Persistence
#4 Peer Mentoring	Essay Focus Group A, B Mentor Journals Observations of peers/mentors interactions and discussions	Focus Group A, B Survey Essay Class Completion End of 1 <sup>st</sup> Semester GPA 1 <sup>st</sup> to 2 <sup>nd</sup> Semester Persistence Mentor Journals

As previously mentioned, data collection included both quantitative and qualitative tools. The data collection process included direct measures such as two focus groups, essays, mentor journaling, an out of class library assignment, and observations. The learning outcomes informed the design of each of the evaluation tools in this study. Additionally, this study included data points such as class completion, end of first term GPA, and persistence from first to second semester. Although these particular data points are not directly tied to evaluating the achievement of individual learning outcomes, analysis of this data as it relates to the ultimate purpose of this program helps inform why these expected indicators increase or decrease (Bresciani, 2006). The reporting of such performance indicators as GPA and persistence are often expected when securing grant funding, thus it is important to include these as they may relate to the individual program to ultimately determine its effectiveness.

Additional self-reported student feedback was collected through a student survey. Each of the survey questions were aligned with the four learning outcomes. More specifically, survey questions 1-2 were aligned with the first learning outcome (academic advising), questions 3-4 were aligned with the second learning outcome (library literacy), questions 5-6 were aligned with the third learning outcome (financial literacy), and questions 7-9 were aligned with the fourth learning outcome (peer/mentor relationships). Using SPSS, a frequency table was developed to analyze participant responses for survey questions 1 through 9. Since the surveys were completed by all of the participants (n=101) and all survey questions were answered, there were no substitutions for missing values. As a result of 100% participation, the entire survey inventory was used in the

analysis. The final survey question (10) asked participants to select one of the learning outcomes students found most beneficial during Transfer Bridge. By using SPSS to run the range of response rates of agreement and disagreement, student feedback was captured and used to reinforce the qualitative data discussed in this section. These data were also used to run a cross tabulation of participant responses (using SPSS) for each of the learning outcomes. The Cross Tabulation Table compared the learning outcome identified by each participant as most beneficial to their response rates for each of the other three outcomes.

The last section on the survey instrument asked students to explain why they selected the particular learning outcome that they did select as most beneficial (final survey question 10). This essay format provided students the opportunity to share their personal experience regarding the impact of the people, places, and things. All of the participants (101) completed the essay portion of the survey. Analysis of this data was done using an open-axial coding process which also included line-by-line coding. Using a separate color code, we were able to separate the data into categories (with labels) then bring the data together in new ways. Connections emerged by developing main categories and their subcategories.

Reporting through essays, observations, two focus groups, an out of class library project, and mentor journals, the majority of the participants reported that the outcomes were achieved. By using open-axial coding, we were able to relate categories to subcategories which then allowed us to identify properties (or descriptors) of a category, and when necessary include dimensions described by participants. This data coding process resulted in 560 codes and 429 descriptors, primarily related to the four learning outcomes from this study. Next, we sorted, synthesized, and organized this large amount of rich data into coherent whole categories. This meant breaking down (or fracturing) the data into concepts and categories, then putting the data back together (using color codes) in new ways by making connections developing categories and subcategories to explain the data. This pivotal link allowed us to develop emergent theories to explain the data. The survey data were analyzed using descriptive statistics.

Other findings that were not tied to the learning outcomes but related to this study emerged from the data described in this section. As previously mentioned, the participant feedback that was collected from student essays or direct observation was analyzed using the open-axial coding process, which also included line-by-line coding of the un-numbered essay portion of the survey. Using a separate color code, we were able to separate the data into categories (with labels) then bring the data together in order to identify whether the outcomes were met and at what level they were met. Connections emerged by developing main categories and their subcategories. Thus, additional findings were discovered that did not pertain to the outcomes directly being measured.

Table 2 summarizes the data collection process for this study. The table includes the data collection tools, the population collected from, when collected, where collected, and when analyzed. The table shows that this study used nine data collection tools for 101 participants. It also shows there were two focus groups consisting of eight students per group. This table includes a student survey that was collected from all participants using a Likert scale and student essays which described their Transfer Bridge experience. An out-of-class library assignment which served as the final independent student project is included in the table. Also included are mentor journals reflecting observations of student learning from each day's program activities and interactions. The table further explains when data was collected for each tool, where it was collected, and when it was analyzed.

## Findings and Discussion

Following the previously described data analysis, data emerged revealing that each learning outcome had been met. Additional evidence came from a student survey where 88.9% of the participants reported that they agreed or strongly agreed that all four of the learning outcomes were met. All of the major categories, which emerged from this study are described in the information that follows.

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Table 2  
*Data Collection Timetable*

What Tool	Population Collected	When Collected	Where Collected	When Analyzed
Essay	All participants (101)	Last Day of Program 8-20-09	Library, 4 <sup>th</sup> Floor – Williams Hall	November 2009
Survey	All participants (101)	Last Day of Program 8-20-09	Library, 4 <sup>th</sup> Floor – Williams Hall	November/December 2009
Focus Group A	8 participants	Last Day of Program 8-20-09	Library, 2 <sup>nd</sup> Floor – Room 201	November 2009
Focus Group B	8 participants	Last Day of Program 8-20-09	Library, 2 <sup>nd</sup> Floor – Room 201	November 2009
Library Assignment	All participants (101)	Due: 8-21-09	SES Office or submitted electronically	October 2009
Mentor Journals	5 mentors	Due: 8-21-09	SES Office	September 2009
Observations	All participants (101)	Throughout program	All program locations	November/December 2009
Class Completion	All participants (101)	8-21-09	SIMS Database	September 2009
End of Term GPA	All participants (101)	1-15-10	SIMS Database	January 2010
Persistence: 1 <sup>st</sup> to 2 <sup>nd</sup> Semester	All participants (101)	1-15-10	SIMS Database	January 2010

### Academic Advising

A core message determined from the participants during Transfer Bridge is that students effectively utilized academic advising during the program and were able to identify their graduation requirements for their major. As reflected throughout the focus groups, essays, and mentor journals, academic advising consistently ranked highest amongst feedback from Transfer Bridge participants. The survey, administered to all 101 participants at the end of the Transfer Bridge program, provided additional valuable data which confirmed the student's responses regarding this outcome. All 101 participant responses were included in the analysis of the academic advising learning outcome and are detailed throughout this section. Survey questions number 1 (found academic advising helpful) and number 2 (can explain my graduation requirements), which had a combined 95% response rate of *agree* or *strongly agree*, aligned with the academic advising learning outcome. The two themes that emerged under the academic advising outcome are *Understanding Class Selection, Registration, and Graduation Requirements*, and *Reducing Transfer Fear/Building Confidence*. Each of these themes emerged from an open axial coding process which included line-by-line coding of two focus groups, five mentor journals (each day), and all 101 student essays. This process allowed us the opportunity to fracture the data into categories (with labels), then bring the data back together in new ways using color codes. Connections emerged by developing main categories and their sub-categories.

## Understanding Class Selection, Registration, and Graduation Requirements

Discussed in the students' essays, mentor journals and two focus groups were 61 separate occasions where participants expressed the importance of academic advising. The 61 occasions are referenced in an open coding table that shows how this theme was derived including each of the codes, properties, and dimensions. This data provides insight into how important it was for transfer students to understand their first semester class selection, the campus registration system, and graduation requirements. According to the survey responses for question 1: "I received academic advising/counseling and found the experience to be helpful," 97% of the students responded *agree* or *strongly agree*. Still, advising students on how to use the campus technology (e.g., web-portal) was timely and useful as each student prepared for fall class registration.

Class registration for transfer students began three days into the Transfer Bridge program. Whereas some students had an idea of which classes they should register for, many students did not know where to begin. A mentor shared in his journal, "Most of my day was spent showing students how to use the Web Portal and adding/dropping classes." Another mentor wrote, "This afternoon I helped with class selection and GE and giving web portal help." Also, students in the focus groups provided similar feedback regarding connecting the advising process to actually learning how to register for classes. Much of what these students explained in their essays and focus groups, and what the mentors described in their journals demonstrated direct student learning and provided evidence of how this outcome was achieved for most students.

The tone of the conversations during both focus groups remained very positive with "high-fives," encouraging comments from peers, head nodding (in agreement), and a few polite hugs gestured as support. One student wrote in his essay, "Advising (was) very useful in determining graduation. It was very emotional (to) finally see the end/empowerment." Providing the transfer students timely and accurate advising and important campus connections, is an important part of developing and maintaining these new relationships for Student Educational Services (SES).

### Reducing Transfer Fear/Building Confidence

During the course of the Transfer Bridge program, a point of emphasis for the staff and managers was accessibility for students, and creating a welcoming atmosphere. In some cases, the more comfortable and connected new students felt, the more likely they were to ask questions and express their concerns. The full schedule of activities kept staff, faculty, managers and mentors routinely available for questions and guidance for all 101 participants.

Academic advising and counseling took place on a formal and informal basis all throughout the program and throughout different campus locations. For example, many students arrived as early as 7:00 am (8:00 am start) to ask questions and to make important connections, while others stayed as late as 5:30 pm (4:00 pm end) for the same purpose. Lunch time each day was another important time for many students to connect and have their questions answered. As such, it is important to note that many of the dimensions regarding academic advising reflect on-going discussions that took place with students over several days, at multiple venues, and in many cases, for multiple purposes. Several students expressed in their essays that academic advising was of the "utmost importance," and "really important," and "was really needed." The focus groups reflected similar sentiment.

In focus group A, for example, a student shared her initial concerns about her graduation requirements when she explained, "It was really confusing and really difficult to understand but Transfer Bridge clarified everything." Another student discussed in his essay, "Prior to this (meeting with my counselor) I had lots of fears. But my counselor eased my fears towards (my) transition to university." A mentor shared in her journal, "I spent a lot of my time (in the morning) helping students choosing classes, really reassuring

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ing them. Many students were overwhelmed with class registration.” Altogether, 50 separate codes expressed academic advising as helpful and beneficial for answering important questions and connecting students to important campus resources. The 50 separate codes are referenced in an open coding table that shows how this theme of *Reducing Transfer Fear/Building Confidence* was derived. The table, which lists the detailed codes derived from essays, two focus groups, and mentor journals, provides insight into the participants’ fear and anxiety of transitioning to the university and how academic advising helped participants’ to build their confidence going forward.

Together, understanding class selection, registration, and graduation requirements were an important part of the academic advising outcome for students transitioning to the university. Based on the participants’ actions (e.g., participation and attendance) and feedback (data collected), students demonstrated utilization of these connected campus processes that every student must learn to use. Other areas discussed by students during Transfer Bridge included important connections made with staff and faculty and the impact of how this connection reduced most of their fear and uncertainty. Specifically, on 21 occasions, students expressed how the impact of academic advising and the connections made with staff and/or faculty helped “ease my anxiety” or “calmed my fears.” One student wrote in his essay, “I am no longer terrified about coming to [name of study site],” while another student expressed in a focus group interview, my counselor “sat me down, listened to me, and stayed with me until I understood my requirements – I’m feelin’ the love.”

Byrd and MacDonald’s (2005) study further indicated that “first term academic performance had the strongest relationship to retention” (p. 24). As a result of their work, they emphasize the need for interventions much like Transfer Bridge that focus on the academic advising needs of transfer students. Ackermann (1991) evaluated a similar summer support program for incoming transfers to the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). The results of Ackermann’s study also suggest that Transfer Bridge programs that contain the appropriate structure and academic support can help facilitate students’ transition and adjustment to university life and improve persistence rates.

### Financial Literacy

Survey questions number 5 (financial aid) and number 6 (financial credit), which had a combined 80.4% response rate of agreement, align with the financial literacy learning outcome specifically. The two themes that emerged from the financial literacy outcome are *Financial Aid* and *Financial Credit*. Each of these themes emerged from an open axial coding process which included line-by-line coding of two focus groups, five mentor journals (each day), and all 101 student essays. This process allowed me the opportunity to separate the data into categories (with labels), then bring the data back together in new ways using color codes. Connections emerged by developing main categories and their sub-categories.

**Financial Aid.** On 27 occasions, students provided explicit details through their essays, two focus groups, observations and mentor journals about the value of the financial aid workshop. The 27 occasions are referenced in an open coding table that shows how this theme was derived including each of the codes, properties, and dimensions. The open coding table provides insight into how relevant and informative the financial aid workshop was perceived and how extensive the interactions were between students and presenters. The data also demonstrates how important it was for participants to go into further depth about this timely topic on financial aid with fall classes beginning three weeks later. During both focus groups, all students confirmed that they had completed the Free Application for Federal Student Aid and had experience with the financial aid process. It is reasonable to assume, therefore, that the vast majority of Bridge participants also have experience with the financial aid process (SES requires students to apply for financial aid).

Dimensions used by many students in their essays to express their feedback included “definitely a good presentation” and “definitely worthwhile.” One student went

on to explain in a focus group, “This was the most important presentation for the entire Bridge program.” Another student in the focus group explained, “I got what I needed from them” while someone else expressed “this really reinforced everything I (already) knew.” Others commented that the student loan information was found to be beneficial with a mentor explaining in his journal, “The financial aid workshop when they talked about loans was really beneficial. This was a big issue for many students.” The information discussed on financial aid availability during the summer session also drew attention. This was deemed important by some students because the Federal Pell Grant was expanded in summer 2009 to include university funding during a summer session, provided students were enrolled in six or more units.

Several students commented on how professional the presentation was and one student expressed in a focus group, “I never felt blown-off from all of the questions I asked and I asked a lot!” Eight students specifically felt the time invested (in the workshop) was worthwhile or should be expanded. Other students provided feedback regarding how much they learned from hearing questions asked by other students and how informative it was to hear feedback from students and staff. At the conclusion of the formal workshop time, we observed that 19 students had surrounded the two workshop presenters. Initially, it was thought that many of the students wanted to thank the presenters, but moving in closer to hear the dialogue, it was realized that all of the students had additional financial aid questions (they also expressed appreciation to the presenters). By all accounts, this workshop was well received by students and provided an engaging format and extensive interaction. According to the survey responses for question number 5: “My knowledge about the student financial aid process was improved,” 86.1% of the students indicated *agree* or *strongly agree*. From the responses, students deemed the topic relevant and expressed sufficient learning.

These findings are consistent with Johnson and Sengupta’s (2009) study which argues that, “Research on (transfer) persistence and completion suggests that college costs are an impediment to both college attendance and college graduation but that burden may be alleviated to some degree by financial (aid) assistance” (p. 12). Byrd and MacDonald’s (2005) study also reported that many transfer students were unaware of financial aid resources when they began college, including some students that delayed starting college for financial reasons.

**Credit.** As new members of the university community, it is important to grasp the intricacies of credit ratings/scores, credit agencies, credit cards, and long-term investment in one’s education. To this end, on 35 separate occasions, students provided feedback through essays, two focus groups, and mentor journals on the financial credit workshop. The 35 occasions are referenced in an open coding table that shows how this theme was derived including each of the codes, properties, and dimensions. This data provides insight into how important it was for transfer students to gain additional knowledge about credit cards, credit scores, savings, investing, and retirement. The workshop presenter, deemed an expert in this field, had over 20 years of banking experience and is currently employed as the manager of a local Credit Union. The presenter, however, did not seem to stay on topic as reflected by some of the student feedback.

Several students in focus group A did not feel the presentation was appropriate given their age, income, and new status at the university. One student commented, “She (the presenter) did not know her audience. I didn’t relate to anything (she said) – it was either offensive or useless.” Another student in the focus group explained, “Total waste of time – she didn’t know her target audience and I found much of it (the workshop discussion) condescending.” Two students expressed in their essays that “the workshop was a total waste of time” and that “the purpose of the workshop was not clear.” A recurring theme from student essays and both focus groups was that “the presenter went off topic” by discussing in depth the discipline involved with saving for family vacations and investment properties. Because the presenter also talked about saving for retirement, many students felt “the investment discussion was not helpful” or “does not apply to me right now.”

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Just the opposite perspective was expressed, on 13 occasions, where students commented that the presentation on credit, investing and retirement was worthwhile and beneficial. These opposite opinions were not reflected during any other point in this study, but may be explained from some of the feedback provided. For example, during each focus group, students discussed the difference in their perspectives related to the value of this particular presentation. A student in focus group A explained, “I liked the (credit) workshop – as older students we have different needs (than younger students).” Another student in focus group A shared that she was “from the streets, and if someone had taught me earlier in life about what it means to save, invest, and plan for retirement, I would be much further ahead in life.” Several students in each focus group requested that we “expand the workshop” or “keep the same.” Three students shared in their essays their appreciation for how to manage money/savings and found the workshop helpful, worthwhile, or useful for planning their future finances.

Participant responses to survey question number 6: “I know how to protect and/or improve my financial credit;” only 74.3% of the students answered agree or strongly agree. It is significant to note that of the nine survey questions, number 6 received the lowest level of student agreement. These mixed results from both the qualitative and quantitative data suggest that different students perhaps have different financial planning needs at different points in their life. Knowing the make-up of the student audience prior to the presentation could likely help the presenter customize this presentation based on age and/or financial experience.

These findings are consistent with Eggleston and Laanan’s (2001) study which argues that establishing and implementing transitional support programs must take into account the financial literacy needs of transfer students. Kezar (2006) also suggests that customizing new programs for transfer students (such as age or experience) could provide effective ways to support their transition and retention at the university.

### Library Literacy

Programs like Transfer Bridge provide an important infrastructure and access for transfer students who may not often use the library by providing key information and instructional services. As such, the Transfer Bridge program offered an important component focused on library literacy for all participants.

A core message determined from the participants during the program is that students effectively utilized the Library and Information Access facility and support services available during Transfer Bridge. The library component included a classroom workshop, a computer lab interactive workshop, a library tour, and an out-of-class library research assignment which served as the final class project. All 101 Bridge participants completed the independent library assignment and demonstrated the appropriate research formatting and other guidelines required for this assignment. Additionally, all participant responses were included in the analysis of this learning outcome and are detailed below. Survey question number 3 (learned library resources) and number 4 (intend to use library), which had a combined 90.6% response rate of *agree* or *strongly agree*, aligned with the library literacy learning outcome. The two themes that emerged from the library literacy outcome are *Supporting Student Success* and *Insured Confidence and Library Use*. Each of these themes emerged from an open axial coding process which included line-by-line coding of two focus groups, five mentor journals (each day), and all 101 student essays. This process allowed me the opportunity to fracture the data into categories (with labels), then bring the data back together in new ways using color codes. Connections emerged by developing main categories and their sub-categories.

***Supporting student success.*** A core message that emerged on 29 separate occasions from data collected was that students learned about the library resources, services and college librarians which support student success. The 29 occasions discussed in students’ essays, mentor journals and two focus groups are referenced in an open coding table that shows how this theme was derived including each of the codes, properties, and dimensions. This data provides insight into student learning and library discoveries experienced throughout the Bridge program. In fact, on eight occasions

students specifically expressed their surprise to learn that library faculty are assigned to each college and how important the connection was to each of them. A student in focus group B, for example, explained “I didn’t know there was a librarian for my college. This is very helpful! All this stuff is new – definitely good to know.” Also, during focus groups, three students spoke about the significance of the Wi-fi area in the library and how important this discovery would be for their fall studies. Several students with children wrote about the significance of the kid’s area in the library, and their ability to bring their children to campus when they study or do research.

According to the survey responses for question number 3: “I learned about the [deleted name of institution] library and its services and know where to go to seek research assistance,” 85.2% of the students responded *agree* or *strongly agree*. Other areas of the library that students stressed as important discoveries: Media Center, Reference Section, Student Lounge, the Writing Lab, and Stacks.

**Increased confidence and library use.** Participant feedback from essays, mentor journals and two focus groups regarding library literacy consistently showed that students had an informative experience which increased their confidence to seek additional library assistance. This theme of increased confidence and library use closely related to the previous one, given the emphasis on learning and library literacy. The responses in this case are highlighted by an experience in which a student expressed, “at least now when I come (here), this (library) building is not intimidating.” Students also described their motivation to seek librarian assistance when needed. During focus group A, several students spoke about the lack of experience for most transfers conducting research in a library with one student insisting: “Transfers don’t know the library, that’s why this (library experience) makes it easy (to come back).”

Nine students went on to explain in their essay that as a result of Transfer Bridge, they “definitely planned to use the library during the fall semester.” This is consistent with participant responses to survey question number four: “I used the [school’s] library during the Bridge program, and intend to use the library during the fall semester,” 96.1% of the students responded *agree* or *strongly agree*. Together, on 40 occasions students referenced an informative experience which increased their confidence to seek assistance if needed and positively impacted their fall library use. These occasions are referenced in an open coding table that shows how this theme was derived including each of the codes, properties and dimensions. This data which lists the detailed codes derived from essays, two focus groups, and mentor journals, provides insight into how important it was for transfer students to build their confidence within their library experience and how this impacted their plans for future use of the facility.

These findings, reinforced by what was found in the literature suggests that Bridge programs are a positive factor in university retention (Ackermann, 1991; Santa Rita & Bacote, 1996), and so too is the campus library (Haras & McEvoy, 2005; Kelly, 1995). The literature explains that working together, they play an important role in effectively reaching at-risk transfer students by providing instruction on information literacy.

### Peer Mentor Relations

Postsecondary institutions are urged to create an educational and social climate that fosters students’ success. This includes creating a campus environment that eliminates barriers to persistence for new transfer students. The literature discussed previously suggests that transfer students most often rely on peers for campus information. Providing opportunities for students to develop meaningful peer interactions and friendships support student success. Peer educators/mentors can have a very positive influence on new students by serving as guides and sources of information, particularly for those whose experiences may be similar. The Transfer Bridge program included an important peer network that connected students to each other to increase their potential for persistence.

“The literature discussed previously suggests that transfer students most often rely on peers for campus information. Providing opportunities for students to develop meaningful peer interactions and friendships support student success.”

A core message determined from the participants during Transfer Bridge is that students demonstrated the value of peer and mentor relations in support of their university transition by virtue of cohort interaction and peer mentoring. As reflected throughout the focus groups, essays, mentor journals, and observations, peer mentor relations consistently ranked high amongst feedback from students. The survey administered to all 101 participants at the end of the Transfer Bridge program provided additional valuable data and confirmed the students' responses regarding this outcome. All 101 participant responses were included in the analysis of the peer mentor relations outcome and are detailed throughout this section. Survey questions number 7 (interacted with my peers), 8 (explain the value of a mentor) and 9 (how mentors support my transition) which had a combined 89.5% response rate of *agree* or *strongly agree*, aligned with the peer mentor relations outcome. The three themes that emerged from the peer mentor relations outcome are *Friendships, Positive Feedback, and Group Interactions; Reducing Transition Fear*; and *A Resource of Information*. Each of these themes emerged from an open axial coding process which included line-by-line coding of two focus groups, five mentor journals (each day), and all 101 student essays. This process allowed us the opportunity to fracture the data into categories (with labels), then bring the data back together in new ways using color codes. Connections emerged by developing main categories and their sub-categories.

***Friendships, positive feedback, and group interaction.*** Establishing friendships and meeting more students was an important component of Transfer Bridge, from the students' perspective. Feedback from both focus groups suggested that each participant met at least one new friend during the program. According to the survey responses for question 7: "I interacted with one or more of my peers during the Bridge program," 93.1% of the students responded *agree* or *strongly agree*. One student expressed in her essay that, "Meeting new friends was the best part of the Transfer Bridge program." Building peer relationships for many students was important for establishing on-going networks. On seven occasions students suggested in their essays that more time be provided during the Bridge program for students to get to know each other. One student wrote, for example, "Our (small) group time is extremely important. I got really good (peer) networks and now (I'm) not alone at [deleted name of institution]." Another student in focus group A suggested, "Please give us more small group time. This gives us a chance to build more (peer) relationships."

It is important to note that all Transfer Bridge students were assigned alphabetically (by last name) to a cluster group ranging from 19-21 students per group. Each cluster was led throughout the course of the program by a peer mentor. Although the mentors were closely supervised each day by an experienced SES counselor, mentors had daily responsibilities to lead group activities, attend workshops with participants, and serve in general as a resource for students, staff, and faculty.

With this being the case, participants provided strong responses regarding the value of mentors and peer positive feedback. On 11 occasions students discussed in their essays and focus groups how both (students and peers) opened up to share goals and experiences, and how meaningful those experiences were. One student shared in her essay, "The mentors are good role models. They speak from experience and this makes me (feel) comfortable at this big campus." During the focus group A discussion, a student explained, "My mentor did an awesome job of sharing and getting everyone to open up." The results of these "student networks," as described by several students in their essays was feeling more confident to attend the university and "no longer feeling alone." This is also reflective of the participant responses to survey question number 8: "I can explain the value of having a peer mentor," 87.1% of the participants responded *agree* or *strongly agree*. One mentor's thoughts perhaps summarized this section when he explained "We established a network of trust, students helping other students (by) pulling them up."

Students went on to describe these peer and mentor relationships as "beneficial" and "crucial" to their attendance at this institution. These comments are further supported by survey question 9: "I can explain how peer mentors support my transition to the university," with 88.2% of the students indicating *agree* or *strongly agree*. To summarize this important theme, on 59 occasions participants indicated through their essays, two

focus groups, and mentor journals that meeting students and making peer connections led to important friendships and support networks. The 59 occasions are referenced in an open coding table that shows how this theme was derived including each of the codes, properties, and dimensions. This data provides further insight into the value of peer mentor relationships and how their support network increased the self-confidence of students attending the university. From sharing (and caring) experiences, students gained trust and comfort through positive feedback.

**Reducing transition fear.** Another recurring theme expressed by many Transfer Bridge participants in their essays, focus groups, mentor journals, and observed during workshops was fear and anxiety that participants were experiencing as they transition to the university. In fact, on 31 occasions students commented how valuable the mentor and peer relationships were with alleviating these fears. The 31 occasions are referenced in an open coding table that shows how this theme was derived including each of the codes, properties, and dimensions. The data, which lists the detailed codes derived from essays, two focus groups, and mentor journals, provides insight into peer interactions which reduced the fear and anxiety of their new university experience for most participants.

The comfort level established amongst the students and mentors appeared to be based on a level of trust. As one mentor explained, “We always had important dialogue (with our students), and our talks was built on trust.” Another student shared in his essay, “Students’ fears went away as we got good advice from the mentors and this is why we trust them.” On 11 occasions, in particular, students referenced in essays and focus groups “feeling very comfortable” and their ability to relate to each other. Because all mentors are former transfer students from the same local community colleges, these shared experiences likely complimented the mentor’s ability “to help students find their way.”

**A resource of information.** A final theme that emerged from the peer/mentor learning outcome is that mentors served effectively as a resource for campus information. In fact, on ten occasions students specifically wrote that their mentor gave “good suggestions,” or “really good directions,” or “good advice.” As for a student that had the same academic major as her mentor, she explained, “We discussed class options and the benefits and resources available for psych majors.” Those personal interactions seemed to boost the confidence of participants and further demonstrated to mentors the value of their participation. A mentor shared in his journal, for example: “Today, I was a source of information for my group (of students). I helped (them) with some of (their) academic questions and (shared) some of my personal information and how I do things. This was a great feeling!”

Other areas where students provided strong feedback regarding mentors serving as resources include Student Health Services, the web portal (campus technology), student clubs and organizations, and campus life. Several students commented on the value of the campus tour and their mentors showing them where their classes would be during the fall. Altogether, on 41 occasions participants indicated through their essays, two focus groups, and mentor journals that mentors answered questions and served effectively as a resource for campus information, suggestions or guidance. The 41 occasions are referenced in an open coding table that shows how this theme was derived including each of the codes, properties, and dimensions. The data provides insight into the personal interaction between peers and mentors and how these exchanges impacted the students’ confidence.

These findings, which suggest that peer mentors can have a very positive influence on new transfer students, were reinforced by what was found in the literature (Ender & Newton, 2000; Hagedorn & Cepeda, 2004). Through numerous cohort interactions and mentoring activities, students developed peer networks that connected them to each other which ultimately increase their potential for persistence (Ender & Newton, 2000).

## Additional Findings

This program evaluation included additional evaluation instruments to collect different kinds of data. Specifically, we chose to include in this study class completion and fall enrollment, end of term GPA, and persistency rates from first to second semester.

Even though all Bridge participants successfully completed the three-unit summer course, only 97 of the (101) students enrolled at the study institution for the fall 2009 term. Student Educational Services (SES) staff were not aware that four Bridge participants experienced barriers to enrollment because no system was in place to check enrollment for this cohort. Campus data for the end of the fall 2009 term confirmed that Transfer Bridge participants (n=97) had the highest GPA amongst the three similar groups compared, including SES transfer students from the same local area community colleges, and the study site transfer students that did not apply to SES (or were not admitted) from the same local area community colleges. Transfer Bridge participants also had the highest cumulative end of term GPA amongst the three groups as well. Table 3 summarizes the GPA data.

Table 3  
*Fall 2009 New Transfer Students – End of Term GPA*

New Transfer Students End of Term GPA		Term GPA (Fall 2009/units attempted >0)	Total GPA (Total units attempted >0 from all colleges)
Summer 2009 Group Transfer Bridge Group A	N	97	97
	Mean	2.82	3.20
	Median	2.92	3.24
SES Fall 2009 Group (excludes above group) Group B	N	243	243
	Mean	2.75	3.15
	Median	2.85	3.10
Comparison Group (excludes above 2 groups) Group C	N	1575	1575
	Mean	2.81	3.13
	Median	2.92	3.11

The comprehensiveness of this program evaluation allowed the program director the opportunity to identify the effectiveness of the Transfer Bridge program in relation to the learning outcomes, and in a manner that allows for program improvement. In doing so, the Transfer Bridge staff know precisely where the program is contributing effectively in support of student success and retention and where it is not. Furthermore, by using this opportunity for assessment, it allows the program's outcomes to be documented, thus capturing many of the important aspects of the department's efforts and resources (Bresciani et al., 2004).

With the budgeting realities of public education, budget reductions in California's post-secondary institutions will play a significant role in shaping student support services today and in the near future. As such, to justify the innovation and continuation of traditional and non-traditional programs such as Transfer Bridge, exemplary documentation of student learning experiences is essential. Given the focus of this study, SES and Transfer Bridge are poised to serve as an institutional campus model that is designed to identify effective strategies to assess student learning and development. This program evaluation

provides practitioners with a framework and assessment tools that could be used for the central educational mission of the institution because it is modeled to determine the effectiveness of student learning outcomes (National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, 2009). By predetermining each learning outcome in relation to the overall program goals, assessment tools can be customized to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the program and how (or if) each outcome (and overall program) contributes effectively in support of student success.

**Program improvements.** Although participant feedback suggested that each of the learning outcomes were achieved for the vast majority of the students (88.9%), these results indicate there is still room for program improvement. Each of the recommendations discussed below are fairly consistent with feedback from participants themselves reported throughout this study. Participant feedback was gathered from a survey, two focus groups, essays, mentor journals, an out of class library assignment, and observations. One hundred percent of the stakeholders participated in the survey and essay portions of the assessment; many others wanted to participate in the two focus groups but could not due to space in the groups and time allotted. The other assessment tools also provided valuable feedback from participants.

Many of the results will be immediately implemented by the SES staff and managers of the Transfer Bridge program. More specifically, for next year's Transfer Bridge program, the program director will survey students at the beginning of the program to better determine their academic advising, library literacy, and financial literacy needs in terms of short term financial planning or long term financial planning. Afterward, participants will be separated into different workshop presentations according to their interest. Some transfer students, for example, may already be familiar with their institutional graduation requirements and their course selection pattern through completion. Therefore, spending time with an academic advisor may not be necessary. Some transfer students may also have extensive library experience, so reducing their time in library workshops and demonstrations and providing a useful alternative could address their concerns. Providing workshop choices (through survey) may be a more productive use of students' time, and parallel what is discussed in the literature in terms of customization of information presentations for transfers (Ackermann, 1991; Eggleston & Laanan, 2001). Additionally, since students expressed they want to learn more about the library resources and services, expanding the amount of library time dedicated to this outcome is a worthwhile improvement. Organizing students into small groups based on their academic college to allow students the opportunity to spend more time with their college librarian is another notable enhancement. Finally, expanding mentor recruitment by starting earlier and advertising broadly throughout the campus in order to develop a more diverse applicant pool of mentors (e.g., academic majors and age) could potentially improve our selection of mentors. Selection of a more diverse group of mentors could strengthen the peer mentor relations outcome and improve student persistence.

By taking into account the needs of transfer students such as customizing workshop presentations according to needs and/or interests, we improve our opportunity to effectively address the needs of each student in our campus community.

**Recommendations for future practice in outcomes-based assessment program review.** Based on the review of the literature, the findings, and conclusions of this study, several recommendations are presented for future practice in outcomes-based assessment program evaluation. An important recommendation is to develop an ongoing annual evaluation plan for summer transitional programs. This plan will assist stakeholders in determining whether the program continues to meet its goals and objectives for transfer students. Outcomes-based assessment program evaluation should be conducted on a regular basis along with implementation of the assessment results (e.g., program improvement). By including staff and faculty perspectives that are apart of the execution of the program – in the program design, strengthens their commitment and understanding of the program's objectives. Other department collaborations (internal and external to the institution) also increase program support.

“Most often, the survey focuses on the number of participants served, did the participants find the service worthwhile, and if so why? We also typically focus on if students plan to return for services and what they would recommend for improvements. Based on these standard responses, or lack thereof, we naively celebrate our delivery of services as a job well done.”

Documentation of a step-by-step plan for outcomes-based assessment program evaluation which considers the department's goals and perspectives of the program's stakeholders should also be developed (Ackermann, 1991; Bresciani, Gardner, & Hickmott, 2010; Bresciani et al., 2004; Greene, 2000; Spaulding, 2008; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). For example, the following steps should be considered when developing and implementing an outcomes-based assessment program evaluation plan:

- 1) Develop program budget
- 2) Review program goals and objectives
- 3) Collaborate with staff/faculty to determine how program goals and objectives will be met
- 4) Identify student learning outcomes
- 5) Develop methodology and design of the evaluation
- 6) Develop/implement marketing and recruitment plan for participants
- 7) Develop recruitment (where necessary) and training plan for mentors, faculty, and staff
- 8) Develop instrumentation (i.e., surveys, focus groups, essays, and mentor journal questions)
- 9) Develop protocols for data collection and confidentiality
- 10) Prepare for IRB submission (if necessary)
- 11) Test the tools/pilot study
- 12) Make changes to instruments and/or protocols (where necessary)
- 13) Program implementation including review of student confidentiality and consent
- 14) Collect and analyze data
- 15) Identify program strengths and areas in need of improvements
- 16) Report findings
- 17) Offer recommendations and implementation of program improvements

In order to receive a complete perspective of the participants' responses, the evaluation should take a holistic approach in using both qualitative and quantitative methods of data collection. To ascertain the information needed from participants, the program can use either pre-existing instruments or instruments customized by the program. Whichever form of instrument used, the instrument must be designed to address whether each of the student learning outcomes was achieved. The use of surveys, for example, can be most effective for gathering quantitative data. Student essays, open-ended questions, and focus group interviews can be effective for gathering qualitative data. The literature used in this study regarding outcomes-based assessment program evaluation can provide further guidance for managers (and evaluators).

### Summary of Conclusions

The economic and political environment in post-secondary education, which is characterized by budget reductions and increasing demands for assessment, make outcomes-based assessment program evaluation an efficient and effective method of evaluation. The results of this study emphasize the value of program evaluation and the opportunity to implement program improvement. The qualitative data from this study provided

strong evidence that the learning outcomes were achieved for most students, reinforced by quantitative data in which 89.9% of students also reported agreement. Other findings, including student essays that described their overall Bridge experience, persistence rates, end of term GPA, and academic probation rates, together indicate this first year transition support program may also contribute to first term academic performance. These evaluation results support many ideas already reported in the literature while providing some new areas for program improvement. Additional research, however, is recommended over time in order to gain further insight into the long term impact of Transfer Bridge participants and non-participants.

It is further recommended that as Student Affairs practitioners, we give meaningful consideration to some of the outdated traditional methods of evaluation. For example, in many student services programs, the method used to evaluate services to students is by survey (if measured at all). Most often, the survey focuses on the number of participants served, did the participant find the service (or program) worthwhile, and if so, why, if not, why not? We also typically focus on if students plan to return for services and what would they recommend for improvements (usually open-ended). Based on these standard responses, or lack thereof, we naively celebrate our delivery of services as a job well done. This method of evaluation has historically been used to validate our programs (and sometimes existence), rarely used or able to provide documented evidence for program refinement, elimination or expansion.

Using data to inform decision making is relevant because many in the academic affairs (or instruction) division of the academy, have often criticized student services programs for a lack of evidence-based decision making, and as a result quietly question the existence of some programs or the need (for faculty) to be fully engaged. In response to these critiques, we conclude that now is the time for Student Affairs programs to move to outcomes-based assessment which allow for data-driven decision making for program improvement. This approach is timely and relevant given our economic and political climate, and allows Student Affairs managers to take their rightful place as full partners in the academy. This methodology also provides the best opportunity to implement program refinements, and as a result, to deliver the support services that our students ultimately deserve.

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