HOW CAN POST-SECONDARY INSTITUTIONS SUPPORT TRANSFER STUDENTS? LESSONS FROM ONTARIO

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Abstract

Studies of student mobility find that some transfer students experience "transfer shock" when changing institutions. While Canadian studies have identified instances of low academic performance and delayed time to completion, these are observed at single points in time and often capture student outcomes at the endpoint of post-secondary credentials. Our research adds qualitative nuance to the concept of "transfer shock" throughout the transfer process. Using 107 longitudinal interviews, we follow students (n = 56) as they traverse a variety of transfer pathways between two colleges and three universities in Ontario. In doing so, we identify the challenges students experience during their first year after transferring, and the extent to which academic and social challenges persist over time. We discuss the implications of these findings for post-secondary professionals who support transfer in the sector, and provide recommendations for alleviating transfer shock.
***Keywords**:* student mobility, transfer, transfer shock, longitudinal interviews

Résumé

Les études sur la mobilité étudiante montrent que les étudiantes et étudiants qui changent d'établissement d'enseignement subissent un « choc de transition ». Bien que les études canadiennes aient identifié des cas de mauvais résultats scolaires et de retard dans l'obtention du diplôme, ceux-ci sont observés à des moments précis et reflètent souvent les résultats des membres de cette population à la fin de leurs études postsecondaires. Notre recherche apporte une nuance qualitative au concept de « choc de transition » tout au long du processus de transition. À l'aide d'entrevues longitudinales, nous suivons des étudiantes et étudiants (n = 56) sur divers parcours de transition entre deux collèges et trois universités de l'Ontario. Ce faisant, nous identifions les défis que cette population rencontre au cours de la première année après la transition, et la mesure dans laquelle les défis universitaires et sociaux persistent au fil du temps. Nous discutons des implications de ces résultats pour les professionnelles et professionnels de l'enseignement postsecondaire qui soutiennent les transitions dans le secteur, et nous formulons des recommandations pour atténuer le choc de transition.
Mots clés : mobilité étudiante; transition; choc de transition; entrevues longitudinales

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INTRODUCTION

Student mobility has been referred to as a "hallmark" of 21st century education (Duklas et al., 2014). In Canada, post-secondary students have a variety of options for non-conventional paths through college and university—a model that resembles circuit boards rather than a linear pipeline (Davies & Mehta, 2018; St. Denis et al., 2021; Zarifa et al., 2020). With ongoing efforts to expand learner mobility (e.g., Higher Education Strategy Associates, 2021; Missaghian & Hon, 2022), students now have more choice than ever to pursue single credentials, switch programs and institutions, re-enter the post-secondary sector, "stack" credentials, and upskill through microcredentials (Davies et al., 2024). An expanded mobility agenda has big implications for the organization of higher education across the Canadian provincial landscape, aided by advisory and non-profit organizations like the British Columbia Council on Articulation and Transfer and the Ontario Council on Articulation and Transfer. Front of mind for these organizations is ensuring that learners are able to strategically navigate through an increasingly interconnected college and university sector.

There has been growing interest in the process and outcomes of student mobility in Ontario, given that the province's post-secondary system was not developed with transfer in mind (see Skolnik, 2010). Transfer research shows that faculty members at post-secondary institutions may have negative perceptions about the academic readiness of transfer students (Missaghian, 2021). Others have found transfer students take longer to graduate (e.g., Davies, 2022) and face heftier financial burdens owing to student loan borrowing (Walters et al., 2020). These outcomes point to a "transfer penalty" that Ontario transfer students pay as they navigate post-secondary credentials (Pizarro Milian et al., 2024). While these barriers tend to be noted at the endpoint of transfer (i.e., as students approach graduation or after graduation), we have less evidence of the challenges students navigate *during* the transfer process. Accordingly, in this article we examine the presence of "transfer shock" (Hills, 1965) for Ontario transfer students in the first year after transferring. While the term was originally intended to capture a drop in grades after transferring from college to university, transfer shock has been expanded to also include social stressors like making friends and a sense of belonging. Rather than a single "shock," we find that transfer students can experience a series of jolts—both academic and social. While most students in our sample were satisfied with the transfer process, most experienced at least some minor jolts along the way. Social jolts in particular appeared to linger into the latter stages of the school year, even among students who were otherwise thriving academically. To improve the student transfer experience and outcomes, we make recommendations to the key sectoral actors who support transfer.

STUDENT TRANSFER IN CANADA

Transfer students move from one college or university program to another, regardless of whether they complete their original program. They may also receive transfer credit for their previous studies as a way to fast-track their placement in their new program. "Transfer" tends to be broadly conceptualized along five pathways: college-to-college, college-to-university, university-to-university, university-to-college, and "swirlers" who transfer between more than two institutions (Zarifa et al., 2020). While these pathways provide the overall structure to the transfer system, they are becoming more nuanced by enhanced prospects for mobility such as microcredentials (Davies et al., 2024) and prior learning assessment and recognition (PLAR) (Missaghian, 2022). Researchers have also demonstrated regional variance to these pathways within Ontario, with distinguishable patterns of transfer between northern and southern Ontario (Hillier et al., 2020; Sano et al., 2020; Zarifa et al., 2020).

Canadian transfer patterns are also distinct from peer jurisdictions. In the United States, transfer is a key mechanism for students to move from community college to university. Community colleges have an established "transfer

function" to "feed" four-year institutions with students following articulated pathways between programs (Taylor & Jain, 2017). This is a key equity component of the American higher education system, granting access to degrees for students who might not otherwise have such opportunities (Fink, 2021; Fink et al., 2023). In contrast, transfer in Canada has developed differently across the provincial landscape, depending on the structure and organization of the post-secondary sector in each province (Skolnik, 2010). British Columbia, for example, has a much more integrated relationship between its colleges and universities, where colleges mirror the junior college model of the United States (Skolnik, 1995; Usher & Balfour, 2024). In the case of Ontario, colleges have been a distinct feature of the post-secondary system, often considered a binary element to universities (Lang, 2009; Piché & Jones, 2016). Colleges were established with the goal of meeting regional labour market needs and to provide technical education, without developing linkages to the university sector (Skolnik, 2010). As Skolnik (2010) states, the ability to transfer to university from occupational college programs "was not on the radar screen in Ontario when the colleges were founded" (p. 6). The result of this binary system design has been a decades-long effort to move from a scattered field of single-program partnerships to a more integrated mobility system (see Kerr et al., 2010).

EXPERIENCING "TRANSFER SHOCK" WHEN TRANSFERRING

An enduring challenge of transfer systems noted in the literature is "transfer shock." This concept was introduced by Hills (1965), who reviewed numerous studies about transfer from junior to senior colleges in the United States, noting transfer students "suffer an appreciable loss in their level of grades when they transfer" (p. 209).[2] This finding has spurred a considerable research agenda to identify and resolve the challenges transfer students experience. Following Hills (1965), many studies noted the drop in grades students experience when transferring from college to university (Cejda, 1997; Rhine et al., 2000). In some cases (e.g., Andres, 2001), researchers attribute this drop to the different learning environment between colleges and universities. As Cameron (2005) notes, this initial drop can be particularly detrimental to the academic spirit of transfer students. Not only were students in their study left "reeling" from lower academic performance in their degree program, "many initially internalized the problem" and others "hypothesized they were underprepared for the academic rigours of the university environment" (Cameron, 2005, p. 32). Those students who are unable to "survive" the effects of transfer shock have a decreased likelihood of returning for continued studies in their program (see Ishitani, 2008).

In recent years, researchers have recognized that the social integration aspect of transfer transitions can be just as consequential as the academic aspect for student success (for a classic perspective, see Tinto, 1975). Transfer students tend to have "unique characteristics and experiences" (Gawley & McGowan, 2006, p. 9) compared to their peers entering programs directly from high school (see Paterson McGuire & Belcheir, 2013). For example, transfer students tend to be older and report feeling more mature than their direct-entry peers (Gawley & McGowan, 2006; Sano et al., 2020). Institutional supports like open houses tend to cater to these "traditional" students, which overlooks the unique questions and concerns a transfer student might have (Luckai et al., 2015; Percival et al., 2015). These compounding factors may prohibit transfer students from developing close personal relationships with their peers and neg-

2 This is in contrast to limited research that has documented "transfer ecstasy," where students experience an increase in grades when moving from college to university (see Gawley & McGowan, 2006)

atively impact their sense of belonging at their new institution. Thus, collegial experiences are just as important as academic considerations for understanding transfer student success (Ishitani, 2008).

When it comes to alleviating transfer shock, it is important to recognize the role that both sending and receiving institutions play (Jabbar et al., 2022; Rhine et al., 2000). For sending institutions, providing pre-transfer workshops helps students anticipate changes in their learning environment and develop important connections to academic support personnel at their anticipated destinations (Rhine et al., 2000). Greater coordination between institutions via transfer liaisons and academic counselling can better support transfer students in their transition, reducing the self-efficacy demands on students (Gawley & McGowan, 2006). For receiving institutions, offering more transfer-specific social supports early on can also help ease the social aspect of transfer shock. Hosting transfer-specific orientation events or information sessions and developing transfer student peer-mentorship programs have been long-standing recommendations in the literature (Luckai et al., 2015; Mallette et al., 2015; Percival et al., 2015; Rhine et al., 2000). Where possible, bridging programs/courses and learning communities have also been shown to ease the academic and social features of transfer shock for programs that have a clear disciplinary connection (Luckai et al., 2015; Scott et al., 2017). Broadly, this literature articulates the consequences of transfer shock and the way institutions and their academic professionals may mitigate its impacts.

METHODS

Our study reports on the experiences of transfer shock in Ontario colleges and universities. While quantitative research has been useful for analyzing grade patterns for transfer students (e.g., Davies, 2022; Xu et al., 2018), a qualitative approach allowed us to identify transfer challenges, how these impacted students as they transferred from one institution to another, and how enduring the effects were. In this article we report on the experiences of transfer students (n = 56) following all five transfer pathways in the province.[3] To understand transfer as a social process—one which previous literature suggests students "meander" through, with many stops, starts, and detours (Jabbar et al., 2021)—we relied on the longitudinal interview method (Hermanowicz, 2013). Longitudinal research can examine how experiences change over time, and how individuals plan and re-evaluate plans over a specific time period (Hollstein, 2020). In this case, it was valuable for understanding how initial impressions of transfer played out over the course of one academic year, and how students integrated into their new environments. Semi-structured interviews were conducted at three time periods. In the fall of 2022, shortly after students transferred, we asked participants about their reasons for transferring and their experiences with the transfer process. During these interviews we probed for initial instances of transfer shock by asking participants about any academic or social hurdles they felt they needed to overcome in their first semester. For example, we asked how students were adjusting to their new learning environment, and whether they noticed differences from their previous schooling. Interviews conducted in the winter of 2023 allowed us to track students as they continued navigating institutional processes and resolved initial hurdles noted in their first interviews. In this round of interviews we revisited the specific challenges noted in the participant's first interview, inquiring whether/how they were resolved or whether these challenges were enduring. We also offered students the option for a final interview in the spring of 2023 if they had any additional insight or final reflections on their transfer experience. Ethics clearance was provided by the Research Ethics Office at the researchers' home institution, and all institutions represented in the sample.

3 This study is part of a larger research project on transfer experiences, funded by the Ontario Council on Articulation and Transfer (see Aurini, LaCroix, & Iafolla, 2024; LaCroix et al., 2024).

Description of Sample

In Ontario, existing qualitative efforts to research transfer experiences have focused predominantly on the college-to-university pathway (see Aurini, LaCroix, Dreesha, et al., 2024), or the program partnerships between selected institutions (e.g., Hurlihey, 2012; Montague et al., 2022). While these approaches have been valuable for examining particular areas of student mobility, our approach provides a broader sectoral view of transfer to make more robust claims about transfer shock. After forming partnerships with two colleges and three universities, we worked with members of the Registrar's Office (RO) to identify suitable participants. Inclusion criteria required these students to be domestic and full-time students who recently transferred. Our sample excludes international students and those studying in programs outside diplomas and degrees (e.g., continuing education). As shown in Table 1, of the 56 students who participated in our study, 32 were from universities and 24 were enrolled in college. Altogether, 107 interviews were conducted. Interviews were conducted over Zoom and ranged from 45–90 minutes in length.

As expected in longitudinal interviewing, we experienced some attrition to our sample. Nine students did not participate in a second interview, and only six participants were interested in a third interview. By spring, most participants were integrated into their new institution and program and no longer considered themselves "transfer students."

Our sample also reflects the five transfer pathways within the Ontario post-secondary system. As shown in Table 2, our sample leans toward swirlers and college-to-university transfer pathways, with fewer college-bound students.

DATA ANALYSIS

By relying on the longitudinal interview method, we collected three cohorts of data: fall interviews, winter interviews, and spring interviews. Each cohort tells a unique story of transfer integration and the process of acclimating to a new institution—both academically and socially. Thus, our analysis proceeded in a linear fashion throughout these distinct periods of data collection. Following the fall interviews, we relied on jottings and analytic notes to capture preliminary insights into transfer shock. These notes were used to craft a transfer narrative for each participant (e.g., reasons for transferring) and were also used to create a deductive coding framework that guided the analysis for our cohorts of data.

Table 1
Qualitative Interview Sample

	Fall 2021	Winter 2022	Spring 2022
College A*	12	11	2
College B	12	9	1
University A	2	1	1
University B	18	16	2
University C	12	8	0
TOTAL	56	45	6

*To ensure the confidentiality of our participants, institution names and student names are pseudonyms.

Table 2
Interview Sample by Transfer Pathway

Transfer Pathway	Interview Participants
College-to-College	5
College-to-University	13
University-to-University	9
University-to-College	9
Swirler	20
TOTAL	56

Our deductive codebook accounted for various dimensions of transfer shock that are prevalent in the scholarly literature and reflects the broader interpretation of this concept (Gawley & McGowan, 2006; Paterson McGuire & Belcheir, 2013; Tinto, 1975). For example, the deductive codebook included codes such as "drop in grades," "transfer credits," "difficulty with new modes of assessment," and "social isolation."

We were also interested in capturing student-centred recommendations for alleviating transfer shock. Accordingly, as part of our deductive codebook we included broader "recommendations" code. Following our initial round of coding, this code was refined through an inductive coding process to distinguish between recommendations our participants had for future transfer students and recommendations they had for their institution and the post-secondary sector.

FINDINGS

Many students in our sample reported feeling happy with their transfer decision and had few regrets about their post-secondary journey. However, this did not mean that their journey was free from various challenges along the way. Rather than a single "shock," we identify several "transfer jolts" that can occur in the transfer process. These jolts can have jarring effects and can occur at different times throughout our participants' first year at their new institution. While both academic and social jolts are experienced early in the transfer process, academic jolts waned in influence by the end of the first semester, whereas social jolts were enduring until the end of our observation period. At the same time, we also find that transfer students approach their institutional transitions with a strategic eye, relying on various academic and social supports to help alleviate the impact of these jolts. As such, we add empirical nuance to the transfer jolts students experience, how they impact transfer students, and how transfer students resolve them. Their various strategies inform our recommendations to the sector for reducing transfer barriers and sources of transfer shock.

Academic Jolts

Through our interviews we identify three sources of academic jolts that transfer students experience: new administrative procedures, new learning environment, and new modes of assessment. In order to make a successful academic transition, these jolts left participants making quick adjustments to their expectations and study practices. In contrast to classic transfer shock literature (e.g., Hills, 1965), no participant mentioned a drop in grades. Nonetheless, these three types of jolts proved to be challenging for some participants.

When explaining their initial transition to their new institution, participants described various administrative challenges that complicated their integration. Students who transferred from college to university sometimes found the course enrolment and selection process challenging. As Allison observed, students have different responsibilities in the university course selection process than at college: "[in] college

they kind of set your schedule. So, they put the courses that you need to take per term. But in university you have to make sure you follow the requirements." Kate similarly noted that having to navigate course selection, as opposed to the "block-style" they were used to, was a "big change." Others agreed that these transitions are something to "get used to," but this is not to understate how jarring this change in responsibility can be for learners without previous experience building their own timetables and using course management systems. Nathan mentioned that this process was particularly challenging because he did not have anyone to help him decide which courses he should be taking.

> I did run into problems when it came to registering for class. It was kind of a complicated process where you go through this schedule builder software, where you build your proposed schedule. And no one taught me how to do that. I didn't have anyone helping me through that.

Fortunately, several participants were able to point to competent academic advisors who smoothed over scheduling difficulties. Mason raved about the positive and enduring impact his advisor had on his transfer experience. He shared that his advisor took the time to get to know him on "a more personal level." The personal connection endured throughout Mason's first year, and in our winter interview he noted meeting with his advisor regularly to ensure he was on the right path.

> I go to her if I have any questions, and she's always like, "Okay, as soon as you get this credit, and come back, talk to me, and we'll figure it out."... So, she's been pretty helpful and trying to figure out, you know, what's my trajectory?

Academic advisors served as key resources for helping students make their initial transition and "hit the ground running." However, not all students utilized the advising supports available to them. Some observed that the sheer size of many universities makes it difficult to connect with appropriate academic resources.

Once students had passed their enrolment stage, they encountered new jolts in the classroom environment. Students who transferred to a different institution type shared experiences of acclimating to new learning environments and needing to change their study habits. For example, Laura transferred from a university to a college and had seven courses in her semester. She said, "just the volume [of work] kind of makes it hard to keep up." In a similar vein, Josh had transferred from college to university and also found the change in workload to be daunting at first glance:

> I didn't realize the way I picked my classes how much reading I was going to have to do. Because my other classes last semester were basically, I do some math and a little bit of reading. This one is like a little bit of math and a lot of reading. So, with all my classes combined, I must be reading like, like three to five, maybe even six research papers a week. So, it is sort of like, more than I'm used to, but I am getting used to it. I sort of saw in the beginning and I was like, "Oh gosh, like this is going to be bad."

Tad had experiences swirling between numerous college and university programs, and characterized the difference in the learning environments as "it's more independent in university. You're expected to just know what's going on when it happens, like the second week." And while Tad mentioned that he felt this was a "fair" expectation, he acknowledged that he did not have those expectations in college and therefore had to learn to be more independent in university.

For some participants, the difference in learning environment was also reflected in the assessment practices of their courses. Lina had swirled between college and university and acknowledged that the skills students need to be successful in both "aren't necessarily the same." In her experience, "the information and how you deal with things in an applied setting is completely different than in a theoretical setting." While she felt that her experience in uni-

versity and college equipped her well for writing essays, she was less prepared for exam-based assessments. Mathew, also a swirler, noted that "in university things are a bit higher stakes" when it comes to assessments. While he had found that college was "constant assignments all the time," the assessments at universities were fewer, and with higher stakes, because "there are three assignments and they're worth your whole grade. Or it's all the final exam.... Everything is weighted so heavily for some reason...so if you mess up once, it's a huge thing." When musing about adjustment strategies, participants like Addison suggested that transfer students make a habit of attending office hours "even just to meet the prof" since professors are one of the key resources that support academic success and continued engagement.

These findings point to the contrasting academic environments between colleges and universities, and the effect these differences have on transfer students. Rather than a single transfer shock, our findings show a more gradual process of experiencing continuous "bumps in the road" as students get used to their new institution. These academic jolts are experienced early, often throughout the first few months after transfer. By the time we spoke to students in the winter, the effects of these jolts were minimal and participants noted thriving academically.[4]

Social Jolts

Social jolts encompass a broad range of experiences transfer students have at their new institution, including interacting with peers and personnel while managing feelings of belonging, loneliness, and overall integration. Like academic jolts, feeling out of sync at their new institution happened early for many of our participants. When Tessa was transferring from a college to a university, her university only held a welcome orientation for direct-entry students. This left her feeling "quite lost for a bit" when trying to find her classes and other supports on campus. However, even when transfer students were included in orientation sessions, many participants found them too generic, or too focused on the "traditional" first-year student who recently graduated from high school. Lina discussed how her transfer status meant that she was not a first-year student, but also not a first-time post-secondary student. She found her orientation was "very focused on the brand new, or those who are already ensconced in the university. There's nothing for that in-between." Our participants expressed a shared desire for more activities to help them acclimate to their new institution and alleviate the initial alienation they felt when beginning their studies. Audrey suggested that "I want to be introduced to other transfer students, even if they're in different programs." She spoke of potential mentors or peers as "champions" of the transfer experience, and individuals she could learn from.

Unlike academic jolts, which subsided or disappeared by the winter term, social jolts tended to persist. When students leave one institution and enter another, they also leave their former connections behind and must build new connections at their destination institution. What complicates this social bridging is that transfer students enter classes and social situations where peers have already built their social networks. As Natalia acknowledged, her classmates had "already formed their peer group."

> Since I am a transfer student, I've found people who have already formed their friend group. So maybe if I had started first year with them, I would be able to find my friends within [that year].... It's quite difficult in the sense that I am mixing first-year courses and second-year courses, and then next semester I'm going to mix third-year courses with second-year courses.

4 There were a handful of participants in the sample who continued to face challenges that compromised their academic trajectory. Eva, for example, was a swirler who was now attending her third post-secondary institution. An administrative error meant that she had not satisfied her current program requirements, thereby forcing her to enroll for another year to complete two electives. Fortunately, these examples were rare, and most students in our sample were able to resolve academic challenges with minimal longer-term consequences.

Natalia entered her program with enough advanced standing to have a schedule which combined first- and second-year courses. In terms of making social connections, this meant that she was traversing two different year levels of peers, making it difficult to meet new people since her peers already had established friend groups. When moving into their next semester, some participants found that their efforts to make friends in their first semester were a futile endeavour, as they were now grouped with new peers. In Bethany's college program, courses operate on a block-basis, and she found that she had to "start over" when she began the winter semester in a new block without her friends from the fall semester:

> It completely flipped on us this year. I had a group of, like, 25 [peers].... And then, this semester, I'm with people that I've never met. I think I have two people from my last semester that have come over with me into this one.

Rather than carrying on with the friends she was able to make in her first semester, Bethany felt like she was back at square one, lamenting "it's like going back to the first day of school again."

Although participants had anticipated being "in-between" different academic year levels,they had not forecasted the social consequences of their program standing. Natalia further shared that while she'd understood what she was "getting into" with her transfer and academics, "making friendships or building connections" was harder than she had anticipated. She conceded that "I didn't think it was going to be that difficult." Others, such as Meaghan, discussed age and lifestyle impacting their connections with their peers. As an older student, Meaghan attributed the disconnect she had with her classmates as "I don't relate to other students' struggles just because I'm not 19. Like I don't live on campus." Interestingly, others perceived their social distinctions from their peers as an asset which could be levied to help build social connections. While Bethany acknowledged having different social priorities than her younger peers, she felt her maturity helped her stand out and attract positive peer attention:

> I've been recognized as one of the older individuals in the course by my peers, and everyone's kind of like, "Oh, go to Bethany, she knows! She knows how to answer these questions." I'm kind of, you know, everyone comes to me.

It is important to note that these social jolts did not leave students second-guessing their transfer decision. Some, like Bethany, viewed these social distinctions as an asset that could foster social connection. Others found social challenges to be a more persistent transfer issue. Despite social tensions being discussed throughout our interview series, our participants remained steadfast that they were satisfied with their decision to transfer and were enjoying their programs.

DISCUSSION

Transfer research indicates that transfer students experience different aspects of "transfer shock," owing to differences between their sending and receiving institutions. On the one hand, various studies have established a "traditional" concept of transfer shock, where students transferring from college to university experience a drop in grades in their first semester (Cameron, 2005; Cejda, 1997; Hills, 1965; Ishitani, 2008; Rhine et al., 2000). What we find is that, with an American skew to the literature, evidence of academic shock may not "transfer" to the Ontario context. Community colleges in the United States have a specific "transfer function" to springboard students into university studies (Cejda, 1997; Hills, 1965). When interpreted in the traditional sense (i.e., a drop in grades), transfer shock is a serious legitimacy threat to this transfer function: How legitimate can the transfer function be if it does not equip students with the knowledge and skills needed to be successful at their new institution? Yet for a system that was not designed to channel college students into universities—such as Ontario's—the findings of our study reveal some indicators of positive academic integration. For example, students in our study did not report any drop in grades. The academic jolts they experienced may reflect structural barriers to transfer in a system that is continuing to build transfer

feasibility. The jolts they experienced were impactful, such as getting used to new academic environments and expectations, but they were not detrimental to their academic performance. Importantly, rather than consequences that leave students "reeling" or feeling "unprepared" (see Cameron, 2005), the academic jolts experienced by the students in this study waned by the end of their first semester. There are, however, areas that could be strengthened.

First, all transfer admission offers should contain the name and contact information of academic advisors and encourage students to connect with them during the enrolment period. We echo the recommendations of our participants regarding the importance of seeking out academic advisors to minimize potential missteps and provide guidance and information.

Second, post-secondary institutions could be even more proactive by having academic advisors reach out to transfer students directly, offering support and guidance to help them with course selection and academic planning. More effort may be needed for those programs with established articulation pathways between colleges and universities, where transfer is an anticipated outcome of the program for some students. Kerr et al. (2010) note that prioritizing transfer is a shared responsibility between both sending and receiving institutions. For sending institutions, they have a responsibility to prepare students for the academic and social transition. For receiving institutions, they have a responsibility for counselling students through their transition (see Luckai et al., 2015; Scott et al., 2017).

Third, policies and practices used by transfer professionals should be developed with an understanding that transfer students may require more customized supports that address their non-traditional pathway through post-secondary. Whereas the participants in this study were able to successfully overcome their academic transitions, the absence of these social supports were discussed as contributing to enduring feelings of isolation and feeling different. Ensuring that transfer students receive transfer-specific orientations, are set up with peer mentors, and grouping transfer students in residence are all recommendations levied in transfer literature to help alleviate the social aspects of transfer shock (Luckai et al., 2015; Percival et al., 2015).

While we note some of the academic and social jolts transfer students experienced, it is important to reiterate that the transfer students in this study were resilient. Despite the highlighted academic and social jolts, these students were able to successfully ward off long-lasting effects of transfer shock, and we did not detect any indication that students were at risk of not completing their programs. This stands in contrast to existing research, which has identified numerous transfer penalties that compromise timely completion of credentials (Elliott & Lakin, 2020; Pizarro Milian et al., 2024; Spencer, 2023). One possible explanation of our discrepant findings is that our analysis focuses on the first year after transfer. Potentially, transfer students encounter additional hurdles later in their programs that impact timely completion. Another possibility is that since the existing research on transfer penalties documents quantitative/objective outcomes of transfer, we may have captured subjective experiences that suggest transfer students are not aware of—or are not particularly concerned about—these outcomes during the course of their studies.

What we establish here is that transfer shock is a social process that occurs when students transfer, and is not necessarily always a harsh and destabilizing experience (Luckai et al., 2015). Both the academic and social elements of transfer shock can occur at different times and have implications for the kinds of supports that would be helpful for post-secondary institutions to implement. We find that the recommendations our participants voiced—both to their institution and to other transfer students—are already present in the scholarly literature on transfer shock. This suggests that there is no need to "reinvent the wheel" when it comes to supporting transfer students. Rather, the findings of this study add to a chorus of existing research suggesting institutions provide more support at the front end of transfer to ensure more seamless integration experiences (Gawley & McGowan, 2006; Luckai et al., 2015;

Mallette et al., 2015; Percival et al., 2015; Rhine et al., 2000). These recommendations require collective efforts, and do not rest at the feet of single transfer advisors or receiving institutions.

CONCLUSION

Ontario post-secondary students have numerous opportunities for transfer between colleges and universities despite the relatively distinct institutional field (Gawley & McGowan, 2006; Skolnik, 1995, 2010). We suggest transfer shock as an ongoing process that lasts at least throughout the first year of study at a new institution, further supporting the idea that transfer shock is not a jarring single event (Luckai et al., 2015). Here, the recommendations we contribute will be useful for transfer practitioners and policy advisors looking to better support Ontario's transfer students. At the same time, it is important to continue examining the long arm of transfer. While we did not find any risk to student success, recent evidence suggests that transfer students pay serious penalties in their academic outcomes (Elliott & Lakin, 2020; Pizarro Milian et al., 2024; Spencer, 2023). Future studies may consider expanded longitudinal mixed-methods designs to combine administrative grade data of transfer students with qualitative methods to understand the impacts of transfer as students progress further into their programs and near completion. This is a much-needed component to research in our understanding of how transfer students fare throughout their academic journey.

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