Education City Transfer Mobility Analysis: Exploring Experiences
of Transfer Students in The Ottawa Region

R1925 Research Project Reflection Report

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Introduction

This project aimed to map the patterns, motivations, and experiences of transfer students in the Ottawa region. While we are unable to, at this time, answer the research questions driving this project or use its findings to provide recommendations on removing barriers faced by transfer students and improving support systems used by transfer students, a great deal of work had been done in preparation for the now-paused data collection. As such, this final reflection report will provide a brief overview of the project's participating institutions, research questions, and methodological approach, while also detailing the evolving impact of the coronavirus and COVID-19 on our capacity to complete this project.

Participating Institutions

The Ottawa region, or the National Capital Region (NCR), is home to five public postsecondary institutions: three public universities—Carleton University, University of Ottawa, and St. Paul University—and two public colleges—Algonquin College and Collège La Cité. Additionally, of the five institutions, two are bilingual universities and one is a French-language college. The five institutions are already part of a provincially supported initiative, Education City, that is looking for ways to improve student mobility and the student transfer experience, between institutions and between academic programs at each institution. This research project was being led by Algonquin College and co-led by the University of Ottawa, with the other partners providing input and being responsible for supporting data collection at their own institutions.

Research Questions

This project was driven by three main research questions which aimed to explore the characteristics/demographics, motivations and expectations, as well as obstacles and challenges experienced by transfer students in the NCR, specifically:

1. What are the characteristics of the transfer population in the National Capital Region?

   - How many students transfer from college-to-college, university-to-university, university-to-college and college to university?

   - How many of those students transfer from within the Ottawa region?

   - What are the general characteristics of transfer students?

2. What are the motivations and expectations of the different types of transfer students (i.e. college-to-university transfer students and vice versa, university-to-university and college-to-college transfer students, French-to-English education and vice versa, international students, transferring within the region or from outside, etc.)?

   - What are the expectations of these transfer students? Did the services provided meet their expectations? If not, why?

   - What factors influence the expectations and motivations of transfer students?

3. What are the obstacles and challenges experienced by transfer students?

   - What kind of systems or agreements are already in place to promote and facilitate transfers between the institutions in the Ottawa regions? Are students satisfied with these services?

   - How can colleges and universities facilitate transfer students best? What type of agreements or support systems need to be in place or created?

Methodological Overview

This project adopted a mixed-methods approach to data collection. Quantitative data collection was planned in the form of a survey of transfer students as well as the collection and analysis of secondary

data sources, such as data on transfer students from each institution's student information system joined with student application data from the Ontario Universities' Application Centre (OUAC) and the Ontario College Application Service (OCAS); and two Ministry of Colleges and Universities surveys that are administered to recent postsecondary graduates, the Ontario University Graduate Survey (OUGS) and the College Graduate Satisfaction Survey (CGSS). The survey was also intended to be a vehicle for recruiting participants for qualitative data collection.

Qualitative data collection was planned to be based primarily on focus groups, to be conducted with a diverse group of students who had varying transfer experiences. The focus groups could be used to elaborate upon themes generated out of the quantitative data collection, and the protocol was developed to explore a variety of aspects of the transfer student experience with their transfer process, including barriers to mobility, the rationale for their decision-making, their expectations, and their experiences with and needs for support systems at their pre- and post-transfer institutions. The focus group data was to be supplemented by responses to the long answer questions gathered during the survey.

Impact of Coronavirus And COVID-19 on Data Collection

With approval to conduct research received from each institution's research ethics board in early 2020, the survey that was developed was piloted on students at Algonquin College. The desire to synchronize the release of the survey at the remaining institutions meant that the survey was on the cusp of going live right as the first serious impacts of coronavirus and COVID-19 were being felt. We were informed that a hold had been placed on any surveying of students at both Carleton University and the University of Ottawa. St. Paul University was still open to having us survey their students, however we were concerned that the unpredictable nature of the time, for both students and institutions, would

negatively affect the response rate of the survey as well as influence the responses of the participants, thus we likewise held off on launching the survey.

Since Algonquin College had already completed its survey data collection, we had begun to plan the focus groups for the 93 survey participants who had indicated that they would be interested in participating. As those drew nearer to being administered, however, all on-campus activities were suspended which resulted in the cancelled of the focus group, and resources were shifted away from their administration to the institution's coronavirus and COVID-19 impact mitigation strategy. Similarly, collection of the secondary data was also put on hold in consideration of not wanting to commit institutional capacity to respond and provide data that would be needed elsewhere during this time, for example in the emergency development of online courses and transition to online teaching. In sum, just as the preparation work for data collection was completed—instrument development, testing, and piloting; obtaining approval to conduct research at each institution; recruitment for focus groups in the case of Algonquin College—the institutional responses to coronavirus and COVID-19 put a halt on their execution.

Work Completed

Despite not being able to execute the bulk of the intended data collection, considerable effort has gone into the project. Aside from applications to each of the institutions' research ethics boards—a lengthy process in and of itself—we conducted a literature review of research on student transfer experience; developed a survey instrument to help us understand the transfer experiences of students; and developed a focus group protocol. Each of these will be detailed below. For the literature review, the full document will be appended.

Literature Review

The literature review looked at the work that had been conducted to date on the characteristics of

transfer students and student experiences, specifically focusing on ONCAT-funded research. Transfer

students differ from direct-entry postsecondary students, typically being older, are more likely to have

dependents, and are more likely to work part-time. Four themes are covered in the literature review:

student motivations to transfer; expectations of the transfer process; experience of the transfer process;

and, experience in the transferred program. On the four themes, the literature review concludes that

> Research shows that students overwhelmingly transfer because of career-related
> considerations—most notably to enhance career advancement opportunities. Although only
> minimally researched, students also report that their transfer programs prepared them for the
> job market; which augments the decision to transfer for career-considerations. University
> students also transfer to college to develop or strengthen practical skills. Although information
> is unavailable, it is possible that students who transfer to college to develop skills may do so
> because of career-advancement considerations. Although some research indicates that students
> are transferring to related and somewhat related programs, students also decide to transfer
> when their fields of interest change. Students seek other institutional programs to pursue this
> shifted interest. However, regardless of reason to transfer, geographic location is a central
> determinant for *where* students will transfer to. Students overwhelmingly transfer to region-
> local post-secondary institutions. Accordingly, collaboration between inter-regional institutions
> will greatly contribute to the success of students as students will be able to locate related
> programming closely available to them.

> Research examining students' expectations of the transfer experience, is unfortunately,
> quite limited. However, research shows that students do have expectations of the different
> workloads between college and university. These are often pre-conceived notions that college is
> more hands-on whereas university learning revolves around abstract and theoretical learning.
> Through high school teachers and college instructors, students also come to expect the
> university workload to be most arduous. Such expectations may be verified in real-life
> experiences because students do report receiving lower grades than they received in college.
> Some research also shows that students expect clear guidelines for the application process, as
> well as clear and accessible information related to the transfer process. However, although not
> always the case, students explain a difficulty in finding such information. Accordingly, it is
> extremely valuable that post-secondary institutions provide guidelines and information in a
> clear and accessible manner. Doing so in a centralized location would certainly be the most
> effective as students primarily use the Internet to search for and acquire transfer information;
> however, students report feeling frustrated when unable to easily access information.

> Students have some expectations about eligible transfer credits and these expectations
> are typically accurate. Accordingly, students are shown to be good predictors of transfer credit
> eligibility. That being said, guidelines and information for eligible credits is highly helpful for

students who might otherwise become confused about eligible criteria. Providing this support eases the transfer experience and encourages student success.

University-to-college transfer students typically feel academically prepared for their transfer program. However, research reports that college-to-university transfer students feel unprepared for university, specifically as essay writing is the most popular assignment in university. This is unsurprising as these students note that their last essay writing experience was in high school. Making such expectations known to college-to-university transfer students may alleviate the shock of transitioning to essay-based coursework, while also providing foresight to prepare for the assignment shift. However, research generally finds that all transfer students are equally successful compared to direct-entry students, and some research even shows that transfer students outperform direct-entry students. The most significant consideration here would be the shock that college-to-university transfer students experience; however, this might be mitigated with adequate foresight, awareness, and preparation.

Lastly, transfer students do not identify typically as 'first-year students' and as a result, transfer students may ignore valuable communication and information directed to first-year students. Accordingly, communication specifically directed to transfer students might reduce any communication gaps. Orientations that centre upon academic preparation and information are also mainly used by transfer students who otherwise find the social aspect of freshman orientations as irrelevant or quite frankly a waste of time. Transfer students typically have external responsibilities which require attention; consequently, providing information in a clear manner reduces the amount of time transfer students must dedicate in sifting through communication.

The full literature review can be found as an appendix to this report.

Development of Data Collection Instruments

Survey

The development of the survey instrument occurred in the Summer of 2019 and was based on the literature that was reviewed, including instruments that were previously used in other research projects on student transfer experiences. The questionnaires from existing data products such as the OUGS and the CGSS were also consulted; while these products are administered on a regular basis by the Ministry and the CGSS in particular has previous analyses on student transfer (e.g. McCloy, Steffler, & Decock, 2017), they are only administered to recent graduates. Based on our literature review, we expected that this dataset might miss a significant portion of transfer students: transfer students with a long gap between postsecondary education experiences. Nonetheless, the questions from them were helpful for the construction of our survey instrument, with the CGSS questionnaire in particular providing many of

our items. Other sources of items used in the construction of our survey questionnaire notably included Blanchard et al.'s (2013) interview guide; Confederation College's (2012) student pathway survey; Decock and Janzen's (2015) interview guide; Gerhardt, Arai, Carroll, and Ackerman's (2012) focus group guide; Gorman, Phelps, and Carley's (2012) interview guide; and Henderson and McCloy's (2017) report. After its initial construction, the draft of the survey was circulated to the project stakeholder group for review and input, then translated. Several revisions were suggested by the University of Ottawa's office of Institutional Research and Planning (IRP) in early 2020 including the removal of several questions whose data could be obtained through an institution's student information system. Though the survey data collection was completed at Algonquin College, because of the suspension of the project due to coronavirus and COVID-19, the data have yet to be analysed. The latest version of the survey (post-IRP revisions) has been attached as an appendix.

Focus Group Protocol

The development of the focus group protocol occurred in the Summer of 2019. It too was created based on work done in previous projects on student transfer experiences. It is based on Blanchard et al.'s (2013) interview guide. After a draft of the protocol was developed, it was circulated to stakeholders for review and feedback. The focus group protocol was never used. Though focus groups were planned at Algonquin College, they were cancelled as part of the institution's response to coronavirus and COVID-19. The focus group protocol has been attached as an appendix.

Notable References From The Development Of Data Collection Instruments

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Education City Transfer Mobility Analysis:
Literature Review of Ontario Student Transfer Motivations, Expectations and Experience

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Abstract

As students increasingly non-linearly navigate their post-secondary education, understanding the student transfer process between institutions is vital. Indeed, it is particularly valuable to understand transfer students' perspectives of transferring because transfer students' experiences provide insights into the successes and challenges of transfer programs. This literature review explores research by the Ontario Council on Articulation and Transfer (ONCAT) to understand Ontario transfer student experiences. More specifically, this literature review reports on students' motivations to transfer, students' expectations and experiences of the transfer process, and students' experience of their transfer program. In examining these aspects, insights are acquired regarding the obstacles and challenges that transfer students encounter. Through understanding these common aspects, transfer programs and post-secondary institutions may consider routes to enhance and ease the transfer process for students.

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Introduction

After recognizing other provincial initiatives to support post-secondary transfer students, Ontario listed student mobility as a primary education goal (Colleges Ontario, 2009). Researchers (Voorhees and Harvey, 2005; Penner, Howieson & DiTullio, 2017) assert that every post-secondary school manage student mobility as a part of their institutional culture. This direction increases transfer pathways, and currently over 1,900 credit transfer pathways are available to Ontario students (ONCAT, 2019). Indeed, Ontario's priority to clearly define transfer pathways across institutions enables a smoother transition for transfer students (Kerr, McCloy & Liu, 2010).

Following efforts to improve higher education student mobility, the Ontario Council on Articulation and Transfer (ONCAT) was established to enhance student mobility across institutions through research and collaborative projects. The research aptly depicts that transfer students are typically older (Gorman, Phelps & Carley, 2012; Blanchard, et al., 2013; Acai & Newton, 2015), are more likely to have dependents (Coffey, et al., 2014; Kennett & Maki, 2014; Henderson & McCloy, 2017), and work part-time (Kennett & Maki, 2014; Shook, Norman & Guyatt, 2016; University of Ontario Institute of Technology, 2016). Therefore, transfer students have a school life significantly different from direct-entry post-secondary students. While research examining transfer student demographics is important, understanding the transfer student experience is valuable. This is central because it illuminates the motivations, expectations, success, and challenges that transfer students experience, and in turn, these understandings influence the ability of post-secondary institutions to enhance transfer pathways and programs. Accordingly, this literature review uses ONCAT-funded research to specifically examine Ontario transfer students' perspectives surrounding the transfer experience. Some

research outside of ONCAT is also used to support common themes. The following literature review discusses: 1) student motivations to transfer; 2) expectations of the transfer process; 3) experience of the transfer process; and, 4) experience in the transferred program.

Student Motivations to Transfer

Career Opportunities

Career consideration is the most common reason for transferring. This is unsurprising as the labour market affects transfers, particularly to university (see McCloy, Steffler & Decock, 2016a). In surveying between 100 and 150 students at each of Ontario's 24 colleges, Usher and Jarvey (2012) found that just over half of transfer students transferred because it was believed to improve career opportunities. In a Confederation College study (2012), researchers found that career considerations were the most cited reason for transferring, and that this related to "Finding a job, finding a steadier job, changing careers, [and] upgrading education to qualify for professional designations" (p. 20).

A Confederation College study (2013) surveying transfer students found that 67% indicated that their main reason for transferring to college was because it enabled "More opportunities for career advancement" (p. 16). The focus group further advanced this motivation with 88% of participants indicating that they transferred to college to build new skills or to further develop skills to improve future employment opportunities. One focus group participant acknowledged "…that's why I switched, because there were no jobs" (p. 19). Through focus groups with Seneca to York and York to Seneca transfer students, Decock and Janzen (2015) similarly found that the decision to transfer was career-related for students transferring from college to university. These transfer students recognized that they could obtain employment with

their college education, however subsequent career advancement seemed unlikely. For example,

one participant recognized that university-educated employees working at the same company as

him, "received better packages than I did. When I started to look for better opportunities in the

market, [the] most attractive jobs require[d] a bachelor degree or a master degree" (p. 13).

Another participant noted that, "Even if they hire you, you can't get a promotion unless you

continue to study and that is hard when you are working and takes very long" (p. 13). This

perhaps explains why in Kennett and Maki's quantitative study, college-to-university transfer

students were the most likely between university-to-college transfer students and direct-entry

students to acknowledge career reasons as their main reason for transferring. Similarly, Gorman,

Phelps, and Carley (2012) found that transfer students perceived a college degree as a practical

mechanism for greater career opportunities. The researchers explain that according to transfer

students, "a college degree is more vocationally focused than a university degree… [they

believed] that a college degree would help them to further their careers and, indeed, some

believed that their opportunities would be limited or non-existent without it" (p. 19).

      McCloy, Baker, Williams, and Decock (2017) also found that transfer students at Seneca

College overwhelmingly transfer because of greater career advancement opportunities. In this

case, 90% of transfer students who used Seneca's Degree and Credit Transfer Office transferred

because of career advancement considerations, compared with 89% of non-user transfer students.

However, students who entered college with plans to attend university in the future were much

less likely to transfer because of career advancement reasoning regardless of whether they used

the Degree and Credit Transfer Office.

      Interestingly, while it could be surmised that a lack of career opportunities would compel

students to transfer in order to enhance career opportunities, this does not seem to be the case.

Rather, the emphasis, as noted above, regards career *advancement*. Decock and McCloy (2011) clarify this distinction in analysing the Ontario College Graduate Satisfaction Survey. The researchers find that the main reason for transferring was because of 'more opportunities for career advancement' and that 60% of transfer students specifically acknowledged that a "lack of job was not a reason" (p. 36). Similarly, a study at Confederation College (2012) found that many students transferred to gain the education necessary for "a particular desired position" (p. 22).

Skills

Students also express transferring from university to college because they were interested in developing existing or new skills. While the university experience is comprised of theoretical knowledge, students perceive college as an avenue to acquire "practical skills to augment their theoretical knowledge' (Decock & Janzen, 2015, p. 22). In a Confederation College study (2013), students transferred to college to develop practical skills. A student explains that university was unhelpful in developing practical skills; "It was not hands-on at all and I needed something that was more hands-on and got you in the community using your skills" (p. 19). Durham College (2013) found that enhancing career opportunities was the primary reason for transferring into a Fast Track program, however 73% of these respondents enrolled to acquire hands-on experience, while 50% wanted to develop their present skills further, and 50% wanted to develop a new, specialized skill. These skills, however, are still related to career advancement as many students perceived these skills as "giv[ing] them an edge in the labour market" (p. 30). It is likely that skills development is a secondary reason, often included in the career-related rationale to transfer; which, is reflected in Usher and Jarvey (2012) wherein not a single response identified *skills* as the major reason to transfer.

Field of Study

A discrepancy between motivations to transfer involves transfer students' interests in a field of study. With nearly 25% of respondents, Usher and Jarvey (2012) found that a changed field of interest constituted the second most cited reason for transferring. One student elaborated on this reasoning by explaining that, "When I first went to college I started off in international trade but I didn't like it after a while and I didn't pursue work in that career ... It turns out that I like accounting more than I thought I would back in high school" (p. 15). Importantly, the researchers note that because students are transferring schools for entirely new programs, these students would be significantly less eligible for transfer credits.[1]

However, McCloy, Steffler, and Decock (2017) found that college graduates were predominantly transferring to related fields of study. The study examined data from the 2006-2007 and 2014-2015 Graduate Satisfaction Surveys and found that almost two-thirds of transfer students transferred to a related field of study. The researchers further elucidate that "54% reported that [their new program] was very related and 36% indicated it was somewhat related" (p. 56). A study from Durham College (2012) also found that 24% of students who transferred into a Fast-Track program indicated their transferred program was 'highly related' to their previous study, and 20% noted that it was 'somewhat related.' However, 56% of respondents reported that their transfer program was 'not related.' The researchers suggest that labour market changes and program availability likely influence students' decisions to enrol in a related field of study. Indeed, change in the labour market is shown to affect university transfers (McCloy, Steffler & Decock, 2016). More research is needed in this area to elaborate upon these inconsistencies. It is possible that Jarvey and Usher's (2012) findings about students changing

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[1] This topic will be further discussed below.

their field of interest may be shrouded in the results of the other responses. For example, 54% of

respondents indicate that the major reason for their transfer was due to career advancement

opportunities, however it is very possible, and indeed likely, that a large segment of these

respondents sought extra education in similar fields that relate to their career. Furthermore, while

Jarvey and Usher determine that changing interest in a field of study is a reason to transfer,

transferring due to *retaining* a field of interest is nonsensical.

Location

Although not nearly as important as career-related reasoning, institutional location also

appears to influence the decision-making of students considering where to transfer. In their

survey of transfer students, Usher and Jarvey (2012) found that nearly 10% of students cited

location as their primary reason for deciding to transfer. Although Confederation College (2012)

found that career-related reasons were the primary reason for transferring, the researchers report

that many participants also identified location as a motivating factor because "they desired to

stay in the region closest to their homes" (p. 20). Location preference, following career

considerations, was also identified as a motivating factor by Decock and Janzen (2015). A study

conducted by Durham College (2013) found that 35% of transfer students in the advanced

diploma program identified location as a primary motivation to transfer to Durham College.

Although not identified as a motivation specifically, Durham College (2016) illustrates

that students with prior post-secondary education experience are overwhelmingly likely to

transfer to schools in the same provincial region. The researchers further determine that transfer

students with prior college experience were specifically more likely to state *location* as a

decision to transfer to a particular institution. Fisher, Nay, Wilson, and Wood (2012) uncovered

the same motivation for transfer students to OCAD with prior college experience, but also found

that most university transfer students also reported location as their major reason.

McCloy, Steffler, and Decock (2017) similarly report that students in the Greater Toronto

Area are most likely to transfer to local institutions because of the close proximity and variety of

accessible schools. This finding was again reinforced by McCloy, Baker, Williams, and Decock

(2017), wherein the researchers found that transfer students are "much more likely to transfer

locally, with almost four out of five transferring to a university in the Metro Toronto area" (p.

35).

Considering the primacy of geographic location as a motivating factor when transferring,

it is important for universities to collaborate and develop inter-institutional pathways.

Accordingly, Durham College (2016) researchers pointedly explain that,

> The evidence of regional preference is important in that it makes it incumbent, at least on
> the institutions in that geographic region, to develop viable inter-institutional credit
> transfer opportunities amongst themselves. (p. 35)

Indeed, failure to develop clear and coherent collaborative initiatives amongst regionally local

institutions would hinder the ease, and possibly the success, of local transfer students.

Plans to Attend University

Many college students transferring to university originally enrolled in college with plans

to subsequently enrol in university. This is perhaps unsurprising as King and Warren (2006)

determined that high school students often perceive college as a vehicle into university. Kerr,

McCloy, and Lui (2010) report that according to the 2009 College Applicant Survey, 18% of

college applicants stated that their *ultimate academic credential* was a university Bachelor

Degree and an additional 12 per cent intended to pursue a professional or graduate degree" (p.

16). However, Lang (2009) also found that most students plan to attend university only after

enrolling in a college program. McCloy, Steffler, and Decock (2016b) examined datasets from Seneca College's Liberal Arts Transfer program from 2002 to 2012 and found the surprising fact that while only 7% of the 2002-2010 stream of entrants had high school grades and courses eligible for university, 82% of entrants planned to enrol in university following college. In reviewing 2010-2015 College Applicant data, Henderson and McCloy (2017) noted slightly over 31% of applicants intended to enrol in university. In a follow-up survey, the researchers found that of this group, 13.4% still planned to transfer to university, while 47.1% already had transferred. Accordingly, the initial aspirations to attend university typically remain.

Steffler, McCloy, and Decock (2018) also found that "49% of college entrants with university-educated parents planned to attend university after college compared to 43% of students without university-educated parents" (p. 8.). Students with university-educated parents, and from low-income neighbourhoods, were the most likely to intend to transfer to university. This study showed that 25.1% of college entrants who planned to attend university following college, did in fact transfer. Accordingly, the researchers conclude that, "facilitating and encouraging college to university transfer…may be a vehicle to reduce the socioeconomic inequity in university attendance in Ontario" (p. 36).

Student Expectations of Transfer Process

Workload Expectations

While most research examines the workload experiences of transfer students, some research examines the workload expectations of transfer students. Leading up to and as entering desired programs, transfer students express having specific expectations of the workload awaiting them. McGregor, et al (2019) found that college-to-university transfer students

specifically had difficulty adapting to their university environment because of differing expectations regarding the university workload. As Gerhardt, et al (2012) found, many students are led to have higher expectations of university coursework due to insights from high school teachers and college instructors. Other researchers (Gawley & McGowan, 2006; Cameron, 2005) also found that students transferred to university with expectations of tougher workloads. Interestingly, Gawley and McGowan (2006) found that college-to-university transfer students expected much more socializing, but experienced significantly less. However, Henderson and McCloy (2017) noted that 42% of college-to-university transfer students did not expect to experience any workload challenges between college and university. Gorman et al (2012) reported that many students felt underprepared for degree programs. Consequently, ensuring that students have an adequate understanding about workload expectations could ease the transition so that students are do not experience a transfer shock. On a related note, explaining to transfer students that such a transfer shock can occur might be beneficial for transfer students to ensure that they may recognize the shock as a common experience and not an instance reflecting individual incompetence.

College-to-university transfer students also expected professors to be distant and unapproachable. However, Gawley and McGowan (2006) discovered that, "focus group accounts illustrated the unexpectedly approachable, passionate, and helpful qualities of the professors at the university" (p. 8). Because of the limited research examining student expectations of their transfer destination it is difficult to understand pre-conceived perceptions. Notably, research in this area may be valuable in determining whether workload expectations function as a deterrent for students considering transferring.

Application Expectations

The application process is the initial phase towards successfully transferring, and students expect a degree of guidance to adequately fulfil application procedures. In fact, Henderson & McCloy (2017) note that the lack of guidance on application procedures was the most cited challenge faced by students transferring to university—registering a response rate of 25.4%. In addition, submitting applications (14.8%), and the application process being too complicated (4.1%) were challenges faced by students. This further reflects that transfer students expect the process to be relatively simplified at the least. It is also possible that the lack of guidelines explains why 25% of students in Usher & Jarvey (2012) identified the application process as taking one to more than three weeks to complete. Accordingly, Luckai et al (2015) incorporate clear and accessible guidance outlines for application procedures as a best practice for transfer programs.

Information Expectations

Students initiate the transfer process expecting to find clear and accessible information to help guide the process. However, in surveys comparing transfer student expectations before and after transferring to Centennial College, Arnold & Woodhead (2015) found that while 80% of transfer students expected to find clear information relating to eligible credit transfers, only 47% were successful. Gerhardt, Arai, Carroll, and Ackerman (2012) similarly found the lack of clear information as a central frustration for transfer students. Fisher et al (2012) explain that students find it difficult to locate relevant information largely because "Information is embedded in layers of university policy as the default organizational structure" (p. 18). Although minimal research examines what transfer students expect in terms of transfer information, it is certain that

information, and the type of information sources, is a vital component of the transfer student experience.

Student Experience of Transfer Process

Information Sources

Providing clear information about the transfer process and credit eligibility is paramount. Without providing clear information about what to expect from either the program or the transfer process, students report finding the transfer experience confusing. As one student explained, it would be beneficial to have, "little extra sessions or seminars…explaining…the pros and cons of bridging over" (Gorman, Phelps & Carley, 2012 p. 24). Gorman, Phelps, and Carley (2012) also found that many students did not have information to "properly plan the path from diploma to degree" (p. 24). Importantly, Durham College (2016) also determined that student difficulty to actually find the first-point-of-contact for transfer information is a "major barrier" (p. 57). Although schools may provide information important to transfer students, transfer students typically ignore these communications because they do not think it applies to them (Blanchard, et al., 2013). Because of this problem, Blanchard, et al (2013) found that transfer students at Carleton University consider returning students to be the most valuable sources of advice and information.

To maximize the ease of transition and success, providing clear and easily accessible information online is essential (Flaga, 2006; Gerhardt & Ackerman, 2014; Luckai, et al., 2016). As will be discussed further below, transfer students do not perceive orientations as valuable, and Henderson and McCloy (2017) also found that traditional information sources such as brochures, open houses, and university fairs are not often used by college-to-university transfer students.

Research shows that students predominantly use websites as their sources of information for transitioning and program details (Decock & McCloy, 2011; Fisher, Nay, Wilson, & Wood, 2012; Confederation College, 2012; Henderson & McCloy, 2017). Websites were frequently noted by students as enabling an easier transition, while website issues such as information that was difficult to access or deemed insufficient frustrated students (Decock & Janzen, 2015). In fact, students note that websites should be improved to provide clear information to transfer students (Decock & Janzen, 2015; Henderson & McCloy, 2017). One student experience from Centennial College (Woodhead & Oh, 2016) reflects the ease enabled from clearly presented online information; "I looked [on] the website and … I found everything I need to know, literally. How they work, how to regist[er] and [use] myCentennial. So for me, it was really straightforward" (p. 35). Students specifically find online information as frustrating if information is unorganized and buried within layers of other information (Gerhardt, 2012; ONCAT, 2013; Decock & Janzen, 2015). In using student insights from the literature, Lukai, et al (2016) specifically recommend that institutions create a "one-stop-shop" online for students to access all pertinent information accompanied with a checklist (p. 7).

Interestingly, teaching faculty are increasingly viewed upon as main sources of information for transfer students (Usher & Jarvey, 2012; Decock & Janzen, 2015). Gerhardt et al (2012) report that transfer students "had specific instructors who encouraged them to transfer, and helped to prepare them in the process" (p. 29). In fact, the prevalence of teaching staff assisting students is impressive with 51% of respondents across Ontario colleges indicating receiving information and assistance from faculty (Usher & Jarvey, 2012). In addition, students view faculty as responsible for providing information. One student explained that, "I think in the diploma program the professors could have…brought more awareness to [the degree program]"

(Gorman, Phelps & Carley, 2012, p. 23). However, Gerhardt, et al (2012) report that it is difficult for faculty to assist transfer students without solicitation because transfer students must self-identify to teaching staff. Luckily, students not only reported feeling comfortable disclosing transfer status to college instructors, but even "went so far as to recommend it as part of a good survival strategy for future transfer students" (p. 19).

Credit Transfers

As part of the transfer process, students identify courses that may be eligible for credit transfer to their new program. However, because of clarity issues, students may have difficulties identifying eligible transfer credits (Luckai, et al., 2016; Kerr, McCloy, & Liu, 2010). For example, Henderson and McCloy (2017) found that two-thirds of college students aspiring for a university degree "did not know how much credit they expected to receive for their college education" (p. 7). Indeed, students require specific guidelines explicating eligible credits as one student explains that they "[weren't] aware that it didn't have to be, like, exact matches" (Woodhead & Oh, 2016, p. 50). In fact, Durham College researchers (2016) assert that because of the lack of clear and easily accessible credit transfer information provided by Ontario institutions, transfer students become reliant upon, "informal, inefficient practices, and scant infrastructure" (p. 59). Following research (Andres, 2001) showing that almost three quarters of British Columbian transfer students were able to find relevant information about eligible credit transfers, Arnold and Woodhead (2013) recommend credit transfer databases in Ontario to help guide student decision-making.

However, Arnold and Woodhead (2013) were able to conclude that students are good predictors of perceiving eligible credits. Indeed, Usher and Jarvey (2012) found that 69% of students received the expected number of eligible credits. Decock and McCloy (2011) found that

almost two-thirds of transfer graduates received the amount of credits they had expected, while

15% even received more than they expected. However, the researchers also note a discrepancy

between students transferring to college versus those transferring to university, with "Graduates

attending university programs … considerably less likely to have acquired the expected amount"

(p. 60). It is possible that results are swayed depending upon whether transfer programs are

related to previous studies. McCloy, Steffler, and Decock (2017) show that those transferring to

a related field of study receive much more transfer credits compared to those entering an

unrelated field—at a rate nearly half of those entering into a related field.

Durham College (2016) also determined that students expect to receive information about

eligible credits within a specific timeframe. When credit transfer information is included in the

admission package for the new program, the researchers find that 40% of respondents expect the

credit transfer processing time to be less than two weeks, while 34% expect the processing time

to be less than one week. However, Usher & Jarvey (2012) found that the amount of time it takes

Ontario transfer students to learn about the results of their credit transfer ranges from one week

to longer than a month. According to an analysis of the Graduate Student Satisfaction survey, in

2015, "only one-quarter of transfers found out whether they were receiving transfer credit when

they were offered admission" (McCloy, Steffler, and Decock, 2017, p. 42). However, nearly 65%

of Ontario transfer students in another study specifically recommended that institutions provide

credit transfer information when they offer admission packages (Durham College, 2016).

Accordingly, it may be valuable for institutions to consider offering, at the very least, clearer

insights towards eligible credit transfers for prospective and accepted transfer students.

One study at OCAD found that students felt that the credit transfer process is "labour

intensive, requires too much information… and remains subjective" (Fisher, Nay, Wilson &

Wood, 2012, p. 3). Despite this frustration however, other research shows that either Ontario

transfer students do not experience this frustration or that it is not a significant influence on their

overall satisfaction with the credit transfer process. Usher and Jarvey (2012) noted that 60% of

Ontario transfer students found the process *easy* or *very easy*, while Durham College researchers

(2016) shared that 85% of Ontario transfer students found the process as *easy* or *very easy*. The

researchers also indicated that 87.5% of transfer students found the credit transfer application

easy to understand, and 86.9% found the application took an important amount of time.

  While more research is needed to determine generalizable expectations, students have

concerns about eligibility criteria. Providing clear information for students to understand credit

edibility will definitively improve and positively influence students' transfer credit expectations.

Student Transfer Program Experience

Academic Preparation

  Ensuring that students are academically prepared is essential, as research shows that

college-to-university transfer students are more successful in and satisfied with their transfer

program if they feel that the college adequately prepared them for it (Berger & Malaney, 2003).

In examining the Ontario's Graduate Satisfaction Survey, McCloy, Steffler, and Decock (2017)

find that 85% of university-to-college transfer students are satisfied with their academic

preparation, while 81% of college-to-university transfer students are satisfied with their

academic preparation.[2] Decock and McCloy (2011) reached similar results using 2001-2007 data

from the same survey. However, Blanchard et al (2013) found that college students transferring

to Carleton University felt unprepared for university studies, specifically in "academic literacy,

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[2] The lower rate of satisfaction for college-to-university transfer students will be discussed further in the following section.

research, critical thinking, and analysis" (p. 10). Indeed, there is the perception that college does

not adequately prepare students for university studies (see Skolnick, 2011). Because of the

different type of assignments in university, college-to-university transfer students specifically

find university challenging. One student explains that in college, assignments included, "group

projects all the time. And [in university] it's essays. I haven't written an essay since grade 12

which is four years ago, so I struggled with the essays at first but now I'm graduating. I'm

comfortable" (Gawley & McGowan, 2006, p. 7). Furthermore, different teaching approaches by

university professors can be frustrating for students. One student explained that professors,

> weren't consistent. Every professor was different and some just spoon fed you while
> others would make you work extra hard, which is not fair, because some of us are
> prepared and some aren't. When you go to York, you're like, 'What happened? I'm not
> ready for this. (Mallette, et al, 2015, p. 30)

Most of the research illustrates that college-to-university transfer students feel unprepared for

university assignments, however, as shown by McCloy, Steffler, and Decock (2017), Ontario

college-to-university transfer students still mainly feel well-prepared for their university studies.

Nonetheless, the challenges reported here do affect transfer student experiences and should be

addressed in some manner to ease their transition and maximize academic success.

Student Success

Overall, transfer students perform just as well as direct-entry students (Decock &

McCloy, 2011; Drewes, et al., 2012; Lakehead University, 2012; Stewart & Martinello, 2012;

Shook, Norman & Guyatt, 2016), while Gorman, Phelps, and Carley (2012) found that transfer

students performed better than direct-entry students. There were no significant GPA differences

between direct-entry, university-to-college, and college-to-college students enrolled at OCAD

(Fisher, Nay, Wilson & Wood, 2012). This is unsurprising as Acai and Newton (2015) found that

transfer students do not differ in learning and academic approaches. However, Stewart and Martinello (2012) also highlight that a difficulty in understanding transfer student success is that, "of the few studies that have examined college-to-university transfer in Ontario, all have identified student success differently" (p. 3).

However, college-to-university transfer students seem to find the adjustment into university culture more difficult and may explain why fewer college-to-university transfer students are satisfied with their academic preparation (see above). Cameron (2005) found that college-to-university transfer students typically drop in GPA initially when adjusting to a new program that lasts into the second semester. One student explained that,

> I was so used to getting 'A's... .I really worked on this paper for over a week but it was just not knowing how they were going to mark and what they were looking for-it was frightening to me and I felt that I had worked really hard on this paper and I got a 'C'-I almost fell off my chair. I wanted to die-I am failure-I am not going to do very well here. (p. 32)

Similarly, Gawley and McGowan (2006) found that the GPA of college-to-university transfer students dropped by an average of 2.37 points in their first university year, and an inability to recover to college-level grades after two years. The change in workload and expectations are associated with a lower academic performance. Indeed, making academic expectations known to students is vital, as one student explained that, "I thought I got the expectations, but when I got the marks back [at York] it was a completely different picture. I was like, 'Oh, okay, I didn't'" (Mallette, et al., 2015, p. 31). Some transfer students appreciated university assignments for their straightforward expectations and criteria, while others found the expectations and criteria more difficult to understand; however, students emphasised the need for direct feedback on assignments to understand areas of improvement (Gerhardt, Arai, Carroll & Ackerman, 2012).

However, as Confederation College (2012) found, university-to-college transfer students typically outperform direct-entry students. College-to-university transfer students identified having more free time in university compared to college because there were greater numbers of assignments in college courses, compared to fewer, and heavier weighed, university assignment (Gerhardt, Arai, Carroll & Ackerman, 2012). One student explained that the many assignments in colleges allowed for greater opportunities of success, "whereas in university if you perform poorly on even one assignment "you're done"" (p. 26). Conversely, university students who transferred into a Fast Track college program, did not feel the coursework was more difficult than university, but did admit that assignments were more abundant and required dedicating more time to completing assignments (Durham College, 2016). Most research tends to show that transfer students perform just as well as direct-entry students, although adjusting to different expectations and workloads may reduce transfer student success. Accordingly, college-to-university transfer students should specifically be informed of higher expectations and the university emphasis on scholarly writing assignments.

Job Preparation

Although little research exists, there are indications that students felt as though their transfer program prepared them for the job market. Durham College (2013) found that 88% of Fast Track graduates felt that their programs were either 'extremely helpful' or 'helpful' in locating employment. Graduates from another study (University of Ontario Institute of Technology, 2016) similarly identified "Increased abilities to choose where they practice" and "Increased professional employment opportunities" as the stated outcomes of their transfer programs. Although more research is needed, this research reassures that the expectation to transfer for career-related reasons is achievable.

Sense of Student Identity

A significant challenge for transfer students is navigating their identity as transfer students. Because of their prior educational experience, transfer students do identify as first-year students when starting their new program (Gerhardt, Arai, Carroll & Ackerman, 2012; Blanchard, et al., 2013). As one student explained, "We're not really first year students. We're not really third year students. We're sort of in between" (Gawley & McGowan, 2006, p. 10). Due to this ambiguous sense of self-identity, transfer students generally ignore communications sent to first year students (Blanchard, et al., 2013). As a result of this ambiguity, students report a sense of loneliness and isolation (McGregor, Matsui, Pletneva & Park, 2019; Mallette, et al., 2015). During the transition process, one student remarked that, "I think everyone felt very alone" (Mallette, et al., 2015, p. 25), while another explained that, "transitioning from second to third year was the worst; you had no one to talk to" (Mallette, et al., 2015, p. 25). Cameron (2005) similarly found that students experience this sense of loneliness as they transition to a new program without former peers and pre-established relationship. However, Cameron did find that transfer student loneliness was most acute during the beginning of the transfer experience, but dissipated as relationships gradually formed with new peers.

Furthermore, because of their prior experiences, and some of the conditions mentioned above, transfer students have different responsibilities and characteristics compared to direct-entry students that make it difficult to relate and immerse with direct-entry students. For example, while direct-entry students are more interested in relaxing and social activities (Fisher, Nay, Wilson & Wood, 2012; Kennett & Maki, 2014), transfer students spend greater time working and caring for dependents (Kennett & Maki, 2014; Henderson & McCloy, 2017). These responsibilities may impede time available for social activities that would ease the transition and

reduce the sense of loneliness and isolation (Cameron, 2005). Kennett and Maki (2014) found that whereas direct-entry students participated in open houses, summer orientations, university preparation events, transfer students are more focused on academic opportunities such as introduction seminars. Indeed, transfer students felt that orientations should focus more on academic aspects (Henderson & McCloy, 2017). Instead, in one study, transfer students found the social/school-spirit emphasis in orientations as unappealing (Gawley & McGowen, 2006). These students were frustrated because "I'm not going to cheer for the colour blue" (p. 9) and "It was sort of a silly thing" (p. 9). Blais and Harper (2013) explain that transfer students are "less interested in the high-energy excitement of freshman orientation events and do not want to feel that they are wasting their time" (p 16). These sentiments were reflected in a study by Confederation College (2012) as well. Similarly, Blanchard et al, (2013) report that, transfer students did not attend orientation events at all, and if they had, they typically disliked the experience. They explain that transfer students, "viewed orientation as a primarily social activity whereas they were looking for one that focuses more on academic transition" (p. 11). While orientations are important, transfer students find the social aspect of orientation unappealing in contrast to the merits of academic activities. In addition, considering their numerous responsibilities compared to most direct-entry students, transfer students are less likely to plan time for orientations with a social focus.

Conclusion

Understanding transfer students' perspectives is integral for improving transfer programs while also designing future transfer infrastructure. It is therefore important to consider transfer student characteristics, and their motivations and expectations of transferring. To create more

effective and efficient transfer programs it is also important to examine the types of challenges that transfer students encounter.

Research shows that students overwhelmingly transfer because of career-related considerations—most notably to enhance career advancement opportunities. Although only minimally researched, students also report that their transfer programs prepared them for the job market; which augments the decision to transfer for career-considerations. University students also transfer to college to develop or strengthen practical skills. Although information is unavailable, it is possible that students who transfer to college to develop skills may do so because of career-advancement considerations. Although some research indicates that students are transferring to related and somewhat related programs, students also decide to transfer when their fields of interest change. Students seek other institutional programs to pursue this shifted interest. However, regardless of reason to transfer, geographic location is a central determinant for *where* students will transfer to. Students overwhelmingly transfer to region-local post-secondary institutions. Accordingly, collaboration between inter-regional institutions will greatly contribute to the success of students as students will be able to locate related programming closely available to them.

Research examining students' expectations of the transfer experience, is unfortunately, quite limited. However, research shows that students do have expectations of the different workloads between college and university. These are often pre-conceived notions that college is more hands-on whereas university learning revolves around abstract and theoretical learning. Through high school teachers and college instructors, students also come to expect the university workload to be most arduous. Such expectations may be verified in real-life experiences because students do report receiving lower grades than they received in college. Some research also

shows that students expect clear guidelines for the application process, as well as clear and accessible information related to the transfer process. However, although not always the case, students explain a difficulty in finding such information. Accordingly, it is extremely valuable that post-secondary institutions provide guidelines and information in a clear and accessible manner. Doing so in a centralized location would certainly be the most effective as students primarily use the Internet to search for and acquire transfer information; however, students report feeling frustrated when unable to easily access information.

Students have some expectations about eligible transfer credits and these expectations are typically accurate. Accordingly, students are shown to be good predictors of transfer credit eligibility. That being said, guidelines and information for eligible credits is highly helpful for students who might otherwise become confused about eligible criteria. Providing this support eases the transfer experience and encourages student success.

University-to-college transfer students typically feel academically prepared for their transfer program. However, research reports that college-to-university transfer students feel unprepared for university, specifically as essay writing is the most popular assignment in university. This is unsurprising as these students note that their last essay writing experience was in high school. Making such expectations known to college-to-university transfer students may alleviate the shock of transitioning to essay-based coursework, while also providing foresight to prepare for the assignment shift. However, research generally finds that all transfer students are equally successful compared to direct-entry students, and some research even shows that transfer students outperform direct-entry students. The most significant consideration here would be the shock that college-to-university transfer students experience; however, this might be mitigated with adequate foresight, awareness, and preparation.

Lastly, transfer students do not identify typically as 'first-year students' and as a result transfer students may ignore valuable communication and information directed to first-year students. Accordingly, communication specifically directed to transfer students might reduce any communication gaps. Orientations that centre upon academic preparation and information are also mainly used by transfer students who otherwise find the social aspect of freshman orientations as irrelevant or quite frankly a waste of time. Transfer students typically have external responsibilities which require attention; consequently, providing information in a clear manner reduces the amount of time transfer students must dedicate in sifting through communication.

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