

**Pathways and Barriers to Art and Design Undergraduate Education for Students
with Previous College and University Experience**
Ontario College of Art and Design University (OCAD U)

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Outline of the Study

This study investigated “the transition needs and experiences of current OCAD U students from two distinct types of educational backgrounds: those with previous undergraduate coursework and those with prior college experience. The study used a mixed method approach, both qualitative (analysis of semi-structured interviews with students from both cohorts) and quantitative (analysis of National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) data comparing college transfer students, university transfer students and students who came directly from high school). The study found some significant differences in the expectations, experiences and needs of students from different educational backgrounds leading to a series of recommendations to better facilitate student mobility and enhance the quality of experience.” (report abstract)

The quantitative analysis involved the identification of respondents who self-reported prior post secondary experience using OCAD University’s results in the 2011 NSSE. Using this data, “the study explored levels of engagement and satisfaction, as well as average grades and time-to-completion for students with previous university and college experience relative to students with only high school backgrounds”. (pp. 6-7)

Qualitative data was collected through interviews of 39 OCADU students, 21 having prior university undergraduate experience (cohort A) and 18 having completed college coursework (cohort B). The cohort A sample was 45% male, a mean age of 27 years, 85% studying full-time, and receiving between .5 and 6.5 transfer credits. The cohort B sample was 22% male, mean age of 23, 89% studying full-time, and receiving between 1 and 7.5 transfer credits. (p. 7)

While this study was limited to OCAD U students, the authors anticipate that the findings could apply more broadly to transfer pathways among other studio-based fine and applied arts programs.

Quantitative Results and Findings

First Year Students: The study found that direct and college entries had lower first year averages than those with prior university experience (70.7% for high school, 69.7% for college and 72.8% for university. (P. 9) There was no significant difference between the three groups on retention to the second year (91% of direct entries, 89% of college entries and 87.5% of university entrants returned to second year). The study also notes:

- “High school entrants and university entrants were less likely than college entrants to believe that OCAD U contributed to their ability to write clearly and effectively and their ability to analyze quantitative problems.” (p. 9)

- Transfer students were less likely than direct entry students “to indicate that reducing class size most needs to be addressed by the institution” (p. 9)
- College transfer students were less likely than other cohorts “to indicate that shifting the mix of lectures, seminars, and tutorials most needs to be addressed”. (p. 9)
- Direct entries and college transfer students were more likely than university transfers to “experience a sense of community in study groups”. (p. 9)

Senior Students: The senior year student analysis observed that direct entries spent more time relaxing and socializing and were less likely to participate in class than transfer students. The study found no significant difference in their overall senior year average (74.5% for direct entrants, 75.1% for college transfer students, and 75.9% for university transfers). (p. 10)

The researchers conclude that the “intake of students with previous post-secondary experiences appears to add to the rich and unique atmosphere of academics, practitioners and researchers on the campus”. (p. 10)

Qualitative Results and Findings

Factors Influencing the Transfer Decision: Both the university and college respondents chose their first post secondary institution based on location. University program choices, however, tended to reflect “uncertainty about ... educational direction” while college choices were purposefully intended “to prepare ... for entry into OCAD U”. (p. 11)

University and college transfer students’ choices of transfer institution were motivated by different pressures and considerations. University transfers cited “personal/financial/medical” motivations and “unhappiness with their previous program” as well as a desire “to be part of a program with greater focus on art and creativity”. The choice was also driven by the “applied” nature of the programs and the anticipated greater employment benefits. (p. 11) Also, the choice of institution “was made without much attachment to transfer of credits” that might be granted for prior study. (p. 14)

The study found that college transfers tended to be attracted specifically to OCAD U and its nature, location, reputation, specializations, faculty, studio-based environment and like-minded peers. (pp. 11-12)

Admissions and Transfer Process Experience: College and university transfers tend to have come with some significantly different needs, expectations and knowledge and, yet, both cohorts are treated the same by the university. (p. 19) Typically, “coming from a program that did not have an art and design or studio focus”, university transfers anticipated being awarded fewer transfer credits and spending longer to complete their degrees than transfers from college. 87% of college transfers, however, had Liberal Arts and Science and Art or Design studio credits.

The study found that some university transfers characterized the transfer as “easy” but faced difficulties such as “locating transfer credit information”, “communicating with the university about transfers of credits”, accepting the “time consuming nature of the transfer credit process”, and “acquiring information such as course descriptions, syllabi”. (p. 13) Less than half of the university transfers received the anticipated transfer credits: the credit expectations of close to 60% of college transfers were not met. The study found that “many students lack a basic understanding about their own programs, ... are often unable to see their degree programs in totality and therefore cannot see where previously taken courses may fulfill ... requirements”. (p. 17) The report suggests that the “university suffers from communications gaps” from a practical transfer student perspective. “Information is embedded in layers of university policy” and “students do not understand transfer of credit rules, policies and opportunities as a result”. (p. 18) “The transfer credit process is labour intensive, requires too much information gathering..., and remains subjective in many cases.” In addition, “communication of transfer credit results takes too much time”. (p. 18)

Transfer students perceived that there was unnecessary duplication in a number of required courses (University transfers found overlap in first year writing, introduction to earth sciences, design processes, research methods, English and art history while college transfers noted significant duplication in life drawing, art history, sculpture, painting studio, and non-specific liberal studies).

While some transfer students found the portfolio entry requirement to be “feared and anxiety producing”, the misgivings voiced after the process related to the length of time that student artwork was held and the “length of time spent in limbo waiting for an answer”. (p. 13)

Information was generally found through the university’s, and the Ontario University Application Centre’s (OUAC) websites. 25% received help from university staff and were generally happy with that assistance. (p. 13) Few transfer students participated in university recruiting and information sessions.

Students recommended improvements in the transfer process including, granting more credits, improving communications and information about the transfer process and fees, adopting more standardized course descriptions, improving methods whereby students are informed of their credit transfer eligibility and making the process more expedient to reduce anxiety and frustration. (p. 14)

Academic and Social Transition: Virtually all transfer students indicated that they were made to feel welcome and highlighted orientation, e-mail updates, friendly staff and faculty and small classes as contributing to their satisfaction with their transition. They found information about available services through promotional materials, on-line notifications, website announcements and through faculty, academic advisors and peers. They recommended instituting better ways of connecting with other mature students, improving the fit of social activities with their interests and providing social and studio space. (p. 15)

While university transfers reported that their OCAD U studies were “equal to or easier than their former universities”, college transfers reported greater difficulty – particularly where abstract course content was involved.

While university transfers tended to see the transfer process as “just requir[ing] adjustment”, many recommended reducing the course load and adding supports such as “more social space, more studio/work space, more academic advising and more information about the academic expectations”. (p. 14) College transfers recommended the addition of supports such as “studio space, ... student residences, ... increased guidance from professors, preparatory classes the summer before they started... and peer mentorship”. (pp. 14-15)

Recommendations

Based on the findings, this study presents a number of recommendations for the enhancement of the transfer process. These are summarised as:

1. “OCAD U should attempt to re-assess its many different programs with facilitating transfers of credit in mind as one of its criteria for clarity and consistency” including the use of “course titles and descriptions that are simple, clear and similar to other institutions, when possible”. (p. 18)
2. “Make the website user-based, graphic and less reliant on written policies ... with carefully prioritized data that may have policies embedded for further information” and “designed around helping students choose the right classes” and “understand programs”. (p. 18)
3. “Standard block agreements need to be forged between copasetic programs, core courses, such as basic research methods and introductory English, need to be more often automatically granted credits, and learning outcomes and experiences rather than course outlines, descriptions and titles need to form the back bone of these prearranged transfers”. (p. 18)
4. “Digitize the entire [admission and transfer] process with workflow mapping, status reports and progress tracking to help those [university staff involved] in the process to manage their time and efficiency”. (p. 19)
5. “Orientation, messaging and even the transfer of credit assessment process itself may need to be redesigned into two separate processes to fit the very different needs“ of university and college transfers. (p. 19)