

# **Engaging Transfer Students: Institutional Support, Challenges, and Recommendations**

University of Colorado Boulder  
Academic Futures White Paper

Lindsay Roberts and Megan E. Welsh  
With input from members of the Transfer Student Working Group

## **Abstract**

Much research has been conducted on transfer students and their transition between institutions. Transfer students arriving to a new institution may be disadvantaged in engaging with their new campus and its resources compared to their first-time college peers, negatively impacting students' success. This white paper raises the question of where transfer students experience barriers to academic success and belonging at CU Boulder and prompts discussion about what actions can be taken to support students as they face these challenges. Challenges of the transfer student transition and strategies for supporting these students are examined through higher education scholarship on transfer students' social and academic engagement. Findings indicate there is a gap in awareness of transfer student needs among faculty and staff working in higher education and suggest opportunities for cross-institutional and intra-institutional collaboration to meet the needs of transfer students.

## **Literature**

Transfer student transitions between institutions are challenging and have been studied for decades to better understand student behavior and institutional impacts on students. The body of literature linking persistence and retention to student social and academic engagement in higher education is vast, with early work written by Tinto (1975, 2012) and Pascarella and Terenzini (1980, 1983). Academic and social engagement have been shown to be a strong predictive factor in transfer students' retention and persistence (Pascarella, et. al., 1986; Bers and Smith, 1991). A critical reading of the literature on transfer student retention and persistence found that early researchers focused on individual predictive factors (race, socioeconomic status, geography) instead of placing an emphasis on institutional barriers that may impact student retention (Tinto, 1975, p. 111; Tinto, 2012, p. vii; D'Amico, et al, 2014; Swail, 2003).

A lack of academic and social engagement is sometimes thought to be connected to transfer shock and transitional challenges for transfer students. Transfer shock, a well-documented, but little understood occurrence in which a student's GPA decreases after transferring, can be a discouraging experience for students as they transition to their new institution (Hagedorn et. al., 2008; Cutright, 2011, D'Amico, et. al., 2014; Hill, 1965; Rhine, Milligan, & Nelson, 2000; McGuire & Belchier, 2013). Townsend & Wilson (2009) describe how transfer students can be understood to have two first year experiences: the first as they entered their community college and the second as they adjusted to the university to which they transferred. In addition to the size of the university setting, researchers note that "[t]ransfer students are less involved in campus clubs, service-learning, research projects with faculty, and other activities that constitute student engagement" (Cutright, 2011, p. 4; Townsend and Wilson, 2009, p. 405).

Early research viewed some individuals as outliers, rather than questioning whether college systems were constructed to incorporate increasingly diverse student bodies, including transfer students (Tinto,

1975, p. 117). Recent research highlights changes to institutional programming or processes so that they contribute positively to students' academic and social engagement at the receiving institution (Swaile, 2003). There is disagreement, however, about which factors are most important for different student groups. For instance, academic engagement has been shown to be more important than social engagement for students in some studies involving underrepresented groups (Crisp and Nunez, 2014, p. 308; Lester, Leonard, and Mathias, 2013; Townsend and Wilson, 2009; Townsend and Wilson, 2006), calling into question whether academic and social engagement factors are consistent across student demographics (Tierney & Sablan, 2014; Crisp and Nunez, 2014). For example, among underrepresented minority students, study groups and faculty interaction were not found to contribute positively for transfer, though they are positively associated with transfer for White students and have long been associated as positive indicators of academic engagement (Crisp and Nunez, 2014, p. 308). This example provides support for criticism of early research and models which focused on describing and predicting the experience of white, middle-class students (Tierney & Sablan, 2014).

The typically larger class sizes and the awareness of pre-established social and academic networks of continuing university students may function as barriers that transfer students need to overcome. Yet, research suggests academic and social engagement can be fostered in a multitude of ways, including transfer student-specific orientations and workshops, engaging student-led organizations to help transfer students network, supporting cohort models, and collaborating across student services (Lanaan, Starobin, Eggleston, 2010, p. 196; Deil-Amen, 2011, p. 69; D'Amico et al, 2014, p. 383). Family and community support have been shown to benefit students' academic engagement, while studying with peers is positively associated with social engagement (D'Amico et al, 2014, p. 383, p. 386; Lester, Leonard, and Mathias, 2013). Scholars advocate creating personalized pathways for transfer students (Poisel and Joseph, 2011; Still, 1990). Proposed solutions include cross-institutional relationships, communication, and planning to ease transitions from two-year to four-year academic institutions (Staines, 1996; Still, 1990; McCallister, Gregor, & Joyner, 2015).

### **Sample Unit on Campus: Academic Libraries**

Some of these strategies can be applied to academic libraries. More than 50 recent studies from the Assessment in Action project suggest that academic libraries contribute to student success and retention (Association of College & Research Libraries, 2017). Oliveira (2017) stated that the main factors associated with academic libraries that are positively correlated to student retention are "library instruction; spaces which provide social interaction and learning; and general materials' use" (p. 310). Library instruction may also lessen library anxiety, a well-documented phenomena experienced by college students which necessitates understanding and intervention from libraries in order to engage students in a successful library experience (Jiao and Onwuegbuzie, 1997, p. 385). Mellon (1986) and Bostick (1992) found a significant number of students experience feelings of fear and inadequacy relating to library research, while Mellon also identified library instruction sessions considerably reduced library anxiety. Staines (1996) concluded that library instruction "differ[s] extensively in instructional design" from two-year to four-year schools which could make the transition between institutions difficult for transfer students. An Ohio study (see Phillips & Atwood, 2010) examined services two-year and four-year libraries offered to transfer students, revealing a gap in awareness of transfer student needs and lack of recognition of the role libraries can play in transfer students' successful transitions. Others have found that when students do not receive library instruction they are at a disadvantage (Cox & Johnson, 1992). Similar unit-specific research can be found for student services and academic units across campus.

## Conclusion

Reviewing trends in educational enrollment and educational equity suggest institutions must continue to work to meet the needs of transfer students, nontraditional students, and students from diverse backgrounds. It is important to consider that, according to 2016 Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) data, two-year institutions serve greater numbers of non-White students and are much more likely to have less stringent admissions policies than their four-year counterparts (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017, p. 243, 250). As a recent Department of Education report noted, in spite of increases in educational attainment for underrepresented students in recent decades, participation of students of color “decreases at multiple points across the higher education pipeline” (Office of Planning, Evaluation, and Policy Development, 2016, p. 2). Ensuring that students from diverse backgrounds have access and smooth transitions from community colleges to four-year institutions is especially important for countering inequities across higher education.

## Current Actions

Various stakeholders across CU Boulder are beginning to address the challenges faced by transfer students. These are a few of the groups and programs of which the authors are aware.

- **Transfer Student Working Group:** A recently developed group of faculty and staff from departments across campus including New Student & Family Programs, Admissions, Cultural Unity and Engagement Center, and more. The group examines questions about who the CU transfer population consists of and why they transfer to and from CU. Additionally the group asks how members can support transfer students within their “realms of influence.”
- **Creating Academic Pathways in STEM (CAPS) Grant:** A National Science Foundation (NSF) grant promoting inter-institutional collaboration across two and four-year institutions in Colorado. Goals of the project include “increas[ing] the number of students, and the quality of preparation, from historically underrepresented populations in the STEM field” and “creat[ing] effective partnerships with 2-year colleges and 4-year universities” (Miller, 2017).
- **Non-traditional Student Organization (NTSO):** The NTSO supports the social and academic needs of non-traditional students, including transfer students, at CU. It “is a community of non-traditional students providing support for each other, both academically and professionally, and to make the transition back into school easier for new adult students” (Non-Traditional Student Organization, unpublished report, 2017).
- **Transfer Student Survey and** \_\_\_\_\_

are navigating the institution easily. In fact, in a survey sponsored by the Non-Traditional Student Organization (which includes Transfer Students), respondents reported wanting to learn how to navigate campus systems, such as the library, dining, and advising, on campus (Non-Traditional Student Organization, unpublished report, 2017).

- **Welcome transfer students.** Read research that suggests ways of meeting the needs of minority and low-income transfer students. Consider hosting a welcome activity for transfer students in your department or participating in transfer student orientations. Explore whether your department could meet transfer student needs by sending a welcome email to transfer students or creating a transfer student guide for your department or unit (Tag, 2004). Townsend and Wilson (2009) recommend that two-year and four-year staff and faculty promote discipline-specific clubs and professional organizations on campus as well as talk about undergraduate research opportunities with faculty.
- **Be informed and collect more complete data.** Knowing how many institutions students have attended before arriving, why students choose to attend CU, and where students go after they leave CU can help paint a fuller picture of transfer student needs. Find data on how many transfer students are arriving to your department or transferring from your department. Which local schools are sending and receiving the most transfer students? Could your department reach out to staff at those institutions to form partnerships? Dialogue across two and four-year institutions may ease transfer students' transitions (Staines, 1996; Phillips and Atwood, 2010). Beyond dialogue, consider field trips for transfer students or co-curriculum planning sessions with local two-year or four-year institutions.
- **Build partnerships.** Consider CU Boulder's participation in partnerships with local and regional institutions, such as the existing [Colorado Challenge](#) program that helps with college counseling and adjustment to college life.
- **Develop and utilize a robust peer mentoring program.** These programs have been shown to be beneficial for the well-being and retention of underrepresented students and transfer students (Shotton, 2007; Office of Planning, Evaluation, and Policy Development, 2016, p. 40; Flaga, 2006).
- **Participate in and honor statewide articulation agreements.** Existing state programs like [Guaranteed Transfer Pathways](#), [Transfer Degrees](#), and [Degree Within Reach](#) are intended to facilitate smoother transitions for students. Making sure CU Boulder academic units are aware of and align curriculum with these existing programs to ensure that students get full benefits from these partnerships.
- **Create a centralized office for Transfer Student Admissions,** similar to University of Colorado Denver, that can help students navigate the transfer admissions process and early days on campus from one office.
- **Improve processes and speed around transfer credit approvals at CU Boulder.** In addition to cooperation with state transfer credit programs, consider portfolios, competency-based credit, and exams that offer credit can also support student transitions (Yackey, 2016).

## [References](#)



