

One Size Does Not Fit All: Tailoring Orientation Services to Mid-Year Transfer Students

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This article describes the unique adjustment challenges facing mid-year transfer students so that administrators and orientation planners can tailor programs and services to better address the needs of those students, leading to improved persistence and graduation rates. This research is based on the findings produced from two studies which detail different aspects of the unique adjustment experienced by mid-year transfer students at two different institutions. Specifically, this article addresses a gap in the scholarly literature pertaining to those aspects of adjustment that can be addressed in orientations for mid-year transfer students.

Numerous publications have made the argument that transfer students are often overlooked in scholarly literature and higher education research. Illustrating this concern, Jacobs (2004) titled her book on transfer students, *"The College Transfer Student in America: The Forgotten Student."* According to Wawrzynski and Sedlack, (2003) the growth in research on transfer students has been slower than the pace of transfer students attending four-year campuses. Research on transfer students is vital since IPEDS (2007) data indicate that 43% of all post-secondary students begin their education at community colleges (AAC, 2010). The National Center for Educational Statistics reported in 2007 that 60% of students graduating with a baccalaureate degree from four-year institutions began their education at different institutions. With a growing reliance on baccalaureate-level education for occupational attainment (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2005; Wellman, 2002), the function of transferring has been, and will continue to be, a strong, viable pathway for many students.

Research on transfer students has focused mostly on outcomes (grade point average, persistence, and graduation rates) rather than on the process of transferring and the adjustment process as students move between two institutions (Townsend, 2008). Despite the lack of attention given to this population, there have been a few notable advances in the study of transfer students. For instance, in 2002 the creation of the annual National Institute for the Study of Transfer Students led to the establishment of the Association for the Study of Transfer Students in 2009 (NISTS, 2010). These advances have led to a number of research studies documenting the experiences of students moving between higher education

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institutions. Furthermore, the last 10 years have produced a small increase in books, monograph chapters, and journal articles focusing specifically on transfer students' needs, such as academic advising and orientation programs for transfer students (Jacobs & Marling, 2010).

Despite this progress, one subpopulation of transfer students that has still largely been forgotten is students who transfer from a two-year institution to a four-year institution in the middle of an academic year. To date, little research has focused on exploring the experiences and unique challenges faced by this sizeable population. According to Britt and Hirt (1999), who pioneered a research study on mid-year transfer students, universities and colleges increasingly admit mid-year transfer students as an enrollment management strategy to supplement declines after fall enrollment due to December graduation or natural student departure.

Mid-year transfer students account for a sizeable portion of the transfer population at some institutions. Tinto (1993) reported that nearly 77% of all first-time entrants began in the fall semester, which leaves 23% starting at irregular times, such as mid-year or during a summer session. According to Peska (2009), the percentage of mid-year transfer entrants in the 2007–2008 academic year at his research site (a large, public four-year Midwestern university) was 24.4% ($n = 436$) of the annual transfer rate of community college students ($n = 1,781$) to that institution. Additionally, Hoover (2010) reported that the University of Minnesota - Twin Cities admitted 900 transfer students mid-year, representing 33% of the university's annual transfer student population.

The timing of a student's transfer is a variable that needs to be explored because it may influence the adjustment of those students. Prior research has linked adjustment to a sense of belonging and integration into the university, which are known predictors of student persistence and success (Astin, 1993; Tinto, 1993). Exploring the factors that lead to such integration is necessary to determine how to improve or increase persistence and graduation rates. This is especially salient since approximately 50% of all students enrolling in higher education end up leaving (Braxton, Hirschy, & McClendon, 2004). According to Berkner, He, and Cataldi (2002, p. 14), among the community college students who intended to transfer and actually transferred to a four-year institution, only 36% earned a bachelor's degree within six years of starting at community college. This higher rate of attrition and non-completion reflects the higher rates of part-time attendance and discontinuous enrollment of community college students.

As a means of reducing attrition and enhancing student retention, many campuses offer orientation and first-year programs and services (e.g., welcome weeks, one-day or overnight orientation programs, first-year seminars, common reading experiences) which help students adjust to life at the institution (Barefoot, 2000; Robinson, Burns, & Gaw, 1996). Orientation programs are necessary in the initial adjustment period and are commonly described as the first retention efforts to keep students at institutions (Noel, Levitz, Saluri, & Associates, 1986). Yet, institutions have struggled with how to best adapt orientation services to be transfer-specific and support the diverse population of individuals who transfer between two-year and four-year institutions (Ward-Roof & Cawthon, 2004).

Hoover (2010) suggested that orientation planners must take several considerations into planning transfer-specific orientation programs to ensure their success.

Community college transfer students perceive orientation services as largely geared for freshmen directly admitted from high school (Nowak, 2004; Townsend, 2008; Townsend & Wilson, 2006). A one-size-fits-all approach may leave some transfer students feeling that they are “second class citizens” on college campuses when they are encouraged to participate in orientations programs and welcome week activities geared primarily for freshmen (Gumm, 2006; Townsend & Wilson, 2006).

According to Mack (2010), most institutions participating in the National Orientation Director's Association Databank in 2007–2008 reported that approximately 70% of their transfer students attended an orientation program of some kind. Hoover (2010) provided numerous examples and suggestions of transfer-specific orientation programs, transfer seminars, transfer mentorship programs, and specific transfer publications; yet, it is speculated that most of these services are offered in the fall when the largest percentage of transfer students enter. Although there is little empirical evidence on mid-year transfer students, it is clear that there are relatively few services offered mid-year, and they often are not specifically tailored to the unique issues faced by mid-year transfer students (Britt & Hirt, 1999).

Review of Literature on Mid-Year Transfer Student Adjustment

Tinto stated, “Persistence to college requires individuals to adjust, both socially and intellectually, to the new and sometimes quite strange world of college” (1993, p. 45). As transfer students move between institutions, they likely will experience a variety of academic, social, and personal adjustment challenges (Berger & Malaney, 2003; Britt & Hirt, 1999; Cejda, 1994, 1997; Diaz, 1992; Graham & Hughes, 1994; Hill, 1965; House 1989; Keeley & House, 1993; Laanan, 1996, 1998, 2001, 2004; Nowak, 2004; Owens, 2009; Richie, 2004; Townsend, 1993, 1995, 2008; Townsend & Wilson, 2006). Research is typically based on fall transfer students and largely on the transfer process of community college students to four-year institutions. Adjustment challenges include “transfer shock,” (i.e., experiencing a dip in grade point average in the first semester after transfer), making friends, feeling isolated, fitting in, navigating the university, accessing university resources, meeting faculty expectations, and adapting to differences in teaching styles (e.g., lecture style, small-group discussion). In numerous studies, transfer students have communicated their perception that the four-year university cares more about the adjustment of direct-admit freshmen (Peska, 2009; Britt & Hirt, 1999; Nowak, 2004; Townsend & Wilson, 2006). In acknowledging that transfer students receive less attention than entrants directly from high school, transfer students who enter mid-year may be further marginalized in comparison with their fall transfer counterparts.

Specifically exploring mid-year transfer student adjustment, Britt and Hirt

(1999) conducted focus group interviews with 25 mid-year community college transfer students seven weeks after their transition to a large, mid-Atlantic university in spring 1996. In addition, they interviewed 16 staff members who directly served mid-year transfer students. Their study revealed 12 sub-themes of academic, personal, and social adjustment challenges faced by this population. They reported that 65% of statements were negatively oriented (challenging adjustment) with 20% positively oriented (promoting adjustment). They also found that the majority of adjustment-related statements were categorized as personal (49%) with academic issues accounting for 33% and social challenges accounting for 18%.

The primary academic adjustment discovered was that mid-year transfer students were impeded by a lack of academic advising during the transition. Many statements referenced that mid-year transfer students were unaware of advising offered or how to connect with advisors. This lack of advising negatively impeded these students' adjustment (Britt & Hirt, 1999).

The most prevalent social adjustment Britt and Hirt (1999) reported was difficulty in meeting and making friends with other students. Mid-year transfer students resolved many academic and personal adjustment challenges, but seven weeks after transferring, many still struggled to make friends and fit into the social environment. Assisting students in developing social connections with their peers is an outcome or goal of most orientation programs. However, according to Britt and Hirt (1999), mid-year transfer students perceived that there was little institutional support provided to enhance their adjustment to the social environment.

Many adjustment challenges Britt and Hirt (1999) discovered were in the category of personal adjustment. Mid-year transfer students perceived that a lack of information hindered their ability to learn about and use key university services such as housing, orientation, and financial aid. As one mid-year student described, "I got here Sunday, before the first day of class. I wasn't registered. It was my first time in the town. I was lost" (Britt & Hirt, 1999, p. 204).

Other personal adjustments experienced by mid-year transfer students included difficulty with financial aid deadlines and applying for fall term housing (Britt & Hirt, 1999). Mid-year transfer students struggled with the application process because it started a couple weeks after they entered the university. This allowed very little time to establish meaningful connections with roommates to make future housing decisions. The primary financial aid issue brought to light by Britt and Hirt reflected difficulty transferring aid and meeting the necessary time parameters to apply for institutional aid. Mid-year transfer students discovered that for access to local scholarships and grants, they would've needed to apply nearly 10 months prior because local aid was often available on a first come, first served basis.

Overall, Britt and Hirt found that mid-year transfer students struggled with meeting people or making friends, acquiring financial aid grants and loans, conferring with academic advisors, securing housing for the following academic year, and accessing transitional resources (1999). Many facets of these challenges

were uniquely related to students entering mid-year.

Current Study

Peska (2009) conducted a mixed method comparative study that explored adjustment between fall 2008 and mid-year 2009 community college transfer students at one large, public, Midwestern university. The first phase collected data via an online survey to understand the adjustment of community college transfer students, producing 353 useable responses. Responses were analyzed and used to guide the qualitative inquiry process. One noteworthy finding from the quantitative data collected was that demographically, the mid-year transfer students were considerably more diverse (e.g., non-White, male, commuters, part-time attendees) than the fall transfer students (Peska, 2009). This is an important finding since the demographic variables associated with mid-year transfer students in prior research were identified as persistence risk factors (Horn, 1996; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). After controlling for demographic data, mid-year transfer students were found to have a more difficult social adjustment and were less aware of resources to aid in their adjustment process (Peska, 2009).

To supplement the quantitative findings, focus groups were conducted with survey participants. Three focus groups were held each semester, with the fall 2008 cohort having 12 participants and the spring 2009 cohort having 10 participants. Data from these focus groups produced 569 statements that were analyzed using a cluster coding technique (Miles & Huberman, 1994) and 31 clusters—12 within the social adjustment category, 8 within the academic adjustment category, and 11 within the personal adjustment category. Closely resembling Britt and Hirt's (1999) study, Peska (2009) discovered that statements ($n = 569$) were 18% positively-oriented (promoting adjustment), 80% negatively-oriented (challenging adjustment), and 2% without direction.

In contrast to Britt and Hirt's (1999) finding that personal adjustment issues were most frequently reported by mid-year transfers, Peska (2009) indicated that the largest percentage of statements (47%) were categorized as social adjustment concerns, while both academic and personal adjustment categories each accounted for approximately 26.5% of the total statements. The majority of social adjustment statements formed three subthemes: orientation services, pre-existing social networks, and activities geared toward freshmen.

Fall community college transfer students reported feeling marginalized because they perceived that orientation services were geared largely towards freshmen (Peska, 2009). This finding is congruent with the transfer student adjustment literature. Mid-year transfer students' experiences with orientation services were largely unhelpful in developing social connections with peers. A few mid-year transfer students expressed that the material they were given was outdated and designed primarily for fall transfer students. At the research site, an organizational fair was held to highlight clubs and organizations which mid-year transfer students were encouraged to attend. One student shared that she was discouraged in finding a club or organization because new member recruitment began in September.

Mid-year transfer students perceived that their social transition would have been easier had they transferred in the fall when there were numerous activities and resources designed to aid their adjustment (Peska, 2009).

Fall and mid-year community college transfer students reported similar challenges in their academic adjustment. Both cohorts perceived faculty expectations to be higher and experienced an increase in workload (homework and reading) than at their community colleges. Another academic adjustment for both fall and mid-year transfers was learning in a lecture format course. The only unique academic adjustment presented by mid-year community college transfer students was difficulty with initial course registration due to the short amount of time between fall and spring semesters to have transcripts sent and evaluated. Some students experienced difficulty during the first week of classes because they could not register until their prior semester's transcripts were processed. This hindered mid-year transfer students' ability to take certain courses and caused a great deal of stress as part of their transition (Peska, 2009).

According to Peska (2009), the most difficult personal adjustments for mid-year transfer students were accessing information, securing employment, and transitioning to technology used in classroom learning. Both fall and mid-year cohorts reported that a lack of information hindered their adjustment, with the primary difference between the type of information being sought (Peska, 2009). Fall transfer students indicated that they wanted more information regarding campus resources (e.g., transportation, activities for transfer students), whereas mid-year transfer students sought information about the community (e.g., movie theaters, work-out facilities, shopping districts).

Peska (2009) reported a personal adjustment category difference between mid-year and fall transfer students with regards to campus employment. While mid-year transfers perceived campus employment as a method of promoting their adjustment, fall transfer students perceived campus employment as hindering their time and ability to socially interact with new friends. It is plausible that mid-year transfer students viewed employment, especially campus employment, as a means to get involved and to connect with peers, whereas fall transfer students had ample opportunities for connecting with peers and perceived employment as a hindrance.

Peska's (2009) study also revealed that some mid-year transfer students experienced a unique adjustment challenge compared to fall transfer students around technology usage. Primarily, software used to support in-class teaching was not adequately covered by faculty, and mid-year transfer students perceived that other classmates knew how to use the technology. For instance, when referring to a particular psychology software program, one mid-year transfer student stated, "All the kids here already knew how to use it, and it is very in-depth. I had no clue, and I couldn't really use the program" (Peska, 2009; p. 158).

Summary of Results

Based on research by Britt and Hirt (1999) and Peska (2009), it is clear that mid-year community college transfer students do experience adjustment

challenges that are specific to the semester when they transferred. Both studies were exploratory in nature, opening a window into the adjustment experienced by mid-year community college transfer students. It is important to note that both of these studies were limited to single institutions and to one point in time.

The results from both studies confirm that mid-year transfer students expressed difficulty establishing social relationships, managing personal adjustments such as securing housing for the fall semester, and joining social organizations. Furthermore, both studies revealed a lack of orientation services for mid-year community college transfer students, and that the orientation programs offered did not address the unique challenges faced by these students in their transition.

The findings from these studies bring to light the unique challenges faced by some mid-year transfer students, which potentially may be useful in designing mid-year transfer orientation programs. Tailoring orientation to match the unique needs and challenges of mid-year transfer students may result in improving the persistence rates of this population of students. Institutional Research (Director of Institutional Research at the research site, personal communication, 2010) indicated that the first-year persistence rate of the fall 2008 community college transfer student population (83.1%) was 6% higher than the mid-year 2009 community college at 77.1%. Any improvement in the retention of mid-year transfers would be applauded by college and university administrators nationwide.

Considerations for Mid-Year Transfer Student Orientation

Just as research indicates that mid-year transfer students experience unique challenges adjusting to life at four-year institutions, it can be assumed that there are unique challenges to hosting mid-year transfer orientation programs. It may be difficult to staff a quality orientation session due to the fact that fall term classes are in session, limiting the availability of student staff and academic advisors who are likely to be assisting current students with spring registration. Yet, professionals planning an orientation session for mid-year transfer students should consider the following advice based on the research presented:

Help mid-year transfer students socially connect with other students. As Britt and Hirt (1999) and Peska (2009) indicated, mid-year transfer students reported difficulty connecting with peers and a desire to meet other transfer students with shared experiences. Moore (1981) suggested the important role that fall and mid-year transfer orientation activities can play in helping transfer students connect with each other. Designing opportunities for students to interact may promote positive adjustment as they transition. What may not work for fall transfer student orientation might work for mid-year entrants. Opportunities for overnight orientation programs could be useful for this population so that they can develop connections with other students in November or December before their spring term start date. Additionally, educating and training student leaders (e.g., resident assistants, campus organization officers) about the more difficult mid-year social transition can help them plan activities to foster social interaction between transfer

and continuing students.

Produce specific mid-year transfer student literature. Mid-year transfer students expressed a sense of marginalization because they thought that information provided to them was designed for fall transfer students or for incoming freshmen. Intentionally creating support resources (e.g., brochures, flyers, handouts) targeted specifically for mid-year transfer students may give the impression that the institution is concerned with their transition to campus. The creation of new resources would also provide opportunities to address specific mid-year transfer concerns. For example, a brochure given at orientation could highlight both campus and community resources available to newcomers. Providing this information may increase awareness of opportunities on campus or within the community, leading to smoother social and personal adjustment.

Highlight campus employment opportunities. With fewer activities and events taking place at the start of the spring term, mid-year transfers disclosed that campus employment was viewed as something that would promote their successful adjustment into the university community (Peska, 2009). Mid-year orientation services could emphasize employment opportunities that might be available at the start of the spring term. Furthermore, this information could be shared with campus partners to encourage hiring new mid-year transfer students to successfully aid in their adjustment. Many departments have openings mid-year due to graduation or natural attrition, and they may be interested in partnering with orientation professionals to inform new mid-year transfer students of these positions during their orientation. Incorporating campus employment opportunities within orientation for mid-year transfer students could potentially alleviate challenges for both the student and campus partners who need to find student employees.

Prepare students for academic transition. Preparing students for the differences they will experience in the classroom is an essential component of most orientation programs. Acknowledging the specific differences regarding the population of incoming students and the timing of their transition is also important. Mid-year transfers have reported difficulty connecting with academic advising staff members after they enter (Britt & Hirt, 1999). This topic can be addressed in orientation programs to ensure that students have accurate advisor contact information as well as maps and directions on how to find them. In addition to advising, informing mid-year transfer students of academic adjustment challenges they may face may be helpful. Sharing the protocol for transcript evaluation and course registration is extremely important for mid-year transfer students due to the short period of time between the fall and spring terms. Informing them in advance of such challenges may help them resolve issues in advance by working with the two institutions to ensure that credit was transferred and received.

Conclusion

Transferring mid-year can be as harsh as the weather conditions typically associated with the month of January. Research indicates that students who transfer mid-year experience a set of social, academic, and personal adjustment challenges that are uniquely different than those experienced by fall transfer students. More research is needed on this population because on a number of campuses, mid-year transfers make up 25% or more of the annual transfer student population. Tailoring orientation services for this distinct population of students may aid in their transition and strengthen their persistence rates. This is important because institutional research data (Director of Institutional Research at the research site, personal communication, 2010) revealed that 6% fewer of mid-year transfer students persisted in higher education than fall transfer students. This may be attributed to entering during a time when there are generally fewer resources available to assist new students in the adjustment process. Specializing orientation for these students is the first step to helping them successfully adjust and begin their transfer experience.

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