

# Advising and Orienting Transfer Students: A Two-Pronged Approach to Improving Transitions

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*A major research university recently redesigned the new transfer student orientation program to provide more one-on-one attention to incoming transfer students. Concurrently, a new student seminar course specifically for transfer students was being implemented. These combined efforts were submitted to the National Academic Advising Association (NACADA) as a best practice for new transfer students and have yielded positive results in relation to students' connection to campus and satisfaction with orientation/advising. Additionally, analysis of both grade point average and first semester retention of students enrolled in the new transfer student advising seminar have been higher than those not enrolled. The implementation of these practices, as well as their analyses, begin the discussion upon which further research efforts pertaining to transfer student transitions can be explored.*

Transfer student issues have been the topic of several research projects aimed at exploring student success on campus. Researchers have emphasized that the unique characteristics of transfer students may cause some of them to encounter challenges when transferring to their senior institution (Laanan, 1996). Laanan called upon student services and academic advising professionals to ensure that their transfer pipeline is well equipped to handle the complex transition to a senior institution (1996).

Research on the transition process for transfer students varies. Davies (2000) reported that difficulty with the transition process will affect transfer student retention and progress towards graduation. In relation to advising experiences, one study revealed that transfer experiences were mixed at the senior institution, with some students feeling positively about the advising they received while others indicating that their advisors didn't listen, made inappropriate comments, or were inaccessible (Davies & Dickmann, 1998). In addition, research on transfer student

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academic performance also varies. Laanan (2001) and Davies and Dickmann (1998) pointed out that while “transfer shock”—the concept of transfer students’ grade point average (GPA) dropping at the senior institution—is a reality for some students, research demonstrates transfer students are equally as prepared as other students to meet the academic challenges of the senior institution.

Colleges and universities across the United States have employed a variety of programs and services to meet the needs of new transfer students, including orientation programs, mentor programs, and orientation courses (Ward-Roof, Kashner, & Hodge, 2003). Stony Brook University (SUNY Stony Brook) has re-evaluated and redesigned its orientation and advising services for new transfer students with positive outcomes and submitted the model as a best practice to the National Academic Advising Association (NACADA). Although not specifically intended as research project, this university has utilized a new transfer student orientation model and a new transfer student seminar course with promising outcomes documented in both individual satisfaction and institutional outcomes.

## **Institutional Demographics**

A large, suburban state institution on the East Coast has an overall population of approximately 24,000 students. The university is both a major research institution and an Association of American Universities (AAU) public institution, attracting many students who are interested in the health professions or natural sciences. Located on a 1,100 acre campus about 60 miles from a major metropolitan area, the university draws a diverse student population.

The university enrolled 16,342 total undergraduate students in Fall 2010. Approximately 52% of the undergraduate student body was male and 48% was female. Geographically, 49% of undergraduate students resided in two local counties and 27% in the nearest metropolitan area. Geographic distribution of other students included in-state/other areas (9%), out of state (6%), and international (8%). The undergraduate student population is primarily White (37%) and Asian (23%), with a lower representation of African American (6%), Hispanic American (9%), international (8%), and other/unknown (16%) groups. On-campus residents accounted for 63% of the undergraduate student population (Stony Brook University, 2010).

Students at the university are generally well prepared academically, with first-year students averaging SAT Math scores of 580–680, SAT Reading scores of 530–630, SAT Writing scores of 520–630, and ACT composite scores of 25–29. Financially, 57% of first-year students are eligible for need-based financial aid in the average amount of \$8,553. The institution has an 88% first-to-second year student retention rate. Academic profiles, financial aid, and retention data are not publically reported for transfer students (SBU, 2010).

## History

The university enrolls approximately 1,200 new transfer students each summer for the fall semester and approximately 650 new transfer students in January for the spring semester, with a large portion of these students coming from two local community colleges. New transfer students are scheduled for one of 12 half-day orientation sessions with approximately 200 students attending each day (100 in the morning session and 100 in the afternoon session). This half-day session is focused primarily on advising and registration. Each summer, the university enrolls approximately 2,700 new first-year students for the fall semester who participate in one of 15 one-day orientation sessions focusing on team building and advising/registration. Approximately 200 first-year students attend each day. They are assigned to a first-year community and enrolled in a one credit first-year seminar course in both their first fall and spring semesters at the university. Transfer students are not assigned to a student community and are not required to complete a new student seminar course.

Prior to 2008, the advising and registration process for transfer students was conducted in the same manner as first-year student advising and registration. In the previous format, students met with orientation leaders to develop their schedules in small groups, and then registered for courses independently on the online system known as SOLAR. An academic advisor was required to review and approve their final schedule prior to their leaving orientation.

Feedback from transfer student orientation evaluations was consistently poor in several areas, indicating that their time was not well utilized during orientation. Data revealed that 33% of students felt that they were not able to easily understand their transfer credit evaluation. Qualitative responses revealed additional insight. Specifically, transfer students indicated that their situations required unique and complex assistance beyond the help of a student leader. The following comments from transfer students convey their dissatisfaction with the previous system:

*"I wasn't a fan of how other students help you make your schedule; I would have felt more comfortable meeting with an advisor."*

*"I felt a bit apprehensive with another student, trained as they may have been, aiding me with preparing my schedule."*

*"I think the part where students advise you with the schedule could have been better. I didn't really get the help that was needed to be advised on what actual classes [need] to be taken in my major. I would have felt better if I was advised by an advisor."*

Qualitative and quantitative comments were consistent from 2006 and 2007. This data caused the director of the advising center to re-evaluate and restructure the transfer student orientation experience. A pilot program was launched in January 2008, and the format has been used consistently from Summer 2008 to present with positive results.

## New Transfer Orientation Model and Outcomes

An initial challenge was that the transfer orientation format required serving the same number of students in each session. Due to the size of the first-year student population, there was no flexibility to extend the dates or reduce capacity in each session. The advising center employs approximately 12 full-time advisors. In the new format, full-time advisors from other academic areas, such as engineering, business, athletics, and the Educational Opportunity Program (EOP), volunteer to assist with advising new transfer students. In addition, approximately five to seven faculty advisors are hired at an hourly rate in unique or high-demand disciplines such as fine arts or natural sciences. A final pool of advisors consists of professional staff members who have completed an Academic Advising Certificate program through the advising center. Overall, approximately 30 advisors are used on each transfer orientation day, which is essential to the smooth operation of the new format.

Students are assigned to one of three student groups before they arrive for orientation. Group A consists of students majoring in the social sciences and humanities, which do not require math/science advising. Group B consists of students in the natural science, math, and engineering majors that usually require math/science advising prior to making their schedule. Group C consists of students who have not completed their math assessment prior to orientation, or of overflow from groups A and B. While the groups are not always evenly distributed, there is an average of 30–33 students in each group.

Students check-in together, receive their photo ID, eat a meal, and listen to an advising overview. They then “rotate” through one-hour appointments. These include one-hour meetings with an academic advisor to create their schedule, a SOLAR registration session with an orientation leader, a presentation on commuting or living on campus, and a math/science advising session (Group B only and some Group C members). Some Group C students may also complete their math assessment. There are optional campus tours for all students. Students need not utilize their full hour of advising and registration; however, it is available if they wish. As a benefit of the new format, transfer students receive one-to-one attention from an academic advisor, an orientation leader, and potentially a math/science faculty member. Another benefit of the new format is that new students interact with a smaller group of students (30, as opposed to 100) throughout the day.

Students are sent an online evaluation by e-mail approximately one week after their orientation date. Results are compiled during the fall semester. Return rates vary from 10–20% of the transfer students served. Feedback from transfer student evaluations regarding the new orientation format has been promising. Increasingly, students feel that their time has been better utilized throughout the orientation day and that they are able to get the advising they need to make progress towards graduation. Students also have a better understanding of their transfer credit evaluation (TCE) as well as the system utilized (SOLAR) to register for classes. Table 1 outlines the percentage of students who either “Agreed” or “Strongly

Agreed" with the selected statements from the student evaluation.

TABLE 1

### Percentage of Students who Agree or Strongly Disagree with Selected Orientation Experiences

% of respondents that Agree or Strongly Agree with the following statements:	2006 (n=267 of 1,374)	2007 (n=118 of 1,225)	2008 (n=231 of 1,114)	2009 (n=204 of 1,223)	2010 (n=145 of 1,147)
My transfer credit evaluation (TCE) was easy to understand.	--	67	81	85	83
The length of orientation was appropriate.	60	75	74	80	83
I understood how to use SOLAR for registration.	86	87	89	91	93
My advisor was knowledgeable about general education requirements.	--	--	83	88	89
My advisor was knowledgeable about major requirements.	--	--	70	74	75
I was able to get the classes I needed to make good academic progress towards graduation.	--	--	72	83	83

Specifically, more students agreed or strongly agreed that their time was well utilized throughout the orientation day (2006 = 60%, 2010 = 83%). More students indicated that they were able to get the advising they needed to make progress towards graduation (2008 = 72%, 2010 = 83%). More students agreed or strongly agreed that their Transfer Credit Evaluation was easy to understand (2006 = 60%, 2010 = 83%), as well as how to use SOLAR for registration (2006 = 86%, 2010 = 93%). Students' opinions towards the general advising and major advising they received also improved slightly. Overall, the new transfer student orientation format has yielded primarily positive results for students and staff. It is also a model of collaboration among student affairs and academic affairs professionals who work in concert to ensure the best possible outcomes for the new transfer student experience.

## New Transfer Student Seminar and Outcomes

In order to better serve the undergraduate transfer student population after orientation, the Academic and Pre-Professional Advising Center partnered with Student Orientation and Family Programs to address the unique and often overlooked needs of new transfer students on campus. Previously, it had been assumed that transfers were better equipped for academic success after having attended a previous institution; these students were expected to find their way among the larger group of continuing students once the semester began. However, advising and orientation staff members realized that while new transfer students were more knowledgeable than first-year students on academic expectations and procedures, new transfer students were yet ill-equipped to navigate a large research institution. Clearly, a new transfer advising paradigm was needed to improve student experience.

In response to these concerns, a first-semester seminar exclusively for new transfer students was established in Spring 2006. Four sections were offered initially, with an enrollment of 74 students. Since 2006, this initiative has grown to over 50 sections per year and enrolls more than 1,000 of the 1,800 transfer students annually. This first-semester seminar is called Advising 101 (ADV 101) for Transfer Students, named to reflect the emphasis on advising. ADV 101 is instructed by a professional staff member or advisor and includes an academic peer advisor who serves as a teaching assistant. The class, capped at 25 students per section, meets weekly for one hour, and students earn one unit of credit upon the satisfactory completion of the course. ADV 101 is required for international students and strongly recommended for domestic transfers.

Learning objectives of ADV 101 are designed to give students the tools and resources necessary to successfully navigate a large research university. These objectives advocate for the development of long- and short-term academic goals, and encourage the development of intellectual and social skills. ADV 101 helps students identify potential leadership and experiential learning goals and ultimately become integral members of the university community. Through the course content, students learn about academic policies, campus technology, internships, study abroad programs, and campus involvement opportunities. They enhance their writing skills by completing various journal activities, and they conduct an interview with a professional staff or faculty member from their academic major.

As an important assessment measure, a comprehensive survey is administered each semester. The survey compares the success of transfer students who have participated in ADV 101 to those who have not. In Fall 2010, approximately 1,200 new transfer students were surveyed at the end of their first semester. Of the 491 responses (~41% response rate), 279 had been enrolled in ADV 101 and 212 had not been enrolled in ADV 101. Based on responses from the Fall 2010 new transfer cohort, 68% of students who were enrolled in ADV 101 agreed or strongly agreed that they felt connected to the university community versus 31% not enrolled in ADV 101. Analysis of the first-semester GPA and retention data were also analyzed

for students enrolled in Fall 2010. An independent-samples t-test was conducted to compare first-semester GPAs of students enrolled in ADV (n=601) and first-semester GPAs of transfer students not enrolled in ADV 101 (n=630). There was a significant difference in the average GPAs for student enrolled in ADV 101 ( $M = 2.81, SD=.82$ ) and the average GPAs of students not enrolled in ADV 101 ( $M= 2.62, SD=1.06$ ) conditions;  $t(1180)=3.53$   $p <.001$ . The first-semester retention rate for transfer students enrolled in ADV 101 was 93% as opposed to 88% for students not enrolled in ADV 101.

The shared goal of ADV 101 and the revised transfer orientation format is to enhance new transfer students' experience and help them achieve a successful transition from their previous college or university to the senior institution. Both initiatives have helped new transfers succeed and realize their full potential in a large research university setting while helping them make personal connections to staff and faculty members.

## Challenges

One challenge to the new transfer orientation format has been the inability to increase financial and human resources in order to meet the demands of the more personalized format. A key challenge is continuing to recruit and maintain the number of academic advisors necessary for the one-on-one advising sessions. This challenge currently is being met through volunteer advisors and limiting appointments to one hour in length with each rotation. The new orientation format is also limited by time constraints. The amount of additional, non-advising related information that can be delivered in this format is minimal. Campus tours are optional and socialization of new transfer students is limited. While there is a greater emphasis on socialization during opening weekend events, student feedback on evaluations repeatedly requests interaction with other students during orientation.

The development and implementation of ADV 101 has not been without its challenges, including the development of an effective curriculum, scheduling of classes, and the recruitment of instructors. Fortunately, ADV 101 has become somewhat of an organic entity with volunteers now coming forward as the word of mouth spreads regarding how rewarding it is to teach. Although no compensation is offered for teaching ADV 101 beyond an end of the semester "thank you luncheon," university staff members continue to come forward to volunteer their time and instructional talents to teach ADV 101. Input in relation to the curriculum and its continued development has been productive as well. An ADV 101 committee, comprised of academic advisors, was established to help build upon the quality of this initiative.

## Limitations

There are several inherent limitations to the information provided and the

models discussed. Specifically, from a research design perspective, neither the revised transfer orientation format nor the transfer seminar course was designed as a research study. Thus, instruments and surveys used to gather data have not been tested for reliability or validity. In addition, excluding the data on transfer GPA and transfer retention, responses from participants were voluntary rather than random.

Programmatic and institutional limitations are also present. For example, the university currently utilizes a mandatory, fee-based orientation format, meaning that all students are required to pay an orientation fee and attend orientation. Institutions using a voluntary format or a non-fee based program may yield different outcomes. Specifically, universities with voluntary orientation programs may find that transfer students who attend orientation voluntarily are more committed to their university experience, including academic performance, retention, and the forming of connections at the university. Also, current university students often have strong opinions about the “value” of education and educational experiences. Students who are charged a fee for their orientation program may have greater expectations for the program considering the fees involved. Additionally, institutions with different demographics in terms of size, academic rigor, commuter/resident populations, geographical, ethnic, and socioeconomic differences may yield different results.

Personal and motivational differences may also exist among students who sign up for transfer seminar courses. As previously stated, ADV 101 is required for international transfer students and encouraged for all other transfer students. There is some belief that students who are willing to sign up for a one-credit, satisfactory/unsatisfactory advising seminar course are already more invested in their academic experience, and thus feel stronger connections to campus, perform better academically, and have stronger retention rates. It is also plausible that if international students were not required to take the course, the overall outcomes in each area would be different.

## **Implications for Further Research**

An opportunity exists to challenge these limitations through additional research. Specifically, removing international students from the analyses may reveal a more accurate comparison between students who elect to take ADV 101 and those who do not. Since international students are required to take ADV 101, they are involuntary participants in the program and may be impacting the outcomes pertaining to connection, GPA, or retention.

Other variables may be included in the analysis of students who participate in the new orientation format and the ADV 101 format. For example, it would be worthwhile to explore the completion rate of new transfer students who entered the university prior to 2008, with those who entered after 2008. Depending on major and number of credits transferred, differences may be noted in the completion times for those who received one-on-one advising and had an opportunity to develop a relationship with an advisor prior to arrival on campus. Another variable to be factored in the previous or future analyses would be pre-



admissions data, such as institution of origin, incoming GPA, and number of credits transferred, as well as previous and intended majors. Relationships may be drawn between pre-admissions data and on-campus success, as they pertain to the new orientation format or enrollment in ADV 101.

Finally, future research could examine these programs from a research perspective, using randomly selected participants and validated instruments, as well as in-depth statistical analysis.

## Conclusion

Transfer students continue to bring unique and complex backgrounds to college campus environments. Colleges should continually examine ways to improve practices for transfer students and personalize services for transfer students in the same manner in which they do for first-year students. Large research universities may have success implementing more personalized orientation programs, as well as new-student seminars designed exclusively for transfer students. Specifically, large research universities that attract transfer students from local community colleges, which tend to be smaller in size, may benefit from personalizing services for transfer students to offset the perception of their university as being large and impersonal. Transfer students add to the rich and diverse fabric of our college campuses, contributing to the academic life, campus life, alumni base, and financial well-being. Campuses that invest in their initial transition through improved orientation and new student seminars may find that new transfer students are more invested and more successful on their campuses.

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