The Anxiety of Change: How New Transfer Students Overcome Challenges
Abstract
To explore obstacles commonly faced by transfer students before and after transition to a four-year university, focus groups were conducted with 14 students who recently transferred from community college. One of the main sources of anxiety was whether or not community college units transferred to the four-year university. Prior to admittance, students did not always obtain accurate advising at the community college level about which courses to take in order to prepare for transfer. After enrolling at the four-year university, students experienced stress over the significant delay it took for the university to evaluate and transfer their community college units toward their degree progress. In addition, students who transferred from community college often had to face their own doubts about academically succeeding at a university level, wade through an overwhelming amount of information about different universities and majors in order to decide where to apply, and quickly adjust to the new institution by figuring out how to enroll in classes and locate other needed information. Recommendations are provided concerning what community colleges and universities can do to minimize these challenges.

The United States is undergoing a “shift to a college economy” (Carnevale, Smith and Strohl 2010); President Barack Obama has set a goal for the US to have the highest proportion of college graduates in the world by 2020, which equates to an estimated 8 million more degrees (US Department of Education 2011). Community colleges are a key component in helping the nation to meet its educational goals, as 45 percent of all US undergraduate students attend community college (American Association of Community Colleges 2013). Many community college students go on to transfer to a four-year institution, with estimated transfer rates ranging from 11 percent to 52 percent, depending on how the transfer rate is calculated (Castaneda 2002). Much of the research on transfer students focuses on academic outcomes, namely the success or failure of transfer students to attain a baccalaureate degree (e.g., Koker and Hendel 2003; Xueli 2009), or the initial dip in GPA known as transfer shock (Ceja 1994; Laanan 2001). Relatively little attention has been paid to the process of how transfer students adjust to the new institution (Eggleston and Laanan 2001), although some researchers have recently taken a qualitative approach to studying a small number of transfer students in depth (Chrystal, Gansemer-Topf, and Laanan 2013; Gard, Paton and Gosselin 2012; Townsend and Wilson 2006). Similarly, the research reported here is limited in generalizability due to the small sample size, but the focus group methodology utilized has the advantage of conveying student perspectives in their own words, with the goal of identifying the common obstacles faced before and after the admission process.

Method
In the current study, three focus groups were conducted with a total of 14 former community college students who recently transferred to a regional four-year public university, where almost half of the incoming undergraduate students transfer from community college. Each focus group meeting consisted of having a facilitator ask a set of structured questions to the group of four or five participants. The meetings were approximately 90 minutes long. The resulting dialogue was audio recorded, transcribed and analyzed for common themes and unique issues. The goal of each focus group was to have the new junior-level transfer students share their perspective on what had been difficult for them, as well as how others had helped them to adjust. Two of the focus groups were held in a campus classroom, with refreshments provided. The third focus group was held online using Skype.

Participants came from a variety of ethnic backgrounds: Caucasian/white, African American, Asian American, and Mexican.
American. In addition, online-only students, student-parents, veterans, and students with disabilities were represented. The age of participants ranged from 20 to 50 years old, with the mean age being 30 years. There were nine female participants and five male participants. The major fields of study represented were communication, health science, history, human development, liberal studies, and sociology. Participants were recruited through department emails, class announcements, flyers, and a Facebook announcement to new students.

Findings
The three focus groups identified a number of common challenges faced by transferring students. The findings can be categorized into two different stages—prior to acceptance by the four-year university, and after acceptance.

Intimidation vs. Inspiration: Prior to Acceptance
The first challenge many participants reported encountering during their application and transfer process was facing their own concerns about whether they would be admitted and have the ability to academically succeed at a four-year university. Specifically, one student stated that there was a “huge stigma” about the difference in coursework rigor between community college and four-year universities, and that being in community college felt like the “minor leagues.” Others agreed with this, and expressed apprehension about their ability to succeed. One student told us that she constantly asked herself, “Is my work going to reflect my junior college work? I am eligible to be here, but do I really belong here? Are the upper division classes [going to] kick my ass?” while another stated, “I just assumed it was going to be hell.” A few of the participants mentioned that their community college teachers and staff had tried to confront this stigma up front, attempting to help their students avoid unnecessary stress and anxiety. When we asked one student to elaborate, he explained:

The teachers at the junior college I came from, I thought they were just blowing smoke when they said these were the same standards and exactly the same. I thought, yeah whatever. But they were right… That was what really made it easier in hindsight. There was anxiety before, but looking back on it that actually helped a lot.

Another student found it reassuring that one of his community college instructors, who had previously taught at the four-year university, was able to reassure him that his work was “on par” before he transferred.

Some students may encounter difficulty even working up the initial courage to apply to transfer to a four-year university. In the case of participants who had taken a break in their education to work and raise children, there can naturally be some hesitation because the individual’s decision to pursue higher education can have a negative impact on the family, whether in the form of lost income or lost time with loved ones. In the case of a 45-year-old mother, however, it was her family that encouraged her to go back to school. This student shared that she had previously been admitted into a nursing program, but was not able to keep up with the coursework and failed her first semester. This led her to doubt her academic ability to succeed at a four-year university, as she frequently thought to herself, “If I can’t survive at a JC level, there is no way that I am going to survive at a university level.” As a result, she developed a deep fear of failing, and shared that it took her four years to even consider going back to school.

My husband had, for many, many years had been telling me, you need to go back to school, you need to finish what you started. And I was the one who just kept putting it off and I was the one who was scared, but I never wanted to admit it. The kids on the other hand, were saying, “Mom, you can do it, you can do it!”

She explained that even when she decided to seek information about the university’s admission process, she still felt apprehensive because of her past. However, because of her family, and the support of an encouraging staff member at the Welcome Center on campus, she was able overcome her fear to apply.

I’d say I owe the breaking of my anxiety to her [staff member at Welcome Center] because I took all my transcripts to her and she said, “You know what, you’re ready to apply, there is no doubt in my mind that you will be accepted.” But, it took me that long… to even bring myself and get that courage to even go online and apply.

The confidence of her family and the Welcome Center staff member was enough to assuage the student’s initial trepidation, and ultimately motivate her to apply.

Aside from concern over the application process in general, students can also face difficult tasks such as deciding on a field of study or identifying universities that would fit their needs. The amount of information available about factors such as tuition, financial aid, geographic location, and programs of study for potential universities can seem overwhelming for transfer students. Luckily, counselors at the community college level are in the perfect position to lend assistance and aid students through this difficult process. One student claimed that his community
college counselor was the person who helped him most with the transferring process. He explained:

My counselor from junior college... was the one who said that I can major in whatever I want, you can major in sociology if you want. It was because of his instruction and direction that I was able to make the transition. He even helped me select this campus because we looked on ASSIST, and looked at all the campuses to choose from.

Whether or not community college units would transfer to the receiving institution was a commonly identified concern for most of the participants. One participant shared that her first attempt to transfer to the four-year university was difficult and ultimately unsuccessful; the reason cited was that she lacked a single unit, even though she had received her associate’s degree.

Well, you know I, of course, was devastated because I was not notified in a timely fashion. If you would have told me say two

Another student shared that she had been involved with the Puente program, which provides resources and support for underserved students in California to earn college degrees. Her Puente counselor was exceptional because he was extremely knowledgable, always available and went “far beyond” what was expected of a community college counselor. She explained, “Everybody could go over there and talk to him and for a simple question he had a full explanation,” which made her feel more comfortable with the transfer process.

Unfortunately, not all of the participants had positive experiences with their counselors, as a handful of participants expressed frustration over receiving “false counseling” at the community college level. They explained that their counselors had told them to take specific courses, which ultimately they did not need or did not transfer. Paired with existing stress and pressure to exit community college and finish their degrees, participants felt aggravated and frustrated when they learned that the information given to them was not accurate. One student shared that, because she did not fully understand how transferable units worked, she had to spend an extra year at community college before transferring because she took the wrong set of courses.

She shared that she had a disability, but was unable to receive disability services during the admission process, which made the experience even more difficult for her. The next year, however, she reapplied without taking any more units, and was admitted into the university without any problems. And although she had been able to receive disability services the second time around, she still felt very anxious about the four-year university system because the same application had first been rejected and then was accepted, with no explanation from the university. Now she takes extra steps to ensure that what she has been told by the university staff is followed through. She concluded by stating, “They say I am just proactive. What I am is paranoid.”

months after I applied in May, then I could have jumped into a summer class in June and fulfilled this one unit business. And then I [could have] even asked for concurrent enrollment, probation status, you know, what can I do for one unit?

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After Acceptance: Adjusting to the New School

Once students have been admitted to the four-year university, they begin the process of transitioning to the pace and culture of the new institution. This can often be a chaotic and confusing time. For example, the four-year university studied is on the quarter system, yet
the majority of transfer students come from community colleges on the semester system. As soon as possible, students need to acquire the knowledge necessary for navigating through the university. Understanding how to enroll in a class, set up university email or navigate through a learning management system (such as Blackboard) can be difficult for transfer students if the information is new and not readily available to them. Moreover, possessing this knowledge is critical for students to succeed. Universities are increasingly utilizing technology and online systems to deliver course materials, host tests and exams, display course grades, and strengthen communication between professors and their students. If a student is unfamiliar with the platforms on which this information is delivered, and cannot get hold of someone who can teach them, students are forced to learn along the way and fill in the missing pieces when they can.

One 30-year-old student shared that the biggest challenge was “learning the technology,” and that when he would try to get help by calling the university, they kept transferring him to someone else until the phone disconnected. Another student explained that when she attempted to learn about the online resource of Blackboard, there was no one available to help explain it to her. This is critical when you are taking online classes, how to navigate. I wanted to learn before classes started. Why do I want to sign on the day class starts and I don’t know what to do? You know, where do I find my assignment? How do I submit it? I don’t know any of this.

This student explained that as a last resort, she turned to her major department’s secretary, who gave her a five-minute tutorial which was all she needed. Alternatively, some students were able to easily get their questions answered. One participant who was a veteran stated, “I am pretty outgoing anyways, and if I have a question, and I am talking to somebody, something pops in my head, I will ask them… I already have got friends in the administration building!” Although the process of enrolling at a new school was complex, he explained that he received the specialized counseling that he needed.

For me it was really just the anxiety of change, trying to figure it all out on a condensed time frame… so far everybody has been really, really helpful. So that is really it. I know that it is pretty anxiety provoking because it is a whole new thing, I had to reapply for all the financial aid, re-certify for the GI Bill, so I felt like I was starting all over again which is a little anxiety provoking. Other than that, it has been a really smooth process.

In an effort to helpfully provide information that new students need, many universities offer orientations to both admitted first-year and junior-level transfer students. The participating university offers transfer students their own independent orientation, but it is not mandatory. Some of the participants in the focus group attended the transfer orientation; however, they had mixed feelings about how beneficial it was. One of the participants did not feel it was very helpful because they did not discuss “core things” such as how to choose professors, where the departments were, and the organization of the faculty. Another participant explained that while the orientation was not “necessarily helpful” to her, that she was glad she attended because it made her feel more comfortable at the university campus. A few of the other participants, however, felt their orientation was a “very positive experience,” as they explained that the orientation staff projected how to register for classes on a big screen. To one of the participants, the orientation made them feel like the university was putting on a “whole big production of welcome-ness.”

Unfortunately, for the few students in the focus group who were online-only students, orientations are only offered in person. A few of them were able to commute and make the in-person orientations, but the others had no form of access to the information covered. In addition, a participant explained that there is only one part-time counselor designated for online students. This made it very difficult to have questions answered in a timely manner, and frustrated her. Thus, it may prove beneficial to increase the counseling resources allocated to online students, and to have important information hosted on the university website or included in a welcome packet mailed along with admission letters.

After the initial processes of transferring and adjusting to the new university, students must begin to plan out their future coursework to meet all graduation requirements. While high school students admitted directly to the university simply have to follow the pipelines laid out for them by their designated majors, community college students must have their previous units evaluated. This general education evaluation, conducted by university counselors, informs the students which of their community college courses transferred over successfully and further provides them with a list of the remaining courses they need to complete before they can graduate. Generally, it took up to two quarters for these evaluations to be completed, and for the student to understand the current status of their degree progress.

The greatest consensus among all three focus groups was that the amount of time it took to receive the results of this general
education evaluation was extremely burdensome and stressful. Without the official verification of transferred community college units, many of the participants expressed feeling anxious over where they stood in terms of graduation. One student expressed fear that a problem would arise from the general education evaluation, and that because of the amount of time it took to receive the results, that she would be in the final stage of graduating before she became aware of it. Another student explained that he was left in the dark when it came time to sign up for classes, because he was unsure of which units transferred over successfully.

Many of today’s college students begin their education at community colleges. Attending community college rather than a four-year university allows students to explore different fields of study and complete their general education at a much lower cost, and often to be able to do so closer to a student’s hometown. But attending community college and then a four-year university also means that transfer students are required to deal with the bureaucracy of at least two different institutions and must repeat the process of learning how to be a student in a new academic environment. Students may even experience what has been referred to as transitional trauma—“the level of alienation a student experiences when unfamiliar with some of the norms, values and expectations that predominate in a school community.”

Discussion

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Before being admitted to the four-year university, students expressed facing many challenges. An initial obstacle they faced was the stigma of having attended community college and feeling that their work would be inferior to that of other students when they entered the four-year university. Such perceptions have been documented in prior research on transfer students (Gard, Paton and Gosselin 2012; Laanan, Starobin and Eggleston 2010–11; Townsend 1995). Although some of the participants experienced anxiety in this respect, two participants explained that their professors at the community college level helped to dispel this myth. Students also faced the daunting task of researching numerous universities, programs and degrees before deciding which ones fit them best. Additionally, students had to examine other factors, such as tuition and financial aid and take them into account when making decisions.

Counselors at the community college are in a prime position to help students narrow down their potential universities and sort through an overwhelming amount of information (Handel 2007). Many of the participants expressed that their community college counselors made the process easy and straightforward, but a handful expressed that the information they received from their counselors about unit transfers was not correct, echoing similar findings from a previous study (Gard, Paton and Gosselin 2012). This led the students to feel frustrated, as they would either have to spend additional time at community colleges taking classes that would count at the four-year level or take those courses at their universities for a much steeper cost. It is clear that counselors play a strong role in preparing students to transfer successfully, and they have the power to make it an easier process for the student.
After being accepted, students face challenges related to being unfamiliar with how the systems of a new school work. The technology used by the university can be complicated, so it is important that students have easy access to the resources which explain elements such as email, Blackboard or other online services. When participants were unable to find information about this, they became worried that they would fall behind. Orientations can be a useful tool to help share this information, but not all students attend them either because they are not mandatory, or because some students, such as online-only students, live too far away to commute. Although orientation was attended by many of the students in this study who lived within driving distance of the campus, orientation was not attended by any of the participants in another study (Townsend 1995). Therefore, it is imperative that transfer students are made aware of where information can be found. Crucial information such as how to sign up for classes, access email or use online platforms can be hosted on the university’s website specifically for new students or even be printed and sent along in the acceptance packet. In this way, it is not left up to the student to figure out how to find information. As advocated by some researchers (Chrystal, Gansemer-Topf and Laanan 2013), universities may wish to consider placing important information online. For example, a virtual orientation can be emailed to students who choose not to attend, or cannot attend due to a lack of proximity to the university.

The most widely experienced source of anxiety among all of the students was the amount of time it took for them to receive verification of which community college units were accepted by the university. This corroborates findings from another study in which “the primary concern of transfer students was the efficiency with which their credits would transfer and apply to degree requirements at the four-year institution” (Chrystal, Gansemer-Topf and Laanan 2013, 14). Because it generally took up to two quarters for units to become evaluated, students expressed a feeling of worry over whether or not all of their units would transfer successfully. Students expressed concern that something would come up from their transcripts that they did not anticipate, and that they would have to take more classes or delay their graduations. Adding to the stress of waiting for their community college transcripts to be evaluated, students at four-year public universities in California currently suffer the consequences of a lack of course availability due to severe budget cuts (Johnson-Ahorlu, Alvarez and Hurtado 2013).

Thus, investing more funds in higher education could shorten the time to earn a bachelor’s degree for many transfer students by supporting more timely evaluation of transfer units and increasing course offerings.

**Recommendations**
A noteworthy finding of this study was that students experience stress and anxiety when the information they need is not available, and experience comfort and a sense of “welcome-ness” when that information is provided to them. Transfer students can be helped in the transition from community college to four-year university by both institutions.

**Community colleges and four-year universities can cooperatively commit to:**

- Coordinating visits to the community college by outreach representatives from the four-year university.
- Funding their articulation officers to keep up-to-date on the immense work of creating articulation agreements between both institutions.
Four-year universities can commit to:

- Supporting meetings between faculty members from both institutions to discuss curriculum and expectations of students.
- Creating a faster process for community college units to become evaluated.
- Offering more advising and services for online students, such as more online counselors and an online orientation.
- Granting early access to disability services for students at community college wishing to transfer.

Community colleges can commit to:

- Confronting the stigma that community college coursework does not adequately prepare students for more rigorous and challenging coursework at the four-year university.
- Ensuring that community college counselors are up to speed with the most accurate information about unit transfers.
- Providing needed information about how transferable units work in readily available formats.
- Developing new resources that can expand student understanding of the process of how community college units transfer to the four-year university.
- Using multiple channels (e.g., orientation meetings, university website, the acceptance packet mailed to admitted students) to communicate information to new students about how to sign up for classes, use email and navigate learning management systems.
- Offering more advising and services for online students, such as more online counselors and an online orientation.
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REFERENCES


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