

Going beyond the « luck of the draw » : Improving the experience of college transfer students at a large research university

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In Ontario (Canada), as elsewhere, universities – including research-intensive institutions - are experiencing an increase in college transfer student admissions. As the Bologna Accord increases and facilitates student mobility across the European Union, Ontario is working to facilitate student mobility and credit transfer between its 44 publicly funded further and higher education establishments. To achieve this goal, in 2011 the province created the Ontario Council on Articulation and Transfer to “enhance student pathways and reduce barriers for students”, while respecting institutional autonomy. Furthermore, it created financial incentives to encourage dialogue between institutions, particularly between further and higher education establishments, to create clear articulation agreements for specific programs where possible (2 + 2 or 2 + 3), and identify credit equivalencies to facilitate transfers and ultimately, degree attainment. Since 2012, there has been increased marketing by Ontario Colleges to secondary school students and their parents to encourage them to begin their PSE with a college diploma, and then pursue a university degree.

As part of its *Transfer facilitation activities and student support services for college transfers* funding from the Ontario Government in 2013, a team at the University of Ottawa designed a mixed-method study to 1) better understand the college transfer students' experience; 2) identify the transfer facilitation activities and student support services that would most benefit these students during and after their transfer to the University of Ottawa; and 3) identify barriers and challenges (policies, procedures, processes) experienced by college transfer students as well as solutions to ensure ease of transition and credit transfer.

A review of research from other jurisdictions with long standing traditions of college transfer students' integration to universities, as well as findings from jurisdictions with similar levels of experience as Ontario, identified important themes and elements to consider in the design of our study such as transfer shock (Cejda, 1997), acclimation/integration (Borglum & Kubula, 2000; Davies & Casey, 1999; Hills, 1965; Laanan, 1996, 2007), transition processes and policies (Barh et al, 2013; Chrystal, Gansemer-Topf, & Laanan, 2013; Dowd, Cheslock & Melguizo, 2008; Flaga, 2006; Handel, 2007; Messinger, 2014 ; Tobolowski & Cox, 2012; Zamani, 2001), factors that facilitate success (Allen, Smith & Muehleck, 2013; Hagerdom, Cypers & Lester, 2010; Townsend & Wilson, 2006), student voice (Davies & Dickmann, 1998; Gard, Paton & Gosselon, 2012;), student heterogeneity (Adams, 2014; Vasseur Tuttle & Droogsmma Usoba, 2013; Wawrzynski & Sedlacek, 2003).

Our intent was to keep the focus broad, and to explore themes that preceded students' access to the University, including an understanding of i) students' secondary school pathways; ii) the diverse pathways that led students to choose their program of study at the college; iii) their expectations of access to university (admission process, credit transfers granted, program and course selection) as wells as the academic and social experience of university.

The quantitative component was an in-depth statistical analysis of student success data from college and university, which was then compared with the same data types for students from other pathways. The qualitative component of our study drew on the sociology of experience (Dubet, 1994), Bourdieu's concepts of habitus, field and capital (1982) as well *le métier étudiant* (Coulon, 2005), to design focus group and interview protocols that would allow us ensure that students' voices were heard, enabling us to gain a better understanding of the lived experiences of college transfers students and their representations (Bourdieu, 1982) of these experiences (Creswell, 2005).

Two significant findings from the qualitative component of the study were identified for immediate action, albeit at different levels. The first finding was the seemingly haphazard granting of transfer credits to students having completed the same college diploma with equivalent standing and pursuing the same university degree. Students reported feeling that the assessment results of their file were very much linked to the “luck of the draw”, referencing either time of application, admission officer consulted, insider knowledge of or social capital within the university or a combination of these factors. Senior management of the Telfer School of Management met with their college counterparts to clearly identify credit transfer bundles (30 credits, 45 credits, etc.) based on college program completion, as well as a clear course sequence at University for students based on the transfer credits granted.

The second finding was that transfer students did not feel that orientation activities were meant for them, as they had already experienced a transition to PSE and most events did not address their needs. The University's student services developed specific orientation activities for college transfer students and will provide opportunities for these students to meet during orientation week to create networks with similar students. The changes related to both these findings have been implemented for September 2014. Their impact will be closely monitored through ongoing research.

The quantitative analysis revealed that when admitted based on similar admission averages college transfer students do not attain similar levels of academic success as their peers transferring from universities or from Quebec CEGEPs. College students with an admission average of less than 80% fared a little better than the traditional first-year student, however, the academic achievement of those with an average of more than 80% did not demonstrate the same success slope as traditional first-year students. Prior to this analysis, similar minimal admission requirements had been set for college, university and CEGEP transfers. Findings demonstrate the need to adapt the minimum admission requirement based on incoming pathway. However, the impact of mismatched credit transfers could not be factored into our analysis. Further studies are ongoing to inform admission decision, particularly based on the changes implemented at the Telfer School of Management.

This presentation will present in-depth findings of both the qualitative and quantitative components of the study, as well as initial findings about the impact of the changes implemented for September 2014. We will highlight the importance of concerted coordinated efforts between university management, academic and student support services personnel, to better meet the needs of college transfer students and ensure a positive academic and social transition and integration into university life.

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Going beyond the « luck of the draw » : Improving the experience of college transfer students at a large research university

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