"Things That Make You Go Hmmm": How Analyses of Student Voice Lead to an Institutional Learning Moment (0081)

Sylvie A. Lamoureux, Megan Cotnam-Kappel
University of Ottawa, Canada

This paper presentation aligns itself with SRHE's vision of higher education research that looks back, looks across, and looks forward to continuously improve university student experience and increase access to higher education.

At present, in most educational jurisdictions around the world, 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, the province of Ontario (in Canada) is working to facilitate student mobility and credit transfer between its 44 publicly funded further (colleges) and higher (universities) education establishments.

To begin, we look back to the first year of a two-year study funded by the Ontario Government through its *Transfer Facilitation Activities and Student Support Services for College Transfers* with the University of Ottawa. An intersectorial research team designed a mixed methods study to 1) better understand college transfer students' experiences, 2) identify barriers and challenges (policies, procedures, processes) experienced by college transfer students, 3) identify the transfer facilitation activities and student support services that would most benefit these students, as well as 4) create solutions to ensure ease of transition and credit transfer.

Theoretical Perspectives

A review of research from educational jurisdictions with long-standing traditions of college transfer students' integration to universities, as well as findings from jurisdictions with similar levels of experience as the province of Ontario, identified important themes and elements to consider in the design of our institutional study. Concepts such as transfer shock (Cejda, 1997), acclimation/integration (Borglum & Kubula, 2000; Davies & Casey, 1999; Hills, 1965; Laanan, 1996, 2007), the importance of student voice (Davies & Dickmann, 1998; Gard, Paton & Gosselon, 2012), and the challenges and realities of student heterogeneity (Adams, 2014; Vasseur Tuttle & Droogsma Usoba, 2013; Wawrzynski & Sedlacek, 2003) informed the design of the first phase of our institutional study. We also took a closer look at the impact of 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), and at the various factors that facilitate success (Allen, Smith & Muehleck, 2013; Hagerdorn, Cypers & Lester, 2010; Townsend & Wilson, 2006).

Methods

A two-year mixed methods study was designed to meet our goals, with a strong focus on student voice. The methodological tools included surveys, interviews, and focus groups.

Year 1 (2013-2014)

Our intent was to gain a better understanding of 1) the diverse pathways that led students to choose their program of study at the college, 2) their expectations of access to university as well as the academic and social experience of university, and 3) their perceptions of their actual lived experiences of transition from college to university, from credit transfer to academic and social integration. Of the 780 students invited to participate in the study, thirty-three responded. 28 participated in one of eight focus groups (four in French, four in English), held in November 2013 and another five participated in individual interviews in January 2014.

Year 2 (2014-2015)

The purpose of the second year of the study was to evaluate the impact of newly implemented changes at the university's Business School, from the perspective of a variety of actors, to identify best practices that could be applied or adapted to other programs and faculties. As such, the second phase of the study focused exclusively on the transfer of students with college business diplomas (2-year and 3-year) to four-year Business degree programs at the Business School.

This phase included two group interviews with four admission and program officers from the Business School as well as an interview with the school's Vice-dean of programs and two senior personnel from the admissions office. In addition, students were invited to complete two surveys (one per term) and to participate in individual interviews (each term). Our pool of potential student participants was limited to the 40 incoming college transfer students. A total of 20 students completed one of two surveys, whereas 12 participated in individual interviews.

Results

This paper looks across the transfer student experience research and presents an overview of the significant findings from the first year of study, with a particular focus on one of the findings that was identified for immediate action. This 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 time of application, admission officer consulted, insider knowledge, social capital within the university or a combination of these factors. They deplored the lack of consistency and had expected a more transparent process.

Based on this finding, senior management of the Business School 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 the University for students based on the transfer credits granted. According to findings from the second year of the study, we were able to conclude that these changes had a positive impact on university staff and their relationship with students, on student success and on the student experience, despite some initial student disappointment about the changes.

Implications

The significance and further implications of this study are related to the importance of concerted coordinated efforts between university management, academic and student support services personnel, university researchers (professors) and students, as well as other institutional partners such as colleges, to ensure 1) that access policies, procedures and practice are research informed and equitable, as well as transparent and well documented; and 2) that these must be driven by an institutional commitment to better meet the needs of students from all pathways, thus ensuring a positive academic and social transition, including overall integration into university life, regardless of prior social, economic or linguistic capital.

In closing, we will look forward and discuss the next steps for the institution and its partners, regarding 1) how to institutionalize best practices across faculties and services to better support our college transfer students and 2) the importance of student voice in higher education research. The implications of this research can be converged with other international perspectives to inform our shared questions regarding increasing access and widening participation in higher education to students from all pathways.

References

Adams, S. (2014). Community College to a Four-Year Institution: Transition for Underrepresented Students. Masters Thesis. Eastern Illinois University,

Allen, J.M., Smith, C.L., & Muehleck, J.K. (2013). What Kinds of Advising Are Important to Community College Pre-and Posttransfer Students? *Community College Review, 41*(4), 330-345.

Barh, P.R., Toth, C., Thirolf, K. & Massé, J.C. (2013) A Review and Critique of the Literature on Community College Students' Transition Processes and Outcomes in Four-Year Institutions. In M.B. Paulsen (Ed). *Higher Education : Handbook of Theory and Research 28* (pp459-511). Dordrecht, Heidelberg & New York: Springer.

Borglum, T. & Kubula, T. (2000). Academic and social integration of community college students : A case study. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, *24*, 567-576.

Cejda, B.D. (1997). An examination of transfer shock in academic disciplines. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice, 32*(3), 279-288.

Chrystal, L.L., Gansemer-Topf, A., Laanan, F.S. (2013). Assesing Students' Transition from Community College to a Four-Year Institution. *Journal of Assessment and Institutional Effectiveness, 3*(1), 1-18.

Davies, T.G. & Dickmann, E.M. (1998). Can we hear them? Do we listen?. Student voices in the transfer process. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice, 22*, 541-557.

Davies, T.G., & Casey, K. (1999). Transfer Student Experiences: Comparing Their Academic and Social Lives at the Community College and University. *College Student Journal, 33*(1), 60-71.

Dowd, A.C, Cheslock, J.J., & Melguizo, T. (2008). Transfer access from community colleges and the distribution of elite higher education. *Journal of Higher Education, 79*, 442-473.

Dubet, F. (1994). *Sociologie de l'expérience*. Paris: Seuil.

Flaga, C.T. (2006). The Process of Transition for Community College Transfer Students. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice, 30,* 3-19.

Gard, D.R., Paton,V. & Gosselon, K. (2012). Student Perceptions of Factors Contributing to Community-College-to-University Transfer Success. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, *36*(II)*, 833-848.

Hagerdorn, L.S., Cypers, S. & Lester, J. (2010). Looking in the rearview mirror: Factors affecting transfer for urban community college students. *Community College Journal of Research and Practive, 32*(9), 643-664.

Handel, S.J. (2007). Second Chance, Not Second Class: A Blueprint for Community-College Transfer. *Change*, 38-45.

Hills, J. R. (1965). The Academic Performance of the Junior College Transfer. *The Journal of Experimental Education, 33*(3), 201-215.

Laanan, F.S. (1996). Making the Transition: Understanding the Adjustment Process of Community College Transfer Students. *Community College Review, 23*(4), 69-84.

Laanan, F.S. (2007). Studying transfer students: Part II: Dimensions of transfer students' adjustment. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice, 31*(1), 37-59.

Messinger, L. (2014). 2 + 2 = BSW: An Innovative Approach to the Community College-University Continuum in Social Work Education. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice, 38*(5), 454-465.

Tobolowsky, B.F., & Cox, B.E. (2012). Rationalizing Neglect: An Institutional Response to Transfer Students. *The Journal of Higher Education, 83,* 389-410.

Townsend, B.K. & Wilson, K. (2006). "A hand-hold for a little bit": Factors facilitating the success of community college transfer students to a large research university. *Journal of College Student Development, 47*(4), 439-456.

Vasseur Tuttle, L. & Droogsma Musoba, G. (2013) Transfer Student Persistence at a Hispanic-Serving University. *Journal of Latinos and Education, 12*(1), 38-58.

Wawrzynski, M.R. & Sedlacek, W.E. (2003). Race and gender differences in the transfer student experiences. *College Student Development, 44,* 489-501.

Zamani, E.M. (2001). Institutional responses to barriers to the transfer process. *New Directions for Community Colleges, 114,* 15-24.