



**Increasing Success for Two-to-Four-Year Transfer Students
Within The City University of New York**

February 2017

Increasing Success for Two-to-Four-Year Transfer Students Within The City University of New York

Christina Ciocca Eller
Graduate NYC Research Fellow, Columbia University

Graduate NYC (GNYC) is an initiative that partners with The City University of New York (CUNY), the New York City Department of Education (NYC DOE), and non-profit organizations in increasing the college readiness and success of New York City students. Over the 2015-16 academic year, GNYC supported a study of the first-year experiences of approximately sixty transfer students and freshmen at three CUNY four-year colleges. The study also includes the perspectives of a smaller group of upperclassmen and college administrators. All student participants were selected at random and compensated for their participation.

Executive Summary

Transfer students represent the *majority of first-time enrollees* on four-year campuses within CUNY; they comprised two-thirds of first-time entrants in 2014.¹ Yet their experiences have been less documented and understood than those of first-time freshmen. The study detailed in this report builds on a concerted effort underway in New York City and around the country to learn more about transfer students' unique characteristics and needs.²

This study relies on over 200 interviews conducted by two Columbia University researchers with college students, faculty, and administrative staff at three CUNY four-year colleges over the course of an entire academic year. It emerges from a yearlong collaboration between GNYC, CUNY's Office of Policy Research, and the Columbia researchers.

Though the focal students in this study certainly cannot speak for all two-to-four-year transfer students, the length of time researchers spent with these students and the depth of their perspectives have yielded six primary recommendations that colleges can heed to increase transfer student success:

- **Get Students On Track Academically**
- **Promote Sustainable Performance**
- **Share Clear Information**
- **Provide Flexible and Helpful Support**
- **Create Opportunities for College Connection**
- **Build on Sense of Commitment**

¹ CUNY, *Admissions to Undergraduate and Graduate Degree Programs by College* (New York, NY: Author, 2014) http://www.cuny.edu/irdatabook/rpts2_AY_current/ADMS_0012_UGGR_DEG_PRG_HIST.rpt.pdf, accessed January 7, 2017.

² Davis Jenkins and John Fink. *Tracking Transfer: New Measures of Institutional and State Effectiveness in Helping Community College Students Attain Bachelor's Degrees* (New York, NY: Community College Research Center, Teachers College, Columbia University, 2016) <http://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/publications/tracking-transfer-institutional-state-effectiveness.html>, accessed January 7, 2017.

Doug Shapiro, Afet Dundar, Phoebe Khasiala Wakhungu, Xin Yuan, and Autumn T. Harrell. *Transfer & Mobility: A National View of Student Movement in Postsecondary Institutions, Fall 2008 Cohort (Signature Report No. 9)* (Herndon, VA: National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2015).

Joshua Wyner, KC Deane, Davis Jenkins, and John Fink. *The Transfer Playbook: Essential Practices for Two- and Four-Year Colleges* (Aspen, CO and New York, NY: The Aspen Institute College Excellence Program and the Community College Research Center, Teachers College, Columbia University, 2016) <http://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/publications/transfer-playbook-essential-practices.html>, accessed January 17, 2017.

- 1. Get Students On Track Academically:** During the first few weeks of transfer students' first semester, they must make important academic decisions that shape the remainder of their four-year experience. These decisions often have implications for both financial aid and future course-taking opportunities. Without sufficient guidance, information, and support to get on track academically, transfer students can miss critical deadlines and requirements, derailing their academic progress and jeopardizing the likelihood of degree completion.
- 2. Promote Sustainable Performance:** Unlike freshmen, who typically take introductory classes populated mostly with other freshmen, transfer students often begin taking intermediate or advanced courses with challenging content and a fast pace alongside other students who have been on the campus for two or more years. Succeeding academically can be difficult in this context, especially if students lack sufficient academic preparation or understanding of senior college course expectations. College professors can increase sustainable performance by becoming aware of the large number of transfer students enrolled in their classes, understanding the challenges they face, and providing explicit explanation of classroom expectations and resources for support.
- 3. Share Clear Information:** One of the most notable causes of transfer students' uneven experiences is ineffective or inconsistent communication about important information such as course registration periods, financial aid deadlines, and requirements related to their majors. Ensuring that transfer students have sufficient access to accurate information and know how to respond to it is essential for their success.
- 4. Provide Flexible and Helpful Support:** As with the majority of freshmen, transfer students often require support or guidance at some point during their first year of college—whether academic or personal. For support to be most useful to transfer students, it needs to be tailored to their particular circumstances and must include flexible scheduling for those who are juggling responsibilities in addition to school.
- 5. Create Opportunities for College Connection:** Transfer students often feel like permanent newcomers or outsiders tasked with navigating the administrative, academic, and social infrastructures of their four-year colleges completely on their own. To help transfer students feel less isolated, it is beneficial to create more opportunities for them to engage with one another and the academic dimension of their college communities, especially during their first year at a four-year college.
- 6. Build on Sense of Commitment:** Many transfer students arrive at four-year colleges with a deep commitment to attaining their bachelor's degrees—often more so than first-time freshmen. This commitment is an invaluable resource for transfer students, and it can be leveraged to support degree completion.

The report details each of these areas in depth and concludes with a set of policy recommendations applicable both to the CUNY system and four-year colleges that share its characteristics. Overall, the report seeks to promote an ambitious, yet attainable, agenda in support of a large and growing population of four-year students, both at CUNY and across the country.

Introduction

The number of transfer students, both at CUNY and at colleges across the country, is large and increasing. The National Student Clearinghouse reports that among all bachelor's degree recipients during the 2013-2014 academic year, 46 percent had attended a two-year college at some point within the previous ten years.³ The study detailed in this report is part of a concerted effort underway in New York City and around the country to learn about and respond to transfer students' unique characteristics, experiences, and needs.⁴

Scope of the Study

The yearlong collaboration between GNYC, CUNY's Office of Policy Research, and researchers at Columbia University was motivated by the shared goal of generating a more detailed, on-the-ground understanding of the first-year trajectories of two-to-four-year transfer students within the CUNY system, especially as compared to first-time freshmen and "native" upperclassmen.⁵ To provide such an understanding, two Columbia University researchers conducted over 200 interviews between September 2015 and June 2016 from a focal sample of ten first-time freshmen and ten two-to-four-year transfer students at three CUNY four-year colleges—a total of thirty freshmen and thirty transfer students overall. The transfer students arrived from both CUNY and non-CUNY two-year colleges.

We interviewed freshmen and transfer students three times over the course of the academic year: in September, January, and May. Over the course of the study, we refreshed the sample once, yielding data on thirty-one transfer students and thirty-two freshmen overall. As a point of comparison, we additionally interviewed fifteen native upperclassmen.

During the fall, we asked students about their family and educational backgrounds, their college selection process, their first few weeks attending college, and their goals for the future. The follow-up interviews focused more specifically on students' college experiences, including classroom learning, the use of administrative and support services, and the social aspects of time spent on campus. We also collected monthly data from the students in the form of online "check-ins," which asked basic questions about academics, social experiences, and stress levels. Together, these data track changes in students' perspectives over time while also creating a better understanding of student persistence.

The students interviewed represent a wide variety of personal backgrounds and educational experiences, ranging in age from twenty-one to fifty-two and encompassing fifteen races and ethnicities. Often two-year beginners represent a less advantaged population than four-year beginners,⁶ and our sample is no exception. While some students proceeded directly

³ National Student Clearinghouse Research Center. *Contributions of Two-Year Institutions to Four-Year Completions (Snapshot Report)* (Herndon, VA: Author, 2015).

⁴ Davis Jenkins and John Fink. *Tracking Transfer: New Measures of Institutional and State Effectiveness in Helping Community College Students Attain Bachelor's Degrees*.

Doug Shapiro, Afet Dundar, Phoebe Khasiala Wakhungu, Xin Yuan, and Autumn T. Harrell. *Transfer & Mobility: A National View of Student Movement in Postsecondary Institutions, Fall 2008 Cohort (Signature Report No. 9)*.

Joshua Wyner, KC Deane, Davis Jenkins, and John Fink. *The Transfer Playbook: Essential Practices for Two- and Four-Year Colleges*.

⁵ "Native" upperclassmen begin at a four-year college as freshmen and remain past their sophomore year.

⁶ William G. Bowen, Matthew M. Chingos, and Michael S. McPherson. *Crossing the Finish Line: Completing College at America's Public Universities* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2009).

from high school to two-year college to four-year college, more than half (eighteen of thirty-one) experienced less continuity in their educational journeys, whether due to academic challenges, financial struggles, or non-academic detours. More information on the student sample can be found in the Appendix.

The transfer students in the sample who experienced more circuitous journeys were older on average than transfer students with direct transitions or their native peers. Knowing that personal responsibilities often multiply with age, it might be easy to attribute the trends identified for transfers as a byproduct of age alone. However, in comparing the experiences of more traditionally-aged transfer students with those of similarly-aged native peers, we found substantial differences. The findings suggest that “transfer status” is a unique category that exists above and beyond age, making it even more critical to understand its meanings and implications.

Notably, two-year transfer students enter the four-year setting with several major advantages. First, they already know, at least to some extent, how college works. Second, many have navigated educational challenges en route to their four-year college, giving them a sense of determination and capacity to fix things above and beyond other students. Third, they demonstrate a focused and highly-motivated drive to persist to degree completion, revealing both perseverance and a sense of pride in their educational destinations. It is time to help such students translate this valuable resource into higher rates of success—a sizeable, but not unattainable, goal.

While we have devised six discrete categories to discuss the experiences of transfer students, it is important to note that these areas are deeply interconnected. When difficulties occur in one area for transfers, the consequences typically impact several other areas. The resulting accumulation of challenges can be quite difficult to address with any singular action.

Findings

1. Get Students On Track Academically

One of the most important ways in which freshmen and transfer students differ is their relationship to time. Freshmen, especially if they have matriculated at a four-year college immediately following high school, arrive with the sense that they have four or more years to determine their course of study and pursue it. During orientation sessions and academic meetings, they are encouraged to learn broadly and explore socially; their first semesters of classes consist of general courses meant to widen knowledge and options. As a result, the sense that college will unfold over a series of years is appreciated by most freshmen.

By contrast, transfer students have less time to get acquainted with their new school and complete their degree. When they enter four-year colleges, many already have experienced at least two years of two-year college, and often more. This fundamental difference between freshmen and transfer students leads to a number of other discrepancies, both administrative and attitudinal.

The most significant administrative difference is that transfer students immediately face a number of academic hurdles that freshmen often do not, such as finishing outstanding general education requirements, completing any prerequisites required for major declaration, and declaring a major. Financial aid policies, both those of New York State's Tuition Assistance Program (TAP) and Title IV Federal Aid, such as Pell Grants, place enormous pressure on transfer students to get on an appropriate academic track as quickly as possible and stay there. In order to maintain their aid, TAP requires students to declare their major by the time they accrue sixty credits, take and pass certain courses in conjunction with the declared major, maintain an adequate grade point average, and complete a bachelor's degree within four years of having first started college, unless the student is in a special opportunity program. Title IV programs have similar standards related to grade maintenance and satisfactory academic progress.

Perhaps in part because of this pressure, many transfer students express a no-nonsense attitude about their four-year experience. As one student reported during her first interview, "*I just want to get my degree.*" This statement captures many transfer students' laser focus on degree completion, to the exclusion of other traditional collegiate concerns such as extracurricular activities or new friendships. In light of this attitude, the significance of checking off academic requirements increases for transfer students.

However, the process of getting on track academically is often difficult—and much more challenging than students initially expect. Transfer students in the sample discussed a number of roadblocks, but several stand out as both common and detrimental:

- *Problems with credit evaluation:* The transfer credit assessment process is long and circuitous, typically requiring academic departments to approve credits rather than admission offices or advising staff. While CUNY's Pathways system has helped some students transferring within the CUNY system, many other students, both within and outside of CUNY, discussed experiencing holdups and confusion. In addition, because full credit evaluations often are not available until late in the summer, months after course registrations have begun, transfer students can run into difficulties when trying to secure seats in necessary courses. Many transfer students consequently begin four-year college at an academic deficit before they even start their coursework.
- *Major declaration challenges:* Not all transfer students realize that they must explicitly declare a major by sixty credits in order to receive TAP. Many instead assume that the major they declared at their two-year college will follow them to their new setting or that the major they list on their transfer application constitutes their "declaration." Without this knowledge, transfer students are at a high risk of losing financial support and halting their academic progress as a result.

Additionally, many transfer students are unaware of specialized major application procedures that accompany some career-oriented paths such as nursing or education; students might arrive at a college thinking they will pursue an education major, only to learn that they must separately apply to the program. In the meantime, students have to declare a *different* major in order to keep their financial aid. Such a circumstance can prove confusing and demoralizing, and further delay students' efforts to make sufficient academic progress.

- *Lack of guidance/conflicting guidance:* Transfer students are given limited guidance about their academic paths when they arrive at their four-year colleges. Though some colleges require students to meet with an academic advisor prior to registering for classes, these sessions typically are brief and only focused on choosing courses for the current semester. Many students in the sample described speaking to a department chair or other professor in their major field of study for guidance, but often they only received a sheet of paper listing class requirements. The lack of sufficient or correct information about academic trajectories at the start of transfer students' college experiences often contributes to early challenges that have long-term consequences for their academic success.

Together, these issues limit transfer students' capacity to get on track academically. Without early academic alignment, transfer students experience substantial frustration that the focus of their college experience—their classes—is not progressing smoothly. This challenge can shift transfer students' perspective on the value of four-year college, either causing them to develop an adversarial stance towards their new institution or decreasing their interest and ability to attend classes. Both of these outcomes raise transfer students' risk of non-completion.

2. Promote Sustainable Performance

While enrolling transfer students in the right courses is a necessary first step, it does not ensure that these students can succeed academically once the work begins. Existing research demonstrates that transfer students often lag behind their “native” peers when it comes to grades, due to the combination of less rigorous pre-college preparation, insufficient learning in their two-year college contexts, and lack of support in their four-year classrooms.⁷

Transfer students often expressed surprise and dismay at their academic challenges, especially after working so diligently to succeed academically in their two-year colleges:

“[My friend and I] were doing really bad. Just because we both came from the Dean’s List at [our community college], like high grades to here, and we were just really upset.”

“It’s hard in the sense that all classes are very intense. It requires a lot of time to prepare for the classes...I’m sure it will be very hard to be the A student that you want to be.”

Other students, however, knew immediately that their prior academic preparation was insufficient:

“[My first semester] was hard...I got my first F ever...But I wasn’t completely fazed about it. Because I knew for a fact that I simply wasn’t prepared for that class.”

⁷ William G. Bowen, Matthew M. Chingos, and Michael S. McPherson. *Crossing the Finish Line: Completing College at America’s Public Universities*.

CUNY, *Policy Research Brief: Do Transfer Students Perform as Well as Freshmen?* (New York, NY: Author, n.d.) <http://www2.cuny.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/page-assets/about/administration/offices/oira/policy/research-briefs/brief3.pdf>, accessed January 7, 2017.

Although many students expressed sentiments such as these, others who had emerged from two-year honors programs or other special initiatives, such as Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP) within the CUNY system, often were more able to navigate four-year classrooms given the challenges of difficult coursework and limited support. Students with relatives or friends who had experienced four-year classrooms before also were advantaged, understanding more clearly how to gain academic guidance from professors or other resources. Yet, since many two-to-four-year transfer students do not enjoy such opportunities, ensuring sustainable academic progress should be viewed as an essential component of overall success.

For students who do struggle, three factors seem to interfere most with classroom success, even above and beyond baseline preparation. First, unlike freshmen, who typically first engage academically in core courses with professors primed to teach new college students, many transfer students jump right into intermediate courses with continuing students. These courses are not tailored to new students, meaning that professors move quickly through the material and rarely explicitly acknowledge the need for additional support for transfer students. While office hours are communicated, the combination of scheduling conflicts, uncertainty about the value or purpose of attending such sessions, and the fact that professors often change their availability, leaves transfer students with limited support from professors.

Second, transfer students uniformly expressed frustration at inconsistencies in the quality of teaching and academic support services. Some students described first-semester courses comprised of a professor reading from a textbook without interruption for two hours. Any student's capacity to remain engaged in this kind of setting is limited. Transfer students often wind up in at least one course like this, both because they register late in the summer (as a result of late credit evaluation) and because professors' names regularly are not listed in course descriptions. Consequently, even if transfer students know about the engaging professors on their campuses, they might not be able to identify the classes taught by these professors.

To find recourse for this situation, a number of students seek outside academic support in the form of tutoring and writing centers. Their experiences in such settings are variable, yet often more negative than positive. Inconvenient timing of "extra help" sessions, paired with oversubscription and spotty tutoring quality, leave many transfer students feeling that the additional services are not always the best use of their time.

Third, the social and emotional context of four-year classrooms also can prove challenging for transfer students. Unlike freshmen, who can enroll in "learning communities" and other programs that initially bind them to a small group of peers, transfer students usually navigate their early classroom experiences alone. As one student told us, breaking into perceived groups of friends taking classes together can be quite difficult:

"These four girls who are in my class, they all sit in a line together in the front and if you accidentally take their seat they do a 'head turn.'... You just tend to stick to certain cliques, and it's really hard for people to kind of branch out of them sometimes."

However, transfer students' sense of academic isolation does not always persist indefinitely. Once the spring semester came around, many transfer students in our sample had started to acclimate, becoming more accustomed to the rigor and new expectations of four-year classrooms. Unfortunately, that transition did not take place for all students, and especially not for those who also struggled with the academic material. Without explicit structural support from professors, advisors, or classmates, the likelihood of such students succeeding in the classroom, and in turn, in four-year college more broadly, decreases.

3. Share Clear Information

One of the most notable causes of transfer students' uneven experiences is inconsistent or ineffective communication of necessary information, including course-registration periods, financial aid deadlines, and major-related opportunities and requirements. Informational inconsistencies largely derive from the gap between colleges' chosen method of communication, official college email addresses, and students' typical modes of accessing information: personal email, text message, or in person. Other sources of confusion include office-to-office or office-to-department inconsistency (discussed briefly in the "Get Students On Track Academically" section), as well as information loss or inaccuracy due to well-intentioned, though faulty, information sharing between students.

It is well known that few CUNY students regularly check their official college email accounts. Many students, both freshmen and transfer, described professors who asked students to provide their personal email addresses or other contact information, knowing that the college email would not prove a viable option. When we asked freshmen and transfer students why they did not use their official college email, they provided a number of reasons:

- Difficulty remembering the login information for all of the separate accounts—usually at least three—required administratively by their colleges;
- Difficulty getting official email set up on a personal phone and/or lack of knowledge that this option is available;
- Lack of knowledge that an official college email might be funneled into a personal email account;
- Fear of information glut;
- Technical challenges and lockouts;
- Feeling that no one uses it, making the college email system seem unnecessary or redundant.

Importantly, students who did manage to set up their college email addresses communicated feelings of connectedness and being "in the know" more often than those who did not. Informational overload was the only downside students expressed about connectedness to college email, potentially obscuring the most important messages about registration deadlines and other mandatory actions. Yet this inconvenience paled in comparison to having no understanding of requirements or deadlines at all.

Accordingly, many students suggested that physical pieces of paper, or a known announcement board or welcome center with relevant information, would be more beneficial than scattered emails to an often ignored email account. Additionally, the students who managed to set up and use their official college email accounts also appeared more generally skilled in navigating bureaucracy, connecting socially, and achieving

academically. These students likely would have succeeded even without official email due to high levels of “self-efficacy,” or the capacity to self-start.

Another reason why informational gaps exist for transfer students concerns initial orientation. The availability of and requirements surrounding transfer student orientation vary from college to college. It is quite common for colleges to lack any formal or mandatory on-campus initiation process for transfer students. If colleges have “recommended” activities, transfer students typically are unlikely to make the effort to attend—often due to external time constraints. In addition, transfer students who experience online orientation sessions tend to pay little attention to the material presented. As a result, transfers often lack knowledge regarding critical academic benchmarks and other campus-based opportunities required to integrate smoothly and effectively into their campus communities. This gap is especially prevalent for students with less preparation and self-efficacy, making it even more critical for such students to receive necessary information from the start in order to stay on track.

In addition to an initial lack of connectedness, whether due to technological issues or because of missed or inadequate orientation programs, transfer students often described other informational challenges emerging from inconsistencies and disconnects between offices and departments. They called this confusion “the runaround.” Especially at the beginning of each semester, transfer students described physically shuttling from office to office trying to clear up confusion, whether related to transferrable credits, financial aid, or major declaration. Though transfer students at points described financial aid or registrar staff as “helpful” or “trying their best,” finding a “nice” person ultimately proved less important than finding someone who could address their problem effectively. On many occasions, disconnects between individual administrative offices or between administrative offices and academic departments seemed to be the root of the “runaround” dynamic.

Somewhat surprisingly, informal student-to-student communication can also serve as another channel for misinformation. When students feel neglected or underserved by their colleges, they often rely on each other, developing an adversarial stance towards college administrators as universally “unhelpful.” Although seeking counsel from classmates may be an effective strategy, receiving the wrong information can delay the resolution of a particular issue. In addition, maintaining a negative image of “official” college support services, regardless of the reality, also can prove detrimental. In sum: inefficient communication leads to both concrete academic problems and feelings of frustration and demoralization.

4. Provide Flexible and Helpful Support

As with the majority of freshmen, most transfer students require support or guidance at some point during their first year of four-year college. For many transfer students, this support is academic; for others, it is financial or emotional. As mentioned in regards to “Promote Sustainable Performance,” transfer students with friends or relatives who already have experienced a four-year college setting are at an advantage, as they can rely on them for external support. However, many two-to-four-year transfer students are first-generation four-year college-goers. It is especially important to provide on-campus support for these transfer students, whether in the form of academic advising, guidance within a major field of study, or easy access to offices such as financial aid, the registrar, or counseling services.

CUNY colleges have addressed this need to some extent, with many requiring transfer students to meet with an academic advisor prior to initial course registration. Some transfer

students described these meetings as helpful in clarifying academic requirements and helping to plan for the long run. As one student reported after an initial advising visit:

"[My advisor] was super helpful....We spoke about the now and the later, so most definitely, I will be seeing her again soon."

Yet most students relayed the brief nature of such visits, and some felt overwhelmed or even distressed afterwards, especially if their assigned academic advisors knew little about their chosen major path:

"Because of what I major in, the [advisors] couldn't give me much. They said that my department—they prefer to advise students, rather than to have these other people do it."

Importantly, students who felt they left their advising session without "much" did not seek out further contact with an academic advisor, viewing such meetings as a waste of time. Other reasons for avoiding future meetings included inconvenient timing or simple disinterest. While disinterest can be quite difficult to address, ensuring that students have a positive initial encounter with an advisor and that advising office hours are easily accessible are more feasible goals.

One of the challenges of addressing these issues is oversubscription in advising offices. As at many public colleges, the student-advisor ratio at CUNY colleges is many hundreds to one. Consequently, scheduling and especially, rescheduling, advising meetings can prove challenging. Couple this dynamic with academic advisors who are only occasionally well-versed in the specific needs of transfer students, and feelings of frustration and isolation are the likely result. One student created a fitting analogy to help illustrate this issue:

"[Y]ou have to nurture something. Like you can't just stick a plant in a closet and expect it to grow. It's the same with humans...you can't just take a transfer student with my major in this school and boom, do as well as you can...With my personal situation, they're doing a really poor job."

In addition to desiring greater personalization, transfer students in our sample often described their need for more flexible scheduling of college services, whether related to academics (advising, tutoring, career centers), administration (financial aid and the registrar's office), or social and emotional well-being (counseling, stress management, procrastination workshops, etc.). This lack of scheduling flexibility proved to be an inconvenience:

"[T]he first time I came in, it was just one hour each day during the summer...that was set for academic advising. It was 11:00am-12:00pm; I worked then. The fact that I had to miss a day from work to get this done, and I had to do it three times; it was a bummer."

In more extreme forms, lack of flexibility also might amplify transfer students' sense of exclusion from the college community.

While advising offices are one critical area of possible support for transfer students, academic departments can provide another important space, whether physical or metaphorical, for transfer students to find guidance. The transfer students in our study who majored in fields with a strong culture of student contact and guidance tended to experience

much more positive first-year experiences than those who did not. Fellow students within a major field can provide a strong source of support, creating a sense of academic community and motivation to continue. As one student told us:

“[In my department] I am seeing the same people....They know what you are going through....Like, they know what you are talking about....So that contributed to the feeling of being a student [in my department]—feeling like you are one and that’s cool.”

Students also described instances in which they relied on one or two faculty members within their department as prominent allies:

“I have had the same teacher four times now so it’s like me and her kind of have an academic bond; I really admire that a lot. She was showing me something about, like basically, what my degree can do for me....So I think it’s good I have an opportunity from this degree; it’s not useless.”

Bearing these useful support structures in mind, attention to transfer students’ connection with major field of study departments, and support resources more broadly, is a critical component of transfer success.

5. Create Opportunities for College Connection

Though transfer students represent two-thirds of all new students entering CUNY’s four-year colleges each year, most assume they are in the minority. Transfer students often feel like permanent newcomers or outsiders, tasked with navigating the administrative, academic, and social infrastructures of their four-year colleges completely on their own. This sense of necessary self-reliance emerges from a variety of sources, which can be categorized as personal and college-related.

From the personal perspective, many transfer students already consider themselves experienced in handling college environments due to their time in two-year college settings. They assume that they will be able to rely on a well-developed skill set to attend to the requirements of their four-year colleges, which often translates to an expectation of needing relatively little support. The fact that these students do not live on campus, coupled with a wide array of external priorities and the acknowledgment that they only will be on campus for a couple of years, combine to shift transfer students’ priorities away from deep social investment in their four-year college communities. As one student told us:

“I don’t like to make friends within the classroom because it distracts me, you know? I’d rather just be focused.”

However, the various assumptions that many transfer students seem to make about engagement with both peers and college support structures are not always accurate. Students often find themselves lost in a maze of confusing information and unknown requirements, undermining their sense that they can figure things out on their own. In fact, transfer students seemed to take note of a shared sense of confusion in one another:

“[They all] have a look like they’re lost; that’s how you know [a person is a transfer student].”

Transfer students also typically come to realize that it is helpful to have at least one or two “go-to” fellow students in their classes in case they miss class or need support on an

assignment. So even though the social aspects of transfer students' four-year experience may look quite different than those of freshmen, there is still value in some form of community connection for transfers.

From the college perspective, very few colleges create opportunities for transfer students to come to know one another, leading to a deepened sense of isolation—above and beyond the challenges imposed by limited support systems. The infrastructure for acknowledging and supporting the unique needs of transfer students tends to be quite thin. Transfer students often lack specialized orientation programming or academic advising. They also receive little tailored guidance from professors or staff within their academic courses and can feel unwelcome or marginalized by college staff:

“As a transfer student, I had a lot of stuff to deal with and have really only had like one positive experience. It wasn't so much that the guy was like, so excited to help me, as much as he was like, yeah, whatever, give me the form. Just that he would sign it.... I really have not encountered too many people like that who are [interested in] what's going on [with transfers].”

The lack of recognition or interest can make transfer students feel like second-class citizens, decreasing their engagement with their colleges.

6. Build on Sense of Commitment

Many two-to-four-year transfer students arrive at CUNY colleges with a deep sense of commitment to attaining their bachelor's degrees—perhaps even more so than first-time freshmen. This conviction is a valuable asset for transfer students. The fact that many of these students have experienced educational challenges increases their pride in “making it” to a four-year setting and also amplifies their sense of perseverance.

Underlying these complementary feelings is a deep conviction in the value of a bachelor's degree, whether because of an appreciation for learning or a purely instrumental understanding that bachelor's degrees can increase opportunities in the labor market. Many transfer students view the bachelor's degree as the “light at the end of the tunnel,” making all of their hard work and sacrifices worthwhile. When asked what “keeps them going” in college, transfer students' commitment to achieving a bachelor's degree emerged as their primary motivation time and time again:

“Getting a degree is, I think, a very strong motivation for me. I really think I want to get a degree and get a job soon.”

“Seeing the end result [and] thinking about the end result. So just like thinking about finishing [my degree] to be honest.”

“I have a desire to finish....I don't have any time to waste.”

However, motivation can gradually diminish as small challenges accumulate: a problem with transfer credits leads to enrollment in core courses that the student already has taken, which leads to a sense of disinvestment, which leads to the student taking on more working hours, which leads to heightened stress and the need to drop a class, which leads to changes in eligibility for financial aid, etc. It also can occur more swiftly: a student arrives at her four-year college expecting to pursue a certain major, only to be told she is not yet

eligible for that major, and she must take unrelated coursework in order to remain enrolled in the college at all. Other reasons for depleted motivation include changes in personal circumstances, whether financial, work-related, family-related, or emotional.

While it is not possible for colleges to control students' personal lives, it is both possible and necessary for colleges to limit the conditions that undermine transfer students' resolve. Colleges can help students to maintain confidence in the value of their impending bachelor's degree in the workplace, whether through messaging generated by career centers or by faculty members and staff within academic departments. While bachelor's degree completion may not prove essential for all students, those with a bachelor's degree benefit from much higher chances of future financial and personal stability than those who do not.

Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

This report has detailed six key actions essential for two-to-four-year transfer students' success: **Get Students On Track Academically, Promote Sustainable Performance, Share Clear Information, Provide Flexible and Helpful Support, Create Opportunities for College Connection, and Build on a Sense of Commitment.** It draws on over 200 interviews with sixty-three first-time freshmen and transfer students at three CUNY four-year colleges to discuss these areas and illustrate the transfer student experience.

While a small number of students in our transfer sample enjoyed a completely smooth integration into four-year college life, the vast majority encountered at least one, and usually several, of the challenges discussed throughout this report. Students with completely smooth trajectories also tended to be those with numerous existing advantages, such as high levels of academic preparation, full family support, and limited financial obligations. Considering that most two-to-four-year transfer students do not fall into this category, the areas of difficulty detailed here are widely applicable and should be addressed.

Some of the recommendations discussed here likely will require a significant investment of staff time and money, but others are relatively low-cost. While the recommendations stem from data collected within the CUNY system, many should be applicable to a wider range of colleges considering how best to serve two-to-four-year transfer students.

1. Solutions for Getting Students On Track Academically

The most important aspects of transfer students' early academic alignment are credit evaluation, major declaration, and first-semester course-taking. Accordingly, solutions are focused on these areas.

Low-resource solutions:

- Describe the major declaration process in early admissions and "welcome" materials more explicitly, noting key deadlines and policies related to financial aid.
- Emphasize the importance of major declaration and major course sequencing boldly on web pages and other widely-viewed public materials targeted at transfer students.
- Use application materials to communicate the value of early application submission, and tell students that officially accepting their admissions offer sooner will lead to earlier evaluation of their transfer credit and earlier opportunities to register for courses.

- Emphasize the value of students' proactive outreach to academic advising both prior to the beginning of the semester and during the early weeks, especially using the classroom as a key channel of communication for this information.

Higher-resource solutions:

- Shift the credit evaluation process to earlier in the summer and include all transfer students who express a serious intent to enroll.
- Pilot a new mode of transfer credit evaluation in which academic advisors and/or admissions staff are responsible for completing full assessments—including electives—guided by explicit and detailed instructions from academic departments.
- Designate transfer-specific pathways into specialized and high-demand majors, including recommendations for useful courses and experiences still covered by financial aid, for students who cannot declare their desired major immediately.
- Train a subgroup of academic advisors with a specialty in two-to-four-year transfer students' academic pathways, enabling clearer and more accurate support.
- Pair students with one, focal academic advisor who can serve as a reliable point of contact at any point during the semester.

2. Solutions for Promoting Sustainable Performance

Although it is difficult to address accumulated disadvantages in the area of academic achievement, such as insufficient prior educational quality and lower family resources, it is possible to create policies and practices to support transfer students as they negotiate a new and likely more rigorous academic environment in their four-year settings.

Low-resource solutions:

- Use targeted academic advising sessions to direct transfer students towards courses aligned with their interests and, if possible, towards professors well known for their support of students.
- Highlight the specific needs and characteristics of the transfer student population with faculty members, encouraging them to provide explicit explanations of expectations and procedures aligned with success in their classrooms.
- Campaign for heightened use of office hours as a space for extra support and more personal learning.
- Increase awareness of all available academic support resources, including writing centers and online course and professor evaluations, through multiple communications channels, including initial enrollment materials, orientation sessions, websites, and in campus gathering places.

Higher-resource solutions:

- Ensure that academic support services, such as tutoring, are available at convenient times including evenings and weekends for students with commitments outside of college.
- Develop transfer-specific summer bridge programs to prepare transfer students for the expectations of four-year classrooms.
- Work with academic departments to create opportunities for paid, qualified peer-to-peer mentoring and tutoring for majors, pairing continuing students with transfer students to facilitate stronger socio-academic integration.
- Use mid-semester course performance data to identify struggling students, reaching out to such students prior to registration for the following semester to diagnose

issues, resolve them, and ensure students align their courses correctly for the next semester.

3. Solutions for Sharing Clear Information

Creating clearer, more streamlined ways to inform students of the responsibilities, deadlines, and opportunities at four-year colleges is an essential aspect of transfer student success.

Low-resource solutions:

- Communicate the importance of having access to school email (or the campus's official information channel, if not email) and help students link their school email with personal devices and accounts as part of standard procedures during initial course registration.
- Use text alerts to bring major issues to students' attention, such as financial aid challenges, major-related problems, or academic probation.
- Enlist academic departments and faculty members to remind students regularly of registration deadlines and the importance of registering early in the period.
- Use or create centralized, physical messaging boards to display key messages in easily accessible and highly visible ways.

Higher-resource solutions:

- Develop a mandatory transfer student orientation program required for all students who accept their admissions offer.
- Offer a semester-long orientation for transfer students, akin to those available to freshmen, that details how to navigate their four-year context.
- Generate stronger information flow between individual administrative offices and between administrative offices and academic departments.
- Simplify the administrative back end, especially the number of websites and portals students need to access for key pieces of information.

4. Solutions for Providing Flexible and Helpful Support

Administrative and personal support must be accessible to transfer students, who often juggle more external responsibilities than first-time freshmen. Beyond basic accessibility, all support services must follow through with the guidance they promise to ensure transfer students' persistence and eventual degree completion. Academic departments can serve as allies in efforts to provide necessary support to transfer students.

Low-resource solutions:

- Appeal to the heads of academic departments to develop specific outreach to transfer students who major in their fields, perhaps enlisting specific faculty members as heads of transfer student studies.
- Publicize personal and emotional support resources to a greater extent in orientation materials, including this information in a Transfer Student Handbook (discussed in more detail below).

Higher-resource solutions:

- Provide every transfer student with a two-year academic plan in initial advising sessions, then send a follow up text or email each semester both to inquire where students stand on their plans and to suggest an in-person advising meeting.

- Increase flexible access to administrative support services like the registrar and financial aid by offering occasional evening or weekend openings and expanding the availability and quality of online and phone resources.
- Train specific personnel in administrative offices to attend to transfer students' key issues, akin to advising personnel.
- Train all academic and administrative support staff in addressing student concerns with an individualized approach.

5. Solutions for Creating Opportunities for College Connection

Because transfer students often experience social isolation within their four-year college settings, especially when they first arrive, solutions should focus on creating a deeper sense of connection among transfer students, and between transfers and their four-year colleges.

Low-resource solutions:

- Increase awareness of and pride in the transfer student population by highlighting the unique and interesting facts about transfer students in early welcome materials and on college websites, such as surprising statistics about the incoming transfer students and the whereabouts of well-known transfer alumni.
- Include messaging in early admissions and orientation materials about the presence of unique policies and practices in four-year colleges, which often look quite different from two-year colleges.
- Host a series of social gatherings for transfer students in the fall semester, marketed as welcome events, including snacks and perhaps the presence of key college faculty and staff who oversee aspects of the transfer student experience.
- Create and distribute a short Transfer Handbook, listing important deadlines, office information, and useful tips for success that are especially applicable to transfer students. Make sure this resource is also published online.
- Work with professors to include an early acknowledgement of transfer students in the classroom, whether through a show of hands in large lectures or through student introductions in smaller seminars.

Higher-resource solutions:

- Develop a program of summer seminars for transfer students, hosted during evening hours and billed as opportunities to meet fellow transfers in students' chosen field of study, to explore the college campus, and to learn more about the four-year experience.
- Design a week of programming during the fall and spring semesters dedicated to transfer students, calling it "Transfer Student Week" and hosting daily seminars about the "ins and outs" of the transfer student experience.
- Adopt certain academic integration strategies used for freshmen, such as learning communities or freshman year initiative practices as a means of limiting feelings of isolation—especially in the classroom.

6. Solutions for Building on Sense of Commitment

For transfer students who have worked hard to keep their focus set on bachelor's degree completion, especially those who have done so while also negotiating educational and personal challenges, the bachelor's degree can serve as a mark of confidence, pride, and future opportunity. Enabling transfer students to realize this vision of possibility for the future, backed by the skills and learning required for success, must remain the goal and

responsibility of all colleges with substantial transfer student populations. Decreasing unanticipated challenges while demonstrating the high value of bachelor's degrees can conserve transfer students' persistence.

Many of the short- and long-term solutions for this thematic area already have been discussed, yet additional practices in the area of career development and inclusionary community are worth considering:

Low-resource solutions:

- Introduce career services and resources to transfer students early in their academic careers, recommending visits to career centers as part of transfer student admissions materials and orientation sessions.
- Enable transfer students to opt-into online career resources as part of the initial registration process.

Higher-resource solutions:

- Increase flexibility in the timing of career fairs and other career-related services.
- If not already present, develop specific Transfer Services Centers staffed with personnel tasked with integrating transfer students into four-year college communities and ensuring their degree completion.

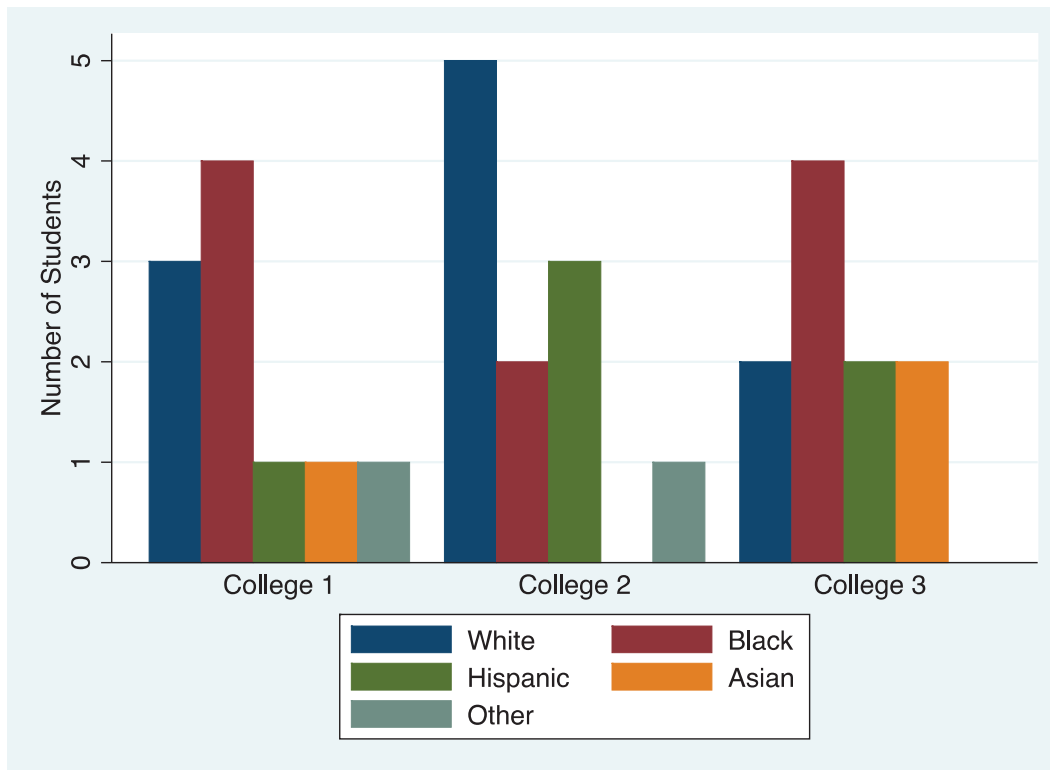
While these recommendations are not all-encompassing, they aim to promote increased dialogue and action concerning the wellbeing and success of two-to-four-year transfer students. They reflect the thoughts and experiences of the transfer students included in this study and resonate with many of the key issues and themes highlighted in related research. Taken together, they seek to promote an ambitious, yet attainable, agenda in support of a large and growing population of four-year students, both at CUNY and across the country, who deserve to succeed.

Bibliography

- Bowen, William G., Matthew M. Chingos, and Michael S. McPherson. *Crossing the Finish Line: Completing College at America's Public Universities*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2009.
- CUNY. *Policy Research Brief: Do Transfer Students Perform as Well as Freshmen?* New York, NY: Author, n.d. <http://www2.cuny.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/page-assets/about/administration/offices/oira/policy/research-briefs/brief3.pdf>. (Accessed January 7, 2017).
- CUNY. *Admissions to Undergraduate and Graduate Degree Programs by College*. New York, NY: Author, 2014. http://www.cuny.edu/irdatabook/rpts2_AY_current/ADMS_0012_UGGR_DEG_PRG_HIST.rpt.pdf. (Accessed January 7, 2017).
- Jenkins, Davis and John Fink. *Tracking Transfer: New Measures of Institutional and State Effectiveness in Helping Community College Students Attain Bachelor's Degrees*. New York, NY: Community College Research Center, Teachers College, Columbia University, 2016. <http://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/publications/tracking-transfer-institutional-state-effectiveness.html>. (Accessed January 7, 2017).
- National Student Clearinghouse Research Center. *Contributions of Two-Year Institutions to Four-Year Completions (Snapshot Report)*. Herndon, VA: Author, 2015.
- Shapiro, Doug, Afet Dunder, Phoebe Khasiala Wakhungu, Xin Yuan, and Autumn T. Harrell. *Transfer & Mobility: A National View of Student Movement in Postsecondary Institutions, Fall 2008 Cohort (Signature Report No. 9)*. Herndon, VA: National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2015.
- Wyner, Joshua, KC Deane, Davis Jenkins, and John Fink. *The Transfer Playbook: Essential Practices for Two- and Four-Year Colleges*. Aspen, CO and New York, NY: The Aspen Institute College Excellence Program and the Community College Research Center, Teachers College, Columbia University, 2016. <http://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/publications/transfer-playbook-essential-practices.html>. (Accessed January 17, 2017).

Appendix

Transfer Students in Study, by College and Race/Ethnicity



- Though the graph only includes five racial/ethnic categories, fifteen different racial/ethnic backgrounds were represented among the transfer students, ranging from Argentinian to Chinese to Guyanese to Pakistani.
- The students ranged in age from twenty-one to fifty-two years old.
- Eight of the thirty-one transfer students, or 26 percent, were born outside the United States.
- Fourteen of the thirty-one transfer students, or 45 percent, represent first-time, four-year college attendees.
- Seventeen of the thirty-one transfer students, or 55 percent, attended high school in NYC; of the remaining students, the majority attended high school in Long Island or New Jersey, though some completed all early education in their country of origin.
- Eighteen of the thirty-one transfer students, or 58 percent, did not go straight from high school to a single two-year college to a four-year college, instead taking time off at some juncture, or attending multiple colleges prior to their four-year college.