



**University of Wisconsin – Madison  
Office of the Provost**

# **Committee on the Transfer Student Experience**

**Final Report Executive Summary**

**May 20, 2004**

Policy and practice surrounding issues in undergraduate education are dominated by the traditional one of students who enroll right after high school and stay until graduation. Nationally, the trends to observe student “swirl” – circulation of undergraduates from one institution to another and back again – is increasing and the influences of these trends are felt at UW-Madison. About 20 % of new undergraduates started college elsewhere and about 80% of UW-Madison graduates carry transfer credit. Many pressures and prospects – both internal and external - have turned our attention to transfer students and motivated the work of this committee.

In October, 2004, Provost Peter Spear and Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs Paul Barrows appointed the Ad Hoc Committee on the Transfer Student Experience (CTSE), with Virginia Sapiro, Associate Vice Chancellor for Teaching and Learning as chair. The committee charge was to

- facilitate communication and coordination across the various bodies already at work on identifying and solving problems related to undergraduate transfer student experiences and
- take a big-picture look at the experiences of transfer students on campus -- including the transfer process itself, advising, and academic and student life issues -- to identify areas of special concern and make recommendations regarding what steps should be taken and by whom.

*We defined transfer students as those students who first matriculated at a different post-secondary institution and then enrolled at UW-Madison in some subsequent semester*

The CTSE gathered together information about the transfer student experience and used that evidence to test how accurately the anecdotes, impressions, and well-circulated myths stand up to the evidence. We drew from several sources: reports from recent committees addressing issues related to transfer students, the existing scholarly literature on transfer students, analyses of student record data, analyses of the 2003 Undergraduate Survey and other survey data, a series of focus groups conducted with UW-Madison transfer starts, and an assessment of the communication skills of seniors in capstone courses done by faculty in those courses.

Several broad themes emerged from our work.

First, transfer students are “our” students. We all noted a tendency for people to use language implying that UW-Madison students are those who arrive in their first year of college, and that transfer students are add-ons, not truly “our” students. Although we found no evidence of intentional differential treatment, we agree that all UW-Madison students, equally, should receive the same care, attention, and expectations for success. Prospective transfer students also merit careful attention. These early contacts influence their experience and success as UW-Madison students.

Second, our research indicates that transfer students’ experiences are diverse with respect to their process of arrival to the campus and integration into it, their preparation for life as a UW-Madison student, and their expectations or desires for their life here. Consequently, it is difficult to make sweeping generalizations about their experience. We do recognize that some of their needs are distinct from other new students and programs designed for them, for example SOAR, will be more effective when it is designed to meet the specific needs of new transfer students.

Third, many, but not all, indicators show that transfer entry students, in the aggregate, face more challenges academically than do students who enroll at the beginning of their college careers. Our analysis does not allow us to identify the reasons for the differences that appear, but they are likely to be a combination of many factors, including the different pool from which these students are drawn; their prior preparation; financial, social integration, and other challenges they face; factors that may have contributed to their motivation to transfer in the first place, and disruptions caused by moving from one institution and location to another.

Fourth, as for so many aspects of life at UW-Madison, communication is a challenge. Sharing information among Admissions, prospective students, newly enrolled transfer students, UW-Madison advisors, advisors at sending institutions, program faculty and staff, and others who need to know on many aspects of the transfer student experience

Finally, as we expected, there are things we can and should do at the campus, college, and more local level to improve the experience for transfer students. Although we discovered that students did not commonly find some aspects of the experience as difficult as we had expected – transferring credit is a key example – we can identify areas for improvement.

We offer the following recommendations that, in keeping with the decentralized nature of the campus, should be implemented at the most local level possible that assures effectiveness and coherence.

1. Build an infrastructure for communication on issues related to transfer students, including communication outward from the institution to prospective transfers and their sending institutions, applicants, and transfer starts and intra-institutional communication among Admissions and the schools and colleges.
  - a. Develop information that is more accessible to prospective transfer students and their advisors at sending institutions, and deliberately assemble this information into a coherent package with an obvious entry point for prospective transfer students.
  - b. Reinforce the communication with prospective and new transfer students that there is a specific requirement to declare a major, and that indicating interest in a major during the admissions process is not a declaration.
  - c. Improve communication between Admissions and the schools and colleges, especially as it relates to notifying selective programs about projected numbers of new transfer students. Improve communication between programs and Admissions about the level of competitiveness and requirements for admission to the major.
  - d. Explore ways to communicate and coordinate the specific requirements for entry to majors and programs across the University community, for example through the Undergraduate Catalog.
  - e. Build a one-stop front door for transfers, either on-line or in physical space.
2. Develop orientation programming for transfer students early in the semester after transfer students have enrolled. Address transfer student needs in a developmentally appropriate way. For example, at SOAR improve connections between transfer starts and other students on campus and explicitly encourage transfer starts to get involved in campus activities early on.

3. Expand new student and student welcome activities, alumni receptions, etc. to *all* new students, ensuring that the activities are specifically appropriate for students transferring from other institutions. With respect to campus academic and student development programs available to incoming first year students, consider whether these programs or others like them should actively recruit transfer students as well.
4. Encourage deans and college APC's to initiate a review of requirements for admission to their programs that exceed requirements for admission to the University, and evaluate if those requirements are necessary to achieve academic goals of the program. Where GPA cut-offs are used solely as a way to restrict access to high demand programs, consider if other measures of potential contribution to a discipline are more appropriate. Review the Undergraduate Catalog description to see if it is clear and accurate.
5. Convene discussions with UW System about the adverse impact of the current UW System policy—a policy that differentiates the admissions and registration processes of UW System students and transfer students from other institutions. Specifically consider the impact on all students with regard to course access, transfer credit evaluation, advising, particularly prior to enrollment, orientation, and communication across institutions and with students.
6. Encourage collaboration between student affairs and student academic services units to provide a more seamless support network and out-of-classroom engagement and learning opportunities.
7. Explore ways to improve the transition to campus of transfer starts to close the existing gap in progress in the first term enrolled and the retention and graduation rates of transfer starts (Section 2K).
8. Provide more on-campus housing opportunities for transfer students, particularly housing with students at their same academic level.
9. Be attentive to the demands on financial aid resources and on Financial Student Services for transfer starts, given transfer students have more limited financial resources that may place them at an educational disadvantage.
10. Urge the Council on Academic Advising or other appropriate advising bodies to develop advising strategies and assistance designed to strengthen the academic success of transfer starts based on specific understanding of the issues facing transfer start students.
11. Establish a Transfer Student Issues working group with a point-person from each school/college and from Admissions to coordinate communication and cooperation across units and programs, and to follow-up on the recommendations set forth from this report. Use this group as a resource in future discussions of policies on transfer students and transfer student admissions.
12. Circulate this report for information and consideration widely across campus including to the colleges with undergraduate programs, the Office of Admissions, the Council on Academic Advising, and elsewhere as appropriate.

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