

Final

UW-Madison Committee on the Transfer Student Experience, 2003-04

Sub-committee: Preparing for Transfer – Communication among Undergraduate Admissions, the Schools and Colleges, Programs, Departments, and Faculty and Other Campus Groups

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INTRODUCTION

The experience of students transferring into UW-Madison is shaped by many different offices and personnel on campus, including, as a partial list, Admissions staff; advisors; schools, colleges, and departments; and faculty. This raises important questions about whether these offices work together with sufficient institutional communication, coordination, or collaboration to be sure that the student experience is as smooth as possible and to avoid unnecessary problems that might be created by mixed signals or bureaucratic inefficiencies. We focused on three aspects of this problem in particular:

A. Restricted enrollment academic programs and majors. Is there sufficient communication and coordination between departments and programs with restricted enrollment and Admissions personnel and advisors working with transfer students? Does the practice of limiting/restricting enrollment have a differential impact on transfer-starts compared with freshmen-starts?

B Access to gateway and required courses. Does the timing of the registration period for new transfer students create problems for transfer students in their first term, for example by inhibiting their ability to make timely progress to a degree, as is widely believed? If so, are there remedies for this problem?

C. Do faculty and staff have information adequate for the task of making sure they can be as helpful to students who enter the university through the transfer process as they are for others? For example, are there special needs or issues of which they should be aware? Do they hold prejudicial biases about transfer students, or about particular categories of transfer students? If yes, how are those biases manifested, and what can be done to counteract them?

Each of these aspects is discussed in turn, below.

A. RESTRICTED ADMISSION ACADEMIC PROGRAMS

The offer of admission to UW-Madison may imply to students that (1) the University is simultaneously making an implied promise that they will be able to enter whatever major or program they wish to enter and have immediate access to the courses they are hoping to take and/or (2) they will have access to courses and the academic programs of the university on parity with continuing students. Although in some cases students are simultaneously admitted to the University and a particular program (e.g. Nursing, Engineering), in many other cases that is not true. Moreover, enrollment pressure in many courses and programs means they may find they do not have immediate access to the courses they want or need. This problem exists for many students who enter UW-Madison as freshmen, of course, but beginning one's course of study on this campus later is likely to multiply the problems. There is a widespread view that we face challenges in providing parity of access for new transfer students because of the timing of their registration and because their timeline to graduation is shorter than that for students who first matriculated at UW-Madison (freshmen-starts). We must identify how great each of these problems is, and how we can remedy those requiring attention. This section of our report deals with access at the major/program level; the next section deals with individual courses.

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Many undergraduate academic programs have requirements for admission to the major or program that exceed those for admission to the University. In this report we refer to these as *restricted* admission programs.

Which undergraduate programs can be classified as restricted admission? They include a surprising large number: the allied health programs (for example, Nursing, Physician Assistant), all College of Engineering programs, all School of Education programs, all School of Business programs, and programs in CALS and Human Ecology, and Letters & Science. In total, a review of the Undergraduate Catalog reveals that 83 out of 151 undergraduate programs (55%) have requirements for admission that exceed those for admission to the University. The types of admission requirements range from stringent academic requirements for admission characteristic of programs with high demand for limited spaces, to demonstration of talent and skills in the fine or performing arts, or modest GPA requirements of some liberal arts programs.

Do we detect inequities in program enrollment between freshman start and transfer start students? Table 1, which displays enrollment in restricted admission programs, shows that, in aggregate, transfer-starts and freshmen-starts have similar rates of access to restricted programs. For example, 50 % of all juniors and seniors are enrolled in restricted programs. Similarly, 48% of transfer-start juniors and seniors are enrolled in restricted programs. Moreover, junior and senior transfer-start students constitute 22% of enrollments in all majors and programs, and 21% of enrollments in restricted admission programs.

Table 1. Enrollments in Undergraduate Majors with Restricted Admission, Fall 2003.

	All Juniors and Seniors	Junior and Senior Transfer-Starts	% of Transfer-Starts
Total Enrollments in Majors/Programs – Duplicating Headcount	19336	4162	22
Enrollment in restricted admission programs	9627	2005	21
% in Restricted Enrollment programs	49.8	48.1	

Source: Retention Data views for enrollment counts; Undergraduate Catalog for information on restricted admission. Secondary education programs with corresponding liberal arts programs were counted separately.

Of course, program-by-program differences exist. For example, a higher than average percentage of transfer-starts are enrolled in Nursing, Physician Assistant, Interior Design, and Art whereas a lower than average percentage of transfer-starts are enrolled in the Biology major, Communication Arts, and Journalism¹. These program-by-program differences reflect differences in program-specific admission requirements, student interest, course access, self-selection, resource availability, recruiting by programs, and numerous other inter-related factors. Some restricted admission programs are only available to continuing students – new transfer students and new freshmen are not eligible to apply. Two examples are School of Business programs (excepting UW Colleges transfers) and Journalism.

It is beyond the scope of this report to describe and analyze these variations in detail [See Appendix A for a by-program listing], but departments and programs should analyze their results and determine whether there are any inappropriate barriers. At the same time, we note that because faculty consider the entry requirements for their programs and majors carefully, this recommendation does not imply any criticism of restricted admissions as such.

¹ See Appendix A. For a more detailed analysis see: Transfer Students and Traditional Students - Patterns of Course Taking and Participation in Academic Programs, J.L. Milner, 2002. <http://wisinfo.doit.wisc.edu/obpa/>

Recommendation A1: Departments and programs should determine whether entry requirements into their majors and programs confront transfer students with unnecessary special barriers.

The primary source for identifying the specific requirements for restricted admission programs is the Undergraduate Catalog, where these can be found with varying degrees of clarity distributed across the school, college, and individual program and department listings. Both the scattered nature of the information and the varying quality of the communication of specifics must make it difficult for students to identify and, certainly, compare requirements, especially for transfer students who are not on campus and therefore lack easy access to program advisors. Moreover, this situation inhibits the ability of the Admissions Office to evaluate applications in light of students' likely success in getting into their preferred program, and creates inefficiencies for academic advisors on this campus and elsewhere.

Recommendation A2. The specific entry requirements for restricted enrollment Academic majors and programs should be communicated to a centralized office, for example, the Registrar or Office of Academic Planning and Analysis, and recorded in a centralized source, for example the print and on-line Undergraduate Catalog. Programs and departments should review their entry requirements statements to be sure that all audiences – prospective and enrolled students, advisors, Admissions staff, other University staff and faculty – are able to understand them. These statements should include information about timing of the acceptance process; especially, does the program offer rolling acceptance or are all admissions done at a particular time.

Colleges, programs, and departments vary in their process and timing of accepting new students into their restricted enrollment programs. Undergraduate Admissions, through Transfer Admissions, and in coordination with colleges, departments, and programs has established processes for working with many restricted admission programs. Consequently, many different models of admissions-related communication and coordination between programs and Admissions exist.

Recommendation A3: Communications from the Office of Admissions (for example, the Admissions website and the admissions letter) that are aimed at prospective or accepted transfers and their advisors should clearly indicate that admission to the University does not constitute admission to a program or major unless that is explicitly stated.

Recommendation A4: Colleges should review their program and major admissions procedures, perhaps in consultation with the Office of Admissions to determine whether establishing more coordination between the program and Admissions in the process would improve the process. Good practices, as identified by Admissions, would assist in this process.

Many new transfer students seem to assume – incorrectly -- that by specifying an intended major on their application they are automatically admitted to that major when they enroll. Among juniors and seniors who have no declared major code, we find that a higher proportion of transfer-starts (31%) than all juniors and seniors (22%) did not have a declared major in Fall 2003. Advisors report that new transfer students often don't know that they have to declare a major once they are enrolled. Students who are unintentional "undeclared" majors are likely to encounter difficulties, including reduced access to courses and other resources associated with their intended programs and the attendant delay in their progress to degree. Such students may be disappointed by the ability to gain admission to a specific program and leave UW-Madison without a degree.

Recommendation A5: Admissions materials must and advisors must clearly communicate to prospective students and applicants that they are not automatically enrolled in most programs or majors upon acceptance to the university, and that they must declare a major after registration.

B. COURSE ACCESS FOR NEW TRANSFER STUDENTS

Course access is widely perceived by advisors and student services personnel one of the major problems facing new transfer students. There are many reasons why transfer students may face special difficulties in course access compared with freshman-start students of their own class. Among these are: they are sometime admitted late or make their decision to transfer late, which delays the registration; students who were admitted in time for registration and are eligible for timely registration (e.g. UW System transfers) may be unaware of advising options or may choose not to avail themselves of these opportunities, such as SOAR. In addition, when they try to register for “gateway” courses they may attribute their difficulties to their transfer status when in fact, students widely share the same experience regardless of transfer experience.

[This is tentative: we are still analyzing] A review of 2003 Undergraduate Survey indicates that there are essentially no significant differences among freshmen-starts and transfer-starts in their satisfaction with registration and access to courses. Thus, on the whole, registration problems encountered by new transfer students do not color their view of registration and access to courses for transfer-starts in a way that distinguishes them from freshmen-starts. How do we rationalize this observation with the experience of student services staff described above? Perhaps the registration frustrations of new transfer students are visible examples of the kinds of experience of all students.

[We will have data from the focus groups with students to extend this analysis].

Recommendation B1. Improve communication to the appropriate faculty and staff in the academic units about how many new transfer students are expected to expect to enroll and in what programs.

If this information could be provided to departments, they could use this information to manage course enrollment restrictions and better accommodate new transfer students who, by necessity, register late. Programs that enroll students who need gateway courses could more readily manage expectations by early communication with the departments that host the gateway courses.

This improved communication would take the form of a report that would be delivered to key personnel in academic units. The report would list the new transfer students intending to enroll, by intended major, by academic level, and with an indication if they have registered for courses yet. Possible delivery mechanisms are the advisor link list serve or the My UW-Madison portal. It is important that such information is delivered to departments in a way that doesn't require specialized technical knowledge.

This reporting approach could help departments and programs plan for course enrollments. It may also allow program faculty and staff to contact the new students who intend to enroll in a given program and advise them appropriately.

Recommendation B2. Analyze close-out statistics to identify courses that have high close-out statistics for new transfer students. Consider if these courses are candidates for new enrollment management strategies or additional resources. [To be added - JLM can access this data and will provide some preliminary analysis of the utility of this approach].

C. BIASES ABOUT TRANSFER-STARTS

[Note: we haven't had time to edit this section yet, but will. This may belong in the “up front” part of the report. In addition, this overlaps with issues discussed by sub-committees focused on advising.]

Do faculty and staff hold biases (founded or unfounded) about students who first enrolled as transfer students, or about transfer-starts with various kinds of prior college experience? If yes, how is that bias exhibited and perceived? How long does it persist after a new transfer student becomes a continuing student? When students are admitted to UW-Madison – both new freshmen and new transfer students –

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they become “our” students. However, our culture and the language that we use to refer to transfer-starts may convey an attitude that new transfer students are not viewed fully as UW-Madison students in quite the same way as are students who started at UW-Madison as freshmen. [More to say here]

A survey of professors of capstone courses around the university [which will be explained more later] asked professors to assess each student at the end of the capstone course with respect to their preparation to handle the course in terms (1) reading skills, (2) writing skills, (3) information literacy, and (4) preparation in their field. If analysis showed significantly lower evaluations of the preparation of transfer-start students than freshman-start students, that would suggest either that even by the end of the undergraduate career the students exhibit differential preparation or that faculty are biased in their assessment of students according to whether the students are transfers or not. (Note that we do not know how many faculty are aware of which of their students are transfers.) Analysis shows that there are not significant differences in the evaluation of freshman-start and transfer-start students on average.

Recommendation C1. Incorporate into our culture the recognition that upon admission to UW-Madison, new transfer students become UW-Madison students. Consequently, they should receive the same level of services and access to programs and courses as freshmen-starts. In advance of their first UW-Madison semester, new transfer students may require additional advising to facilitate the transition.