

**Committee on the Transfer Student Experience
Summary of Focus Group
Preliminary Findings**

Introduction

Six focus groups were held with transfer students between February 12 and February 27, 2004, from 2-4:00 p.m. at Memorial Union. Students were randomly selected for the conversations but grouped by the following categories: 1) transfer students from other state universities, 2) new transfer students (this being their first year here), 3) transfer students from UW Colleges, 4) transfer students from UW 4-year universities, 5) transfer students from the Wisconsin Technical Colleges, and 6) transfer students who are currently seniors.

The groups ranged in size from 3 to 10 students. Virginia Sapiro attended and moderated all sessions. Mo Noonan Bischof attended and took notes on all but one, which was staffed by Carrie Waugh. The following individuals each participated in one or two sessions each: Joanne Berg, Jocelyn Milner, Neil Richardson, and Tim Walsh.

The purpose of hosting these focus groups was to investigate the experience of students transferring to UW-Madison, and to identify what the university could do to better to serve the needs of transfer students. The discussions were organized chronologically starting with when students first thought about transferring to UW-Madison, the application and transfer process, what happened when they first arrived on campus and started classes, and finally about life as a UW-Madison student. Each student filled out a brief questionnaire providing some background information. The sessions were kept very informal. Many of the students expressed appreciation at being included in the process, and satisfaction that we were undertaking this project.

Preliminary themes, findings and recommendations that surfaced from these discussions are presented below.

Reasons for Transferring to UW-Madison

A primary reason, across groups, for transferring to UW-Madison was because students felt the need to be closer to family and friends. Several students described this as being homesick.

Most of the students who attended out-of-state institutions indicated that another compelling reason to transfer to UW-Madison was because tuition is less expensive here than at their prior institution.

Several students also indicated that they chose UW-Madison because of its reputation and that UW-Madison offered the academic program they wanted. Several students had family members and friends who attended UW-Madison.

A majority of students from both the technical colleges and the two-year UW colleges indicated that they planned to transfer to UW-Madison after completing a year or two at one of these institutions.

Admissions and the Transfer Credit Process

Perhaps relevant mostly to the transfer students from the 4-year UW institutions was the frustration and difficulty these students found with the application and transfer credit process.

A common frustration for these students was not finding information about who to contact at UW-Madison if they had questions. Clearly, contacts or advisors at their prior institutions were not helpful.

Overall students in the other groups remembered the admission and transfer process as being, for the most part, an easy process. Even students who were "caught" during the admission's freeze didn't think the process was difficult. Access to online information about admissions and having access to the forms they could download was noted often as being very important.

Orientation, Advising, and Registration

Students who met or consulted with a departmental advisor early on had a much easier time registering for and getting the courses they needed. This tended to be students who came to UW-Madison knowing what academic program or field they intended to major in.

Most students who attended SOAR reported that it was not very useful, the content and issues were irrelevant to their expectations and needs, and the amount of information provided was overwhelming.

Students who didn't attend SOAR think, in hindsight, that it would have been useful in terms of meeting other transfer students and getting advice about credit transfer and course registration. Several students who didn't attend SOAR also reported that either they thought or they were told that SOAR wouldn't be useful to them as transfer students.

Students who did not attend SOAR, particularly those that were undeclared majors, had the most problems and felt lost when they arrived on campus.

A number of students, across groups, who attended SOAR were particularly critical of some "bad" advice they received regarding course registration. In most of these cases, students were advised to register for a course that they didn't need.

Across groups, advice student had about ways to improve SOAR included:

- provide more information that is relevant to transfer students
- engage students with like interest in *small* group discussions
- provide specific information about the importance of getting involved on campus and include specific information about student organizations and clubs, or make contact persons from these organizations available at SOAR for students to talk with.
- provide opportunities to tour campus at SOAR and distribute campus maps to students. (Several students felt lost, literally, the first few weeks on campus.)
- involve other transfer students in the advising process at SOAR

Social Integration or Connectedness

A consistent reaction across groups was that students have difficulty with social integration issues, particularly meeting other students and finding friends, and getting involved in various campus activities. Several students noted that social networks were already formed when they arrived. Assistance, early on, meeting with other transfer students or students at their level is very important.

Students, across groups, made an important observation that they didn't leave the prior institution necessarily because they didn't like their experience. The cultural adjustment to coming here can be difficult because of that.

Students typically noted that being recognized as a transfer student didn't seem to bother them. They want their experience and knowledge respected, and yet, they recognize they are still new to this campus and have a lot of concerns and questions that other *new* students have.

Students who came to UW-Madison and lived either in a private resident hall or off-campus consistently reported that it was more difficult to meet other undergraduates and to get involved in campus life. Students, however, who lived in on-campus dorms, indicated that they wanted to live with other students at their level---not with freshmen.

Students, particularly those who came from out-of-state institutions, noted that social networks were already formed when they arrived. While they might reconnect with past high school friends once they are here, they felt particularly isolated and found it hard to meet new friends, other transfer students, or people with similar interests.

Student feedback when asked what they thought about providing a transfer student drop-in center was mixed. Some didn't think it would be helpful in terms of connecting transfer students with other transfer student and other thought having the option would be a good idea.

Most students like the idea of establishing housing options on campus for transfer student such as a floor/house. Many students liked the notion of providing transfer students with opportunities like FIGs.

Feedback was very positive, across groups, for providing a transfer student reception/orientation during the first few weeks of their first semester here. Students indicated that such a program should be a mix of both social and academic/program/information. They would welcome opportunities to meet with other transfer students, students with similar interests, or students/contacts representing a variety of student organizations and activities.

Academic Preparation and Integration

Consistent across groups was the notion that while the coursework may not be more difficult than what they experiences at their prior institution, the amount of work per course, particularly the amount of reading expected of students, is much higher at UW-Madison.

Students from the technical colleges and the 2- and 4-year UW colleges also recognized that there is more competition to excel and get good grades than there was at their prior institutions.

Across all groups, students commented that faculty at UW-Madison are very welcoming and accessible if students are willing to seek their help.

The broad array of academic programs is a plus, particularly for students who come here with undeclared majors, or for students who change their minds about a major/field of study.

Communication

Students coming from 4-year UW institutions clearly had the most trouble finding information about credit transfer, registration and advising. All but one of these students became frustrated because they could not find information about who to contact (not just an office) if they had questions relative to the admission or transfer credit process.

In general, other students thought that admission and credit transfer information was easily accessible. Students who knew about and used the TIS, seemed to think this was very helpful understanding the transfer credit process.

Integrating more online information that is specific and intended for transfer students was suggested by several students across groups. Students suggested including a FAQ section for transfer students, make contact persons by department/program/major available, and provide easy links to important activities, social and academic, for new transfer students. As one student noted, the current website is structured for new students and UW Madison students--where do transfer students fit?

Student who attended the recent mid-year L & S workshop indicated that communication about these workshops needs to be sent much earlier to students, and an option for rescheduling should be provided. Many transfer students work, on and off campus, and assumptions that they could be scheduled at pre-arranged times based solely on their course schedule was off-putting. Further students indicated that communicating that a hold would be placed on student records if they did not attend was frustrating.

Information about SOAR should be sent to students apart from the packet of information they already receive. Students also indicated that it's important to be clear about what transfer students will gain by coming to SOAR.